

August 16, 2020

Oppression and Resistance

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Romans 12:1-8

After being given the option of speaking today on the texts suggested by the lectionary or a topic of my choice I have chosen the former, but not without some trepidation. I do not have any theological education, and the task of drawing meaning from the Bible should not be pursued lightly. It strikes me that there is similarity between the act of attempting to diagnose physical ailments using the Internet, and attempting biblical interpretation after reading a little bit of commentary - to do either of those things properly you really should have some training! Having said that, within our Anabaptist tradition is the idea that the Bible is interpreted within community and we struggle together to find its meaning. It is in that spirit that I offer my words today.

In his book "How the Bible Actually Works", author and biblical scholar Peter Enns describes our task in interpreting the Bible as taking a series of writings that are ancient, ambiguous and diverse and undertaking the sacred responsibility of faithfully and seriously engaging the stories to ask the questions "What is God like" and how to be a Christian here and now. The two passages from Exodus and Romans that I've chosen for today are well-known: the Exodus one falling within the narrative of the Israelites time in slavery in Egypt, and the Romans text as part of Paul's letter to the group of Christians in Rome. Despite being written centuries ago to particular audiences, they have something to say to the time we find ourselves in.

A keen observer may have noticed the texts I'm using are actually from next week's lectionary. Patrick and I agreed to switch speaking Sundays but to continue with the texts we had originally given some thought to, so they are going to fall somewhat out of order. The Exodus passage follows the story in Genesis where Joseph gains a position of favour in Egypt, oversees the government response to seven years of famine, and brings his family to join him. Patrick will jump back in time next week to discuss that further. For today, the story picks up where that generation has now died, but the numbers of their descendants are increasing. In verse 8 we are told there is a new king in Egypt who did not know Joseph. What follows is a story of oppression and resistance that has echoes of similar events that have occurred in many places and times.

In an address to his people, the new king labels the Israelites a group to be afraid of. "They outnumber us" he says, "they are putting our national security at risk". The claim that there were more Israelites than Egyptians strikes me as "alternative facts", but the point is they were seen as outsiders and a threat to Egypt's power. The new king responds by putting in place a system intended to take care of this threat: first by subjecting them to forced labour, and when that wasn't effective, by the killing of all newborn boys.

Apparently Pharaoh wasn't worried about girls being born, ironically his plan was foiled by five women. Two Hebrew midwives – Shiprah and Puah – refuse to carry out the order. The mother of Moses also defies Pharaoh's edict, hiding the baby for 3 months and then coming up with a plan to try to save him. Moses' sister, after witnessing the child's discovery by Pharaoh's daughter was quick-witted and suggested to her that she would find someone, who just happened to be the child's mother, to nurse him. Even Pharaoh's daughter participates in the subversion, she recognized Moses as a Hebrew child but ensured his survival and later raised him as a son. We know where the story goes from there, with Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery to the promised land.

What struck me about this story when I read it in preparation for today was how familiar the story of oppression feels. History is full of examples that have followed a similar pattern: one group of people feels threatened by, superior to, or misunderstands another group of people, and systematically goes about implementing a structure to oppress if not eradicate the other. We can see this playing out in North America today as we deal with the legacy of two such systems: the forced slavery of black people and the colonization of indigenous people. There may not be any more cotton plantations in the U.S. or Indian residential schools in Canada, but the lasting effects of these and other similar structures have been profound. The recent months have seen an explosion of activism and attention around issues of racial injustice. What can we take from the Exodus story to apply to this current reality? I'll come back to that.

The first sentence of chapter 12 of Romans begins with the phrase "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters ...". The use of the word "therefore" indicates this is the second part of a thesis or idea: because of this, therefore something else. My study bible suggests here Paul is turning to the practical application that flows from the theological discussions of the first part of his letter. In chapter 11 he discusses how the majority of Israel have rejected salvation through Christ, making room for Gentiles to be grafted in as branches to the tree representing the people of God. Both groups having been shown mercy by God, and something is expected in response.

The church at Rome was apparently predominantly Gentile, and they were rejecting the Jewish minority who held on to ritual practices regarding food and sacred days (see chapter 14). Paul probably didn't have in mind "how to undo systemic racism" when he wrote his letter to the Romans, but he was motivated to bring these two groups together in the spirit of Christ. His words in chapter 12 speak to me when I think about our responsibility as those who have been welcomed into the people of God to respond to systems of injustice.

