

GOD’S STORY, OUR STORY

“God Has A Plan”

Exodus 2:1-10; 3:1-15

PENTECOST 16

September 29, 2019

Rev. Jeffrey H. Rickards

God’s story continues as it moves into the second and most important book of the Jewish Torah — Exodus, which literally means “*a way out.*” In order to provide you with a more authentic explanation for the importance and significance of Exodus, I turn to a Jewish scholar and writer I deeply admire and respect, Rabbi Jonathan Sachs. Rabbi Sachs is the former Chief Rabbi for the Congregations in Great Britain, and a unique voice within the contemporary Jewish world.

Rabbi Sachs speaks of Exodus as **“an astounding story of how a group of slaves are liberated from the mightiest empire of the ancient world by a supreme power intervening in history in defense of the powerless.”** He goes on to add, **“Never before and never since has the message of monotheism been more world-transforming, and the exodus narrative has inspired many of those who, in later times, fought oppression in the name of freedom and began the long journey across the wilderness in search of the promised land.”** As we move from Genesis to Exodus, the entire Biblical landscape changes, and God’s promise and plan takes on substance and form.

Before entering the story of the departure of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, we need to grasp how they got there in the first place. Last week, our reading ended with Jacob limping off, after a night-long wrestling match with God, to meet his estranged brother, Esau, whom he cheated out of their father, Isaac’s, blessing. After reconciling and burying their elderly father, Jacob and his sons, whose names will be identified as the Tribes of Israel, end up in Egypt. This

is because a famine forces them to reunite with a long lost son, whom he had presumed to be dead — Joseph. Because of his God-given gift of dream interpretation, Joseph was given an administrative post in Egypt, and was in a position to help his family.

The book of Exodus begins where the book of Genesis leaves off. After four hundred years of living peacefully, tending to sheep and growing crops in northeastern Egypt, the Hebrews' fortunes go downhill rapidly, when a Pharaoh "***who did not know Joseph***" comes into power. Exodus begins, like Matthew's Gospel, with a genealogy, telling us that Jacob had seventy descendants. The number, seventy, appears in many places in the Bible as a precise number, or symbolizing a large group of people. In Exodus, it signifies a problem of too much fertility, causing an anxious Pharaoh to order the first recorded genocide, in this case, all the male Hebrew sons two years old or younger.

Thankfully, the actions of some braver God-fearing Hebrew women limit the death toll. One child, who is spared by the ingenuity of a Hebrew mother, is drawn from the waters of the Nile River by a childless woman, who is none other than Pharaoh's daughter. Because of her discovery of the child, and because she draws him from a basket-like ark, the princess names the infant child Moses, meaning "*I drew him out.*" Prophetically, Moses will "draw" his people "out of" Egypt.

The first two chapters of Exodus provide a brief summary of the brutalities suffered by the Hebrews. The Lord's promise, first made to Abraham, is now coming to pass in a way no one could ever imagine. Despite the cries of the Hebrew people, there is no word or response from God, until God encounters a shepherd at a burning bush and calls him to be the instrument whom God will work through to liberate His people from slavery and Egypt, leading them to their promised land. That shepherd, of course, is Moses.

The burning bush scene in Chapter Three of Exodus is surely among the ten best known Biblical stories. It has been immortalized in countless ways in our

culture, especially since the founding of the modern state of Israel. An entire “baby boomer” generation grew up with Cecil B. DeMille’s rendition of it in an epic movie starring Charlton Heston — **“The Ten Commandments.”** For a younger generation of viewers, this scene has been animated by Dreamworks’ **“Prince of Egypt.”**

In the original version from the Second Chapter of Exodus, Moses calls himself **“an alien residing in a foreign land”** (2:22). However, Moses is a man who has never been at home anywhere. Born to a Hebrew mother, adopted by an Egyptian princess, and given an Egyptian name, Moses tries to intervene to help his kinfolk by murdering an Egyptian taskmaster. He flees Egypt as a murderer on the run, only to be identified as an Egyptian by the women he meets and rescues from robbers at a well in Midian. From the adopted son of royalty, Moses is now shepherding flocks for the father of the woman he is now married to, one of the women he defended at the well.

