

“Israelites and Immigrants”
August 24, 2008

Exodus 1:8-22
Romans 12:1-8

On Sunday mornings the last several weeks – ever since I returned from vacation in mid-July – we’ve been making our way through the broad narrative arc of the second half of Genesis. We’ve followed Isaac and Rebecca’s son Jacob through some of his dreaming and scheming, and we’ve encountered Jacob and Rachel’s son Joseph as a young adult, when his arrogance, his father’s favoritism, and his brothers’ resentment combine to lead him into slavery in Egypt.

This morning we’ve left Genesis and moved into Exodus. A great deal has happened to the descendants of Isaac and Rebecca since we last spent time with them. After many years of slavery, Joseph rose to become Pharaoh’s administrator over all of Egypt, and through his God-given ability to interpret dreams he prevented the destruction of Egypt and of his very own extended family during 7 years of drought and famine.

Years have now passed, and the Hebrew people are no longer known as the family of Joseph, the one who guided Egypt through the famine. A new pharaoh, a new king, has arisen, and he doesn’t know the story of Joseph the dream master and his family who traveled to Egypt looking for food and for a better life for their families. This new Egyptian king and his people know only that the Israelites have grown numerous. Pharaoh and his people feel threatened, so they turn first to forced labor and oppression, using the Israelites to build grand Egyptian cities. When that doesn’t produce the desired results, Pharaoh turns to murder and sets the stage for Moses’ entry into the story.

The narratives we’ve been following include both high drama and lowdown deeds. These narratives can and have provide marvelous material for novels, plays, music, movies, and more. . . . But we don’t gather here on Sunday mornings as a large book club. This isn’t a movie theater. And even though Broadway is just a few blocks away, we’re not an off-Broadway performance space.

Why, then, *do* we read and explore these narratives every now and then? Perhaps more to the point, why do *I* choose to take us through these and so many other stories from a distant and, in the deepest sense of the word, mythical past? Or, to put it more bluntly, which I know at least some of you do from time to time, why do I make us listen to this Biblical . . . nonsense (or some more colorful word), week after week?

It’s a legitimate question. (It’s a question, too, I wish you’d bring to *me* when you have it, so I can hear you directly and have a chance to respond one-on-one.) It’s a legitimate question, a *good* question that definitely deserves to be asked periodically.

It’s also a question that will never have a complete answer, and in a strange way, the incompleteness of the answer is *part of the answer*. What I mean is that we read and grapple with the Bible in part because, despite the fact that individuals and communities have been reading and grappling with it for *centuries*, no one has yet been able to understand it completely. So we grapple with it because it still has something new to reveal. Through the grace of God and the gift of human imagination, these texts retain their capacity to surprise, to heal, to challenge, and to call.

So I invite you, week after week, to open yourselves to what these stories and this book may have to offer because we are part of a living tradition that cherishes these stories and finds in them an ever-deepening understanding of what it means to be human and what it means to be created and claimed by God.

In these stories we encounter people who are courageous, faithful, loving, and wise, *and* we encounter people who are liars, cheats, adulterers, murderers, and more. In that sense, fortunately and unfortunately, the Bible suggests that we post-modern folk aren't all that different from those folk from long ago and far away. When we take an honest look at ourselves, our own families, and our world, we still see courage, faith, love, wisdom, deceit, theft, adultery, murder, and more.

So these stories provide a mirror. Sometimes when we recognize ourselves in these people, we may wince, as we see that their arrogance, self-centeredness, or fear looks remarkably similar to our own. Other times, we can experience God's healing embrace as we recognize ourselves in these imperfect people and hear the stories proclaiming that the Holy One works through, loves, and forgives imperfect people like Jacob and Joseph and people like Mary, Martha, Peter, and Paul.

And then there are times like this morning, when a story from a distant time and a distant land can come along and wake us to a new or renewed perspective like an early morning splash of cold water in our faces. There are times like this morning, when in the midst of another election an ancient story comes along and offers us what may well be a deeper, richer, and more faithful perspective on a hot issue of our day.

