

Beginning today and continuing for the next nine weeks (all the way to October 19!) we will be reading from the Book of Exodus. It's one of the most familiar stories in all the Bible, even if our familiarity does come to us second-hand by way of Charlton Heston in *The Ten Commandments* or the more recent *Prince of Egypt*—or maybe by sharing a Seder meal with Jewish friends. But over the course of these next two months we have an opportunity to go deeper into this primary source. We'll discover (or rediscover) four major Biblical themes that originate in Exodus and then weave their way through the rest of the Old Testament and into the New Testament. Before I discuss today's reading, then, I want to offer a preview—a look ahead to the fall line-up. Specifically, these four major themes we will be exploring in the next two months are: liberation, law, covenant, and presence.

- **Liberation.** Exodus, especially the first fifteen chapters, is about the journey from slavery to freedom. It is about God's activity in the world to bring about healing and transformation for individuals, nations, and ultimately the whole creation. I know that while I was on sabbatical, there was a study on liberation theology. All liberation theology—Latin American, African American, feminist, Asian—all of it is rooted in this core narrative found in the first fifteen chapters of Exodus. “*Tell old Pharaoh to let my people go!*” The heart of our Eucharistic life-in-Christ is rooted in this Exodus event and in particular the celebration of that first Passover. On the last night of his life, Jesus gathered with his friends at the Seder Table, taking the bread and the cup to remember the God who is an active force in the world on behalf of the weak and powerless. Every time we break the bread and share the cup we re-commit to sharing in that liberating work on behalf of all of God's children.
- **Law.** I prefer the Hebrew word “Torah” over law because I think that especially as western Christians we mishear and misunderstand what the world *law* is meant to convey. I think of the voice-over from the TV show “Law and Order,” about how “in the criminal justice system the people are represented by two separate yet equally important groups...” But Torah is not primarily about a set of rules; nor is it about crime and punishment. Torah is *instruction*. Torah is a collection of teachings given by God at Sinai as a gift intended to form and shape a people after God's own heart—a gift “sweeter than honey,” the Psalmist says. The Gospel readings this fall will be coming from Matthew's Gospel; of the four it is the one most clear about seeing Jesus as a kind of “second Moses” who comes not to abolish Torah but to fulfill it. So as we explore Exodus, we might also want to listen for those themes and connections as well.
- **Covenant.** It is true that there are covenants made in Genesis with Noah and with Abraham and Sarah. But the heart of Biblical faith is found in the binding relationship that God makes with Israel at Mount Sinai. That promise to be their God and to love this people through thick and thin extends not only to Jews but through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, it extends to every people and tribe and nation on the planet. We are a people of the New Covenant, which shouldn't be heard to negate the old covenant (as if we are “new and improved”) but rather as an invitation to share in the *first* covenant that goes all the way back to Sinai.
- **Presence.** This is the part of Exodus I think most often forgotten by Christians, but not by Jews. Protestants, especially, are pretty good at remembering that Exodus is about liberation, law, and covenant. But it is also about the *tabernacle*: about the God who goes on that journey with Israel into the Sinai Desert. God isn't confined to the heavens or waiting ahead of us in the Promised Land, but dwells among God's people in the midst of the ongoing journey. I think

that's "good news." When we speak of God's presence we speak of God's holiness and God's imminence and although the Old Testament doesn't put it exactly in this way, what we are talking about is something like what we Christians mean when we celebrate the Sacraments. We use "outward and visible signs" to convey the promise that whenever two or three are gathered together, Christ is present in an inward and spiritual way.

So that is our fall line-up! But for today, we are at the beginning of all of that. We've been introduced to the crisis: there has been a regime change since the end of Genesis and a new Pharaoh has come to power who didn't know Joseph. This new king is a brutal dictator who doesn't care at all for the underclass or how his economic policies affect those living below the poverty line. His propaganda machine is shrewd and ruthless, causing the Egyptians to dread the Israelites. He encourages his own people to be afraid, arguing that if his government is not ruthless and bitter, then the Israelites will revolt. Fear gives him even more control. So his ruthless domestic policies end up leading to genocide; he commands that the sons of the Hebrew women be killed.

