



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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EXODUS 1:8-2:10; PSALM 124; MATTHEW 16:13-20

PATHWAYS OF LIBERATION:

From the Birth of Moses to the Restorative Justice of Jesus

As we transition from Genesis to Exodus, the Hebrew people in exile in Egypt are faced with a new, hostile Pharaoh. This self-styled, god-like figure subjected the Hebrew people to cruel slavery and oppressed them with forced labor, even to making mortar and brick and using them to build whole cities! Pharaoh, the all-powerful, seemed to have nothing to fear. But, his regime sensed a threat: Hebrew children were becoming more numerous and multiplying. These “other” people could jeopardize his repressive kingdom: they might seek to be free from enslavement!

Pharaoh is so concerned that he himself commands the midwives of the Hebrew children to kill all the boys and spare the girls. We hear that the midwives “feared God” (that is, believed in the God of the Hebrew people) more than they honored the law of Pharaoh – and so they did not obey. Here we have the first known act of civil disobedience in the

name of God. The women are named, Shiphrah and Puah; when interrogated they say that the Hebrew women were too vigorous, giving birth before the midwives could arrive. So, Pharaoh goes full totalitarian, ordering the whole Egyptian population to massacre male Hebrew newborns.

In this climate, a Hebrew woman gives birth to Moses and proceeds to hide him for three months. Then, in despair and hope, he is put into a basket and left in the reeds. His sister is a plant looking on to see what happens. God’s purposes are fulfilled in a most amazing and unorthodox manner. None other than Pharaoh’s daughter – of all people – sees the baby floating and calls her aides to retrieve him. Ironically, this daughter of Egyptian supremacy shows compassion – the word ‘rahamin’ shows love from the deepest part of herself, the womb. She then sees that it is a Hebrew boy. This does not deter her. She is

“moved from within” and provides for his care. Her transformation leads to the drawing out (midwifery as it were) of the basket of liberation for the Hebrew people.

As Moses grows and realizes that he “is a stranger in a foreign land,” he witnesses and identifies with the suffering of his people. As he comes to know his vocation to lead his people out of slavery to freedom in the promised land, he can thank the midwives who knew their vocations first. Today, we face a time of pandemic, economic collapse, rampant racism and state-sanctioned hate and violence. Valarie Kaur, the Sikh spiritual writer and activist notes, in our anguish and despair, what if this moment could be embraced, not as the darkness of the tomb but rather as the darkness of the womb: as a movement of *rahamin* ready to birth forth, like midwives ushering forward our collective liberation in the freedom of God.

Our nation at this moment is at a critical point, with much energy devoted to dividing and conquering. Jesus gave his life as the ultimate reconciler whose life, death and resurrection united us all in the sacredness and dignity that all share as beloved, human beings who no one has the right to violate. Rev. Daugherty left us with the question last week, “How do we need to change our minds to be conduits of healing and reconciliation?” At root, for me, it means to remember it is from the darkness of earth by the grace of God that we came, to trust that we are called by name and that we belong to one another, and to walk humbly to seek right relationship

with God and neighbor. It means being willing to be changed. Such an orientation honors each as made in the image of God, worthy for who we are, not for what we produce or consume. The practice of forgiveness makes us more human. As a society, forgiveness may offer the possibility of reconciliation, widening ripples of communion until we breathe and push forth a renewed humankind, what the Hebrew scriptures call the wholeness or *shalom* in the city.

The church springs from the divine authorization to those who follow the path of Jesus to love one another and to forgive one another, a meeting of justice and mercy. In Matthew, relationships in the house church are built on equity. Rather than slide into the spiritual wilderness of unrestrained power, prestige, and possessions, the disciples are commissioned to repair the world through the little way, that of community, with the homeless, the incarcerated, the immigrant, the sick, the lonely, the abandoned, the least, the last, and the forsaken. Following the way of Jesus means seeking first God’s reign of justice and peace, love and mercy. Communities whose relationships embody forgiveness are ripe to grow into the countercultural path of restorative justice.