- "do not be conformed to this world": This is an urging to think critically, to not buy in to popular values that promote power over others, or narratives that portray others as less than, or as a threat.
- "be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God": Turning away from those popular values or narratives requires active learning. The Exodus passage talks about the new king acting because he did not "know" Joseph or the history of the Israelites. We can renew our minds by reading articles and books,

listening to podcasts, watching documentaries or films, and attending cultural events that teach us the history and perspectives of those who have been oppressed or marginalized. Our church bulletin from July 26 included a message from MCC with a link to a website with lots of resources for anti-racism education.¹

- “we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another”: Paul’s description of God’s people is one that values diversity, unity, and service.
- “present your bodies as living sacrifice”: I mention this phrase last because it is harder. It suggests action is required.

I like to think of myself as someone who abhors racism and treats and respects all people equally. However, in my reading, watching and thinking the last few months I have been challenged to recognize the unconscious biases I still hold, and how as a white male I have benefited from living in a society with foundational structures marred by systemic racism. More pointedly, I have been shown my responsibility to participate in breaking down those structures.

In a few of the commentaries I read about the Exodus story, the midwives Shiprah and Puah are held as examples of resistance to structures of oppression, and rightfully so. They acted according to their conscience rather than conforming to something they knew was wrong, and undoubtedly did so at great personal risk. If Pharaoh was willing to kill every baby boy, surely he would not think twice about doing the same to those who disobeyed his order. It is always those who are already marginalized who bear the most risk when confronting systems of injustice. For most of us though, Pharaoh’s daughter is in a more analogous position. As a result of the good fortune of the circumstances of her birth she was in a position of privilege. She played no direct part in putting the system of oppression in place, but nevertheless was a beneficiary of it. She certainly would have been aware of the command about the Hebrew babies, but she acted out of mercy and love for someone who needed help. We don’t know what kind of explanation she gave her father when she later brought the grown child home as her son, but it seems safe to say she put her herself in some jeopardy by taking these acts.

Watching the 8 minutes and 46 seconds of George Floyd being suffocated by a Minneapolis police officer was shocking and heartbreaking. I think part of the reason it affected people so deeply was we were confronted with humanity in its purest form when George Floyd called out for his mother and to be allowed to breathe, contrasted with the unwillingness of the police officers to see that humanity. It is tempting to categorize this as something that only happens in the U.S., but what about the so-called "Starlight Tours" from 20 years ago where Saskatoon police officers were credibly accused of picking up indigenous men and dropping them outside the city limits in the dead of winter? Did I see the humanity of those men?

¹ <https://mcccanada.ca/stories/resources-anti-racism-education>

The last few months have been important to me to engage in renewing my mind to better understand the situation of those who are victims of systemic racism in large and small ways every day. One comment I read that hit home was that as a white person I have the luxury of whether I want to think about racism or not. A person who is black or indigenous in North America does not have that choice – that is their daily reality. So renewing my mind was a necessary first step, but Paul's words about offering myself as a living sacrifice keep nagging at me. That doesn't mean I have to literally put my life on the line, but I should be willing to take actions, even if they might cost me something. Like Pharaoh's daughter, I did not participate in putting in place the structures that have left the legacy we are dealing with today, but that does absolve me of the responsibility to act. Moses' mother and sister could not save him by themselves, some of the burden had to be taken by someone in a better position. Similarly, we should not let issues like reconciliation with indigenous people and protecting marginalized people fall on those who already have borne an unfair burden.

One article I read by songwriter Courtney Ariel gave the following suggestions for someone wanting to act in solidarity with those who are pushing for racial justice:

- **Vote**, keeping in mind the communities of people that do not live with privilege.
- **Protest**, using your body/voice in situations where you will be safe, when a marginalized body may not.
- **Call** elected officials and hold them accountable. Sign petitions. Send emails.
- **Donate** to organizations that are on the ground doing the work. One possible example is Christian Peacemaker Teams which does a lot of work with Indigenous communities.
- **Follow** Black Lives Matter, black activists, Indigenous activists, and other marginalized people who are doing the work of anti-racism.
- **LISTEN.**

That last one was written in all caps to emphasize its importance. I don't want to over simplify what is a difficult and complex issue, and I'm sure I'm not alone in wondering how much of a difference acts like this will actually make. Another article by Ariel summed things up this way:

“Sometimes living with privilege can disillusion us into thinking that being in community with other humans doesn't require work. This is a lie; it requires a great deal of work. And all of that work requires being a human and trying to love other humans well.

I believe that this is holy work, the work of justice, the pursuit of it. It doesn't need an audience, and it will not always have one. It will happen most days in ways that are unseen. ... There may not always be a practical, tangible way to pursue this work, but I believe you will know it when you meet it face-to-face.”²

We see in the Exodus story examples of women who were ready they were faced with an opportunity to participate in the work of justice. May we be also.

² <https://sojo.net/articles/our-white-friends-desiring-be-allies>

- Amen