This command leads to the first recorded act of civil disobedience in the Bible. God's people answer to a higher law than that of human authorities. Pharaoh tells the midwives to kill all the male Hebrew children but Shiprah and Puah refuse to obey that law, and for their refusal they are summoned to answer for themselves. When asked why they have acted in this way, they lie. They tell Pharaoh that the Hebrew women are so vigorous and strong that they don't even need midwives; that they just pop their babies out before they can even arrive! It isn't clear whether or not Pharaoh buys the story; but the narrator points out that God appreciates it and deals well with the midwives.

If a human law is unjust, then what is required of those who would do justice is to disobey it. No one should ever pretend that it is easy to know when we are in such a situation—but we make a serious mistake if we forget that there will be times in human history and in our own lifetimes when human laws will not reflect the divine will. If the law of the land says you can't sit in a certain part of the bus because your skin is darker than someone else's, then remember Shiprah and Puah and sit down. If you are in the military and your commanding officer orders you to torture a prisoner, it is not only the Geneva Convention that is mocked but God; remember Shiprah and Puah, even if it gets you locked up at Leavenworth. If you are a businessperson and your boss tells you to figure out a way to dump toxic waste in the local rivers to increase third quarter profits, remember Shiprah and Puah, even if it means you will lose your job.

I watched Pastor Rick Warren the other night when he asked both presidential candidates about evil, and how you deal with evil. I'm not sure what to make of questions like this being posed of people running for president but I certainly find the question an interesting one. If I were asked that question I might look to Exodus 1 for some insights. Evil is definitely real, and the Israelites who lived at the bottom rung of Egypt's economy and under the horrors of genocide didn't need to consider the question hypothetically. But you can't always fight evil directly, especially when you are powerless. You begin, I think, by unmasking it and naming it—but sometimes to confront evil the best strategy may be to work under the radar—at least initially. You have to work together. Ultimate defeat of evil is a divine prerogative not a human one: Moses is God's agent in this story, but ultimately it is not Moses versus Pharaoh; it is *God* who takes on Pharaoh because Pharaoh has overstepped his bounds, because he has ceased to be a steward of political authority and chosen instead to abuse his power.

But there is also always the danger that you will become what you are trying to resist. History has countless examples of the oppressed leading revolutions only to become themselves worse oppressors than those who preceded them. The challenge Moses will raise again and again in the Sinai Desert right up to the very end (and that the prophets will return to again and again) is to ask whether Israel will be able to set up an economy in the Promised Land that doesn't treat widows and orphans with the same disdain that Pharaoh did.

So Shiprah and Puah and Miriam and Moses' mother and Pharaoh's daughter don't make any big speeches; they simply keep on delivering babies in spite of the fact that they live in a world where it is costly to do so. They simply figure out how to survive in a world that has gone insane. "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," Pharaoh's daughter says. In Pharaoh's own household there are people who yearn for justice, who know that genocide is evil, who are willing to take risks on behalf of what is right. I firmly believe that when Miriam comes up to Pharaoh's daughter and says that she knows this Hebrew woman who would make a perfect wet nurse, Pharaoh's daughter knows perfectly well to whom she is speaking. All of this works to create a space for this child to survive and even thrive. He is given an Egyptian name: Moses.

And so finally, the name is uttered at the end of today's reading. But it certainly won't be the last we hear of him. Moses will dominate the narrative as we move forward—he'll dominate all the way through the next thirty-nine chapters of Exodus and through Leviticus and Numbers and the very end of the Book of Deuteronomy. And beyond that as the prophets try to recall God's people to the teachings of Moses, and beyond them to Jesus of Nazareth who comes to fulfill what Moses and the prophets stood for. When I teach undergraduates the Bible at Assumption College I usually ask them a question on the first day of classes: name the three most important characters in the Bible. You'd be surprised how many of them respond: Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. While arguments can be made about who ought to be on that list, any list that doesn't include Moses isn't yet familiar with the Old Testament.

So Moses will loom large in these weeks ahead and we will be exploring just why that is. But for today, we get something not unlike the Christmas story: this vulnerable child wrapped up in a receiving blanket, hidden among the reeds. This child whose survival depends upon the courage and *chutzpah* of strong, ordinary women who don't make big speeches but simply do the right thing. Today, before we get to Moses there are these women who choose hope over fear and obedience to God over imperial edicts. It reminds me, at least, that we cannot expect liberation to be delivered to us on a silver platter—not by God or by Moses or by some civil rights leader or by some politician or bishop or pastor. We begin the march from slavery toward freedom only when we ourselves are willing to risk becoming the change we yearn for. There is no "rest of the story" without these strong women! And yet because of them, there is so much more to tell...