The Hebrew people, the Israelites, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, have migrated to Egypt. Joseph was sold into Egyptian slavery, but his brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews and all their kin migrated to Egypt looking for a better life, hoping that their children might survive and thrive. For a while, the Egyptians may have been glad to have those Israelites around to do the hard work, care for their children, and build their cities. But over time the Egyptians have begun to feel threatened. The Israelites have become too numerous; they have too much potential power and influence.

So the Egyptians try to keep the Israelites in their place, to force them to do the dirtiest jobs under the most burdensome conditions. But the Israelites don't wither under oppression, and they don't flee from Egypt. Pharaoh then issues a decree requiring that all Israelite male infants must be killed, a decree that in essence makes the very lives of those infants illegal. He orders two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to be the first to obey this new law of the land.

But Shiphrah and Puah consider God's claim on them to be greater than Pharaoh's claim. They violate the law of the land, and, when Pharaoh summons them to explain why the Israelite male infants have lived, they lie through their teeth. Immediately after repeating Shiphrah and Puah's lies to Pharaoh, the Book of Exodus says, "So God dealt well with the midwives." They violated the law, they lied to the authorities, and what happens next? "God dealt *well* with them."

Not exactly a law and order text, is it? Depending on whether we see ourselves as Israelites or Egyptians, this text offers a call to resistance or a call to repentance. Depending on whether we understand ourselves as the outsiders doing hard, bitter work or as the rightful residents of the land in which we live, this text offers a word of hope or a word of warning. And no matter who we are, this story serves as a reminder that God's

vision is always broader than ours. Even though we often can fail to see beyond our own self-interest, God is always looking and moving us toward the well-being of all creation.

Along with this not-law-and-order text this morning, we also hear the words of Paul to the church in Rome, echoing the lessons of the story from Exodus: “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice. Do not be conformed to this world.” Remember, in other words, that we belong to the One who loved us into life and who calls us not to live solely for ourselves. Our lives are a gift, and we are called to share that gift as a blessing to all peoples. Do not be conformed to the ways of the world, Paul urges, because the ways of the world divide people and assign different degrees of worth to different people. The ways of the world elevate the needs of some people over others, simply on the basis of where people were born.

Throughout this collection of ancient writings that we keep visiting week after week, we encounter reminders that our ways are not God’s ways and our thoughts are not the Holy One’s thoughts. Our limited vision and our limited ability to love our enemies do *not* reflect the vision or the love of the Holy Spirit of Life and Love. We do well to remember that God’s vision and love always call us to stretch, to include and welcome the ones the world considers “less than.” At the same time, though, we also need to remember that we are and always will be imperfect people living in a very imperfect world, and what that means is that we will never have the perfect solution to any of the problems of human life. No political position or policy approach will ever be perfect.

Instead of pursuing a perfect policy or political position, we need to have before us – in our hearts, our minds, *and our politics* – the Holy One’s vision of Shalom. Instead of asking for perfection, God is asking us, in Paul’s words, to be the body of Christ, never perfect but always moving toward greater faithfulness. God is asking us to continue Jesus’ ministry, the ministry Jesus announced with these words in Nazareth: “The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free.”

My beloved brothers and sisters, that is the vision, that is the path we are called to follow. To bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free.

Now, before I sit down, I ask you to hear what I am *not* saying. This is an election year. Immigration is a hot issue; it is an important issue. I have been called to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and that is what I try to do. The Gospel as I encounter it clearly declares God’s embrace, love, and care for all people and especially for the least and the last. The Gospel as I encounter it calls us to be the body of Christ in trying to live that embrace, love, and care in all we do, including how we vote.

What I am *not* saying and what I am *not* preaching is that there is only one way to be the body of Christ in our daily lives and in our political lives. Conservative Christians have made the mistake of claiming that there is only one political approach that is faithful to God’s call, and progressive Christians have made the same mistake. The Gospel as I encounter it *does* put before us a very clear vision of God’s dream for creation, but it does *not* put before us a single way to work toward that vision. We need *clarity* about the inclusiveness of God’s dream, and we need *humility* when it comes to our ideas about how to nurture it into reality.

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God's vision for creation is a flourishing of all people and all life. What we are asked to do is to embrace that vision as our own and to try to live our lives and make our choices in ways that transform that vision into a reality, knowing, *always knowing*, that we will always make mistakes along the way and that we will always need and receive God's guiding grace.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC
August 24, 2008