

LFLC – August 23, 2020 (Exodus 1:8 – 2:10)

When I first looked at the lectionary texts for this week, I felt the Exodus reading was just a bit too long. But as I thought and prayed about these texts, I began to see that this passage has a very contemporary meaning that challenges us. Besides, it's a wonderful story – one of my favourites from Sunday School days.

There was a recent series of articles in one of the newspapers I scan on the internet, asking people to recount the first movie in their youth that really affected, even transformed, them. My choice would have been the **10 Commandments**. Given today's technological advances, the movie probably seems rather hokey - but as a farm boy who didn't get out much, I found it overwhelming. How DID they divide the Red Sea?

This morning there are a few more serious questions that this passage asks of us.

The first is to consider the old adage that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Pharaoh had no need to be anxious. His armies controlled the Mediterranean area and extended through modern day Syria. But, power can produce paranoia and Pharaoh now sees this growing Hebrew population as a menace. It is not obvious why - they are working hard and peaceably, toiling to complete the mighty engineering feats of his rule.

There is also a convenient lack of memory. "A new King was born among the Egyptians who did not remember Joseph." Joseph helped save Egypt from starvation. His people were welcomed in Egypt and lived in peace. How did they suddenly become a threat, enemies?

The capriciousness of power: Manufacture an enemy, reduce the food quantity and quality; clamp down on surveillance; even resort to infanticide.

We don't have to go very far to cite examples of the ways of power in our world.

- The president of Belarus blames foreign agitators for unrest in his country – as does the president of Zimbabwe, or the former leaders of Lebanon, just as examples.
- The president of the USA blamed Mexicans for bringing drugs, violence and immorality into his pristine domain – forgetting that he himself is the grandson of immigrants.
- We will never forget Hitler and his charge of conspiracy against the Jews – and while he was at it, why not include the Roma peoples and homosexuals?
- Unlike Pharaoh, the Chinese leaders do not have to kill Uighur babies, they can simply sterilize all the women.
- The Myanmar government can blame the Rohingya for its own inadequacies and racism.
- And, lest we forget. Our nation was founded on the belief that Indigenous Peoples were a threat to our faith, prosperity and security – as were Ukrainians during WW1 and Japanese during WW2
- So, generally, be suspicious of all leaders who call on God or the Party or our glorious founders, or our inspired ideology, as the sole reason such drastic measures have to be taken.

Well, you will have your own examples of ways in which the powerful manipulate reality to create their own narrative. But what of the resistance?

The story of the Hebrew midwives has to go down as an all-time classic. Tasked with killing the newborn boys the midwives insist they are trying their best, but those robust Hebrew mothers just keep delivering in the express lane!

Exodus 2 takes us to another form of resistance. A Hebrew woman has her baby in secret and then, in defiance of Pharaoh, as the baby boy grows, designs a plan she hopes just may work. The woman is a Levite as is her husband. They are of the priestly class – and, now we begin to see the hand of God at work.

Switching themes for a moment – there is that wonderful line by Phillips Brooks in his Carol, ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem’, when he penned the phrase, “How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given.”

A baby is born in secret, nurtured, protected from death, and he will one day be the one who warns the Israelites that the Angel of Death will sweep over the first born of all of Egypt.

I know people ask of the Church, ask of us, where is God in the midst of this current Covid19 pandemic? If God is all you say God is, why the silence, why the inaction? Why are we left to suffer?

Well, there is no easy answer to that question. Or, should I say ‘*polite*’ answer. When the economy is booming, we are happily exploiting earth and sea, and we live, as my dad used to say, high off the Hog. Who needs God? But when the party’s over, we expect God to come and clean up the mess.

But another suggestion is this: God does not work from the top down, but from the bottom up. True faith – as in true resistance to the power of Evil – begins in the most unlikely places: even a river bank, even a sheep pasture as with David, even a stable . . .

Resistance – sometimes it brings a smile to your face.

When I met Linda she was an activity director in various Nursing Homes. There was one terrible place mainly for people with mental disabilities. One day I helped her push some rather large men in wheel chairs up a ramp to a place set aside for group work. It was really hard work to get everyone together – and Linda whispered to me, “Some days this place drives me crazy!” Beside us from a wheel chair came this booming voice, “Well, you’re in the right place!”

These moments change us!

The response to subjugation by our Indigenous peoples often is very humorous – treat yourself to a Thomas King novel for a good example.

In Malawi there was a chap named Godfrey who used to come by my place at least once a week telling me sad tales about his problems and needing a little cash. I did what I could but he was just got to be too much. So, one day we had this conversation:

Me: Godfrey, I know you go to Church, but do you pray?

Godfrey: Oh yes, Abusa (Chichewa word for Pastor), I pray every day.

Me: Do you share your problems with God?

G. Oh, yes, I tell God everything.

Me. And what is God saying to you?

G. Oh, God says, ‘Go see the Abusa!’

Yeah, I walked right into that one. But Godfrey got a second helping that day.

And some of the great songs we remember over the years come from the poor and oppressed. Singing their songs in a foreign land.

I know, poverty and oppression are no jokes! People suffer and it is not funny at all. But resistance comes in many ways.

God works through the spirit of those who refuse to let poverty, oppression, fear define them.

God works through the cleverness and resilience of those who dream of a better world.

Think of the early Church – as Paul said to the Corinthians (1:26f)

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

I think of slavery in the USA and often think that the Gospel was not heard in the beautiful churches of the rich exploiters, but rather in forest clearings where enslaved people sang the songs of sorrow, hope and defiance.

The Church in the world is growing in places most of us would prefer not to live.

Is the Church only about morality and being good, or is the Church also about liberation and combatting the forces of darkness?

We are in a dangerous place just now:

Democracy is under siege; the Internet's dark side promotes hatred and violence; a Pandemic rages; millions struggle without the minimum essentials of life.

We look for people to blame, scapegoats, immigrants, minorities.

Is it not strange that God often has to use people who don't quite meet our expectations – people of other faiths or no religion in particular: Malala Yusafzai, Greta Thunberg, Jane Goodall, even the tragic death of a poor man named George Floyd.

I can't think of any incident that revealed the horror of the Syrian civil war more than when we saw the 3 year old body of little Alan Kurdi washed up on the Mediterranean shore.

In these dark days we need to keep our wits about us. We also need to go deeper into the consequences of being who we claim to be – followers of Jesus.

It is a question of identity – do we blend into the cultural norms of the day? Do we simply sigh with a sense of hopelessness? Or, do we confess who we are and live out the consequences?

A Hebrew midwife? A Galilean peasant girl called Mary?

A fisherman named Peter who was asked by Jesus, 'Who do you say I am?' And then Peter was declared the Rock upon whom Jesus will build the Church!

Was it Oxford or Harvard where Peter studied?

So we are asked this question today: Who do we say Jesus is?

And if we confess with Peter, 'Saviour, Messiah, Son of God,' well - Jesus may just have a job for us!