Restorative justice is a seedling of a liberation movement that victims and offenders can encounter one another, confront truth, express accountability, and potentially foster understanding in relationship. It holds forth possibility to address harm and heal trauma.

At the national level, the arduous and risk-taking example of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa upon liberation from the cruelty of apartheid, chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, stands out. In his book “No Future without Forgiveness” Tutu says:

Here the central concern is not retribution or punishment but, in the spirit of Ubuntu, the healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances, the restoration of broken relationships... Thus, we would claim that justice, restorative justice, is being served when efforts are made to work for healing, for forgiveness and for reconciliation. (51-52)

To be given the authority to bind and to loose, as Peter and the disciples were, implies having our hearts broken open to the ways of God. It is to partake of the sacred and human act of forgiveness. Such authority entails that we have sought and experienced forgiveness ourselves. We see this mutuality as essential in marriage, close relations and friendship.

The church too needs forgiveness for our complicity in white supremacy and racism. For the ongoing detention of immigrant children, for the acceptance of mass incarceration and law enforcement violence toward Black and brown people, for the marginalization thrust upon Native siblings, we are charged to lament, repent, discern, and act. The church has the capacity to draw forth the transformation needed for such a time as this. Does the church have the

audacity to join God’s initiative for reconciled community?

The theologian James Cone speaks a word to the people of God who would seek to restore justice in our land.

There can be no forgiveness of sins without repentance, and no repentance without the gift of faith to struggle with and for the freedom of the oppressed. When whites undergo the true experience of conversion wherein they die to whiteness and are reborn anew in order to struggle against white oppression and for the liberation of the oppressed, there is a place for them in the black struggle of freedom. Here reconciliation becomes God’s gift of blackness through the oppressed of the land. (Cone 1997, quoted in Wallis 2016, 65).

Archbishop Tutu likened his commission’s role to that of a midwife of a new nation; that is, through the thorough unmasking of pain and suffering the healing balm of Gilead might be felt. Perhaps our Great Commission for this moment might be movement from privilege and domination-system values toward new and renewed interrelationships with Black, indigenous, people of color, and to do our own necessary work, such that we might be prepared to see the world more as they would have us see it and that, together, we might more approximate the restorative justice that leads to shalom in the city.

On the long-running news magazine “60 Minutes,” recently, the story was re-told about how the Ethiopian Orthodox church gathers and worships in 800-year old rock carved from the clay four stories down into the earth. Hundreds of thousands of people, with much sacrifice and having endured famine and war, make the pilgrimage to the church born literally from the earth. It was said that it was built by angels. They were seen assembled at an all-night vigil to welcome the birth of Jesus. Ethiopians then and now, like South Africans in the freedom struggle, were ordinary people doing extraordinary things. Faithful people of God. The rock on which a church of a faith that does justice is built.

We are, together, Black and white, Latinx and Native, Asian and of diverse backgrounds, races, ethnicities and identities, a people of God. For the church that is in the process of rebirth, the key for entrance is the humility to seek forgiveness for our racism and white supremacy, as the first gesture of seeking right relationship with God and God’s dream of beloved community.

A second step is to put on the mind, heart, soul and strength of the midwives who dared empire in refusing to give into the demands to destroy the lives of an oppressed people. For every Moses who is drawn out of the water and nurtured to maturity as a liberator by a God who cries with and suffers with, there are midwives who have borne the burden first, who are themselves the instigators of movements of parting waters and bringing new life from the womb. These midwives are us, when we face the conflict of our culpable blindness and the harm this has caused our siblings and make reparation through listening and learning, through accompaniment, solidarity, and resistance, that is, restoring justice through Christ-like reflection and action. The church will be reborn through the shining of light on injustice and by drawing on the love of the person of color from Galilee who too had to flee execution as a child and met the violence of the cross as an adult. A savior who through us continues to liberate, such as we dare to cooperate.

Saint Mark’s Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You will find Saint Mark’s Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!