

LFLC – September 13, 2020

Exodus 14:19-31

It was just 3 weeks ago that I had the opportunity to preach on Exodus 1 and 2 – the introduction to the dilemma faced by the Israelites in Egypt, once honoured guests and now slaves. We also celebrated the birth of an Israelite baby who was saved from death by a clever mother and sister – reared by a Princess who gave him a name – Moses.

I also mentioned earlier how my imagination had been stirred by the movie ‘The 10 Commandments’ and even as I worked on this sermon I had a hard time not letting Charlton Heston be my guide. But that brought up a strong recollection in me.

I was brought up in the Church and loved the Church School lessons that had some action to them – much more fun than memorizing the 10 Commandments!

But then I entered that time in university when it is important to give up childish ways! Geologically, such a miracle could never have happened. Doubt – is any of this true?

It seems hard to believe, but one of the things that kept me from joining the ministry was my conviction that I can’t preach this stuff! Was I naïve! In my intro O.T. class I discovered all sorts of neat things – some of which I couldn’t tell my Mother.

There are at least 3 layers to the story of the Exodus. The most ancient tells of the cloud of God descending over the Egyptian army, causing confusion and riders heading off into the Sea of Reeds – in other words, a swamp. A later edit made the locale the Red Sea and Moses became the central figure in obeying God to open the mighty Sea.

A third editor brought the two stories together to our text today.

I asked my friend who taught OT at the Vancouver School of Theology what the current understanding of this passage is. She said there is a long answer and a short answer. The short answer is that a miracle indeed happened. But the numbers who escaped were probably much less than those in the text.

Why do I share this? I respect whatever your point of view. But my growing understanding of God in history suggests God works with the poor and frightened in out of the way places, even swamps, resisting the Hollywood Sound Stage.

Israel had a problem with too much reliance on the perfect, powerful leader. And so do we in the modern age. We should consider the type of collegial leadership Jesus taught and used.

But back to the story! A lot has happened in 3 weeks! Moses has been called by God through the miracle of the Burning Bush; Egypt has suffered 10 plagues, the last being what Israel would call the Passover; and now we are before the Red Sea with Pharaoh in a rage, his army bearing down on the Israelites.

The Passover and Exodus events became the defining myth of the Israelites (and by myth I do not mean something fictitious, but rather the shared recollection of history and tradition which become Israel's collective memory.

Founding myths can become idolatrous – as we see in too many nations today. But for Israel, the Exodus connects the people to the promise given to Abraham centuries before. It shows how God works in history, and - I think this is important – working within history, and among the common folk, to reveal power and faithfulness.

Through this long, sometimes sad history of Israel, was an underlying theme – the people will proclaim the glory of God not in terms of power or wealth, but in terms of obedience and faith – in terms of care for the earth and the sojourner in their midst, in remembering the God of the past is God of their future.

There is a movement in the mainline churches these days to have a 'Season of Creation' celebrated within the longer season of Pentecost. In that light, allow me to try to make some connections.

There are people these days who look at this story and get angry with God. Pharaoh was the villain, so why did thousands of Egyptians have to die in the floods? Couldn't have God been a little kinder to those people?

So, allow me to meander for a moment and consider the 10 plagues that affected the Egyptians.

There were warning signs along the way:

After floods the frogs and gnats appear;

After droughts the locusts appear.

There was a steady decline in the health of the nation.

And there was this prophet, this once-upon-a-time prince who was warning Pharaoh that the mighty God of Creation was behind all this. Pharaoh declined to agree.

Where am I going with this? 2 directions, I guess!

- a) We all lament the decline of the Church in the West. Have we ever considered the fact that in life style we have come to resemble more the Egyptian elite than the Israelite pilgrims? It is the eternal temptation to assume that wealth and privilege are sure signs that God loves us – that poverty and wretchedness are a sign of God's displeasure.
- b) Do we take note of the environmental decline around us and wonder if perhaps God is telling us something?

Are we, as God's people, identifying as the servants of the Lord, but acting more like Egyptians in power? Blind to a reality that eyes of faith should plainly see?

Moses' message to Pharaoh was to read the signs of the time.

- The sea just across the street from us is radiant in the sunshine – but what of its true health? Do the seals peak at us because we are so cute, or asking if we happen to know where all the salmon have gone? Will we be able to drive this highway in a generation?

- I don't have to list the signs of the earth's pain and decline – there are surely at least 10 of them.

Then what are the signs of hope?

- The Me-too movement; Black Lives Matter; a growing solidarity among Indigenous peoples;
- Youth who are refusing to buy into a consumption culture;
- A Build Back Better Movement - a Green initiative supported by all kinds of people, including Oil Company executives.
- Covid-19 is teaching us that despite our enormous technological advances, a tiny particle of not-quite-a-living-thing can change the world.

And, I believe, there are people waiting for the Church to regain a Prophetic Voice, a Servant attitude, a Word that challenges and inspires.

Long ago the Deuteronomist quoting the tradition of Moses, said God is putting before us a choice between Death and Life. Choose life was the proclamation. (Deut. 30:11f)

From Moses, through Elijah, through Jesus – even when it is a Cross before us, God's people choose life.

I know you all are aware of the serious issues facing our community and our planet. It would be good to meet to share our thoughts and actions.

Personally, I support KAIROS of which the ELCIC is a member – stressing these days environmental justice. Maybe I'll close with that thought.

There is time as in Chronos – chronology, human time.

There is Kairos – as in the Critical Moment, Opportune Time, Time of Decision or Action. Kairos Time is Passover and Exodus; Good Friday and Easter.

We live by chronos; God acts by Kairos.

It is my humble belief that the Church and the World are in a period of Kairos – it is a time to watch the signs; the time is here for us to choose Life!