Chapters Three and Four of Exodus record Moses’ “call.” It is what is termed a “call account.” As a long-time member of our Synod’s Candidacy Committee, I have heard more than my share of “call accounts” from men and women aspiring to become pastors. Like Moses, some of them had their share of ups and downs and strange experiences. I personally never had a “call” experience, but, like Moses, I tried to talk my way out of it. Fortunately for the Hebrews, God remained tenacious with a trying-to-get-out-of-it Moses. In fact, God never took a take-it-or-leave-it-position. God is a hard bargainer.

Because it does not appear in the Narrative Lectionary’s selected texts, Moses’ first attempt to persuade Pharaoh to release the Hebrews is an unmitigated failure. Both Pharaoh and the Hebrew people Moses has been sent by God to liberate reject Moses and his message. I can surely identify with Moses. In Chapter Two, the Hebrews are crying out to God for someone to deliver them, and by the end of Chapter Five, it is Moses, himself, who is crying out in anger and frustration to God. The one called and sent by God to deliver the Hebrews from their lamentations can only raise his own angry and honest voice to God in complaint.

All of this begins as a result of Moses' own curiosity, seeing a burning bush that is not being consumed, while he is out in the wilderness leading sheep at a place called Mount Horeb. In the ancient world, mountaintops were traditional dwelling places for the Divine. Fire is a common Biblical symbol of God's presence. God instructs Moses to remove the sandals from his feet. The gesture is an ancient practice when entering a holy place of Divine presence. Taking off one's sandals is a gesture of many cultures associated with entering not only a worship space, but also a home. Thus, here at the foot of the Mountain of God, Moses, the "alien," has at last found a true home. Moses finds his true home, identity, and calling not with humans, but with God, the God of his ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

God calls Moses to go back to Egypt, where he is both wanted and unwanted. As in some other "call stories" in the Bible, Moses resists the call and raises a number of objections, to which God responds. Moses first pleads his own lack of skills and qualifications. "***Who am I?***" he asks (3:11). God responds, None of that matters. "***I will be with you***" (3:12). The people will ask, "***What is God's name?***" God responds "***I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE.***" As with the burning bush, this special divine name will serve both to reveal and to hide. The mysterious name will be fully revealed by the key points of the Exodus story that will fill out the character and identity of Israel's God. When God presents Moses with the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, God will announce "***I am the LORD your god . . . who brought you out of the land of Egypt . . . I am a jealous God, punishing . . . but showing steadfast love***" (20:2-6).

As we have read and learned from the past, God had a plan for Moses to bring the Hebrews out of Egypt, and through their forty year wilderness experience, to form them into a mighty nation, prepared and poised to enter and conquer Canaan, the land promised centuries ago to Abraham. After learning and experiencing who God really is, and following a plan and path set by God, Moses finally succeeds as a leader.

Stories like this are important for people like you and me, because God has a plan for each of our individual lives, and for our lives together as God's people in this faith community known as Grace. Some of you have already discovered, realized and offered up to God your God-given personal talents, skills and spiritual gifts, to be a blessing for others in what we call the church's ministry and mission for others. However, many of you have opted to sit out and not get involved — a way out, so to speak? You'll never know what you've been missing!

Beloved people of God, by virtue of your baptism, God has called you **“to proclaim Christ in word and deed, care for others and the world God has made, and work for justice and peace.”** Are you living out your baptismal call? As you leave this place of worship today, I want you to reflect on and pray about these questions. What personal talents and spiritual gifts has God blessed you with? Are you using them in God's service? What further tasks does God have in mind for you? What path have you been set upon? What other ministries can we do together as Grace Lutheran Church?

I close this message with a prayer that appears in the Evangelical Lutheran Worship's Even Vespers: **“O God, You have called Your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that Your hand is leading us, and Your love supporting us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord,”**

AMEN