



It is Time for God to Act

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given August 27, 2017

Exodus 1:8-2:10, Proper 16A

I recently attended a funeral at an Orthodox church in St. Paul. It was the first time I had ever been in a Christian Orthodox church, and I was amazed and moved by many things. There are no pews – everyone stands for the service; the walls and ceiling are covered, every square inch, by beautifully colored icons of Jesus, Mary the Mother of God, and all the saints; the service is chanted in beautiful a capella four part harmony sung by the whole congregation. And when it came time for the priest to give the homily, the first thing he said was, “It is time for God to act.” Apparently that is the liturgical line that is said at every Orthodox service by the deacon at the service. The deceased had been a deacon, in fact a deacon we have been praying for here at St. Stephens every week, Bohdan Melnychenko, who was a dear friend of parishioners here. Bohdan had said that line, It is time for God to act, many times throughout the course of his life. It was the focus of Bohdan’s life and vocation. And it became the focus of the priest’s homily.

There are times in the life of the world when we know we need God to act. The story described in the first chapter of Exodus from this morning’s reading was exactly such a time. If you remember from previous weeks, the children of Israel, beginning with Joseph, had come to Egypt long before. Joseph had been sold as a slave by his jealous brothers, but he ended up using his gifts of interpreting dreams to save all of Egypt from a famine, including in the end his own brothers who had betrayed him. The Pharaoh of Egypt had been so pleased with Joseph that he invited Joseph’s family to come live in Egypt with him, and they did. But hundreds of years later, we discover in today’s text, there came a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph.

When this new Pharaoh saw the Israelite people, he did not see the descendants of the man who had saved his country. Instead, he saw difference, and potential

threat. He saw foreigners who did not belong, and who he feared might end up fighting against Egypt in the event of war. This fear of foreigners became a loathing and a dread, the text says, and out of that loathing and dread the Egyptians became ruthless in their oppression of Israelites. They made Israelites slaves.

And in the middle of that oppression, today's story comes. In today's story Egypt's dread and loathing of the Israelites has risen to such a pitch that the Pharaoh has ordered an abominable thing, which is the requirement that Israel kill its baby boys. The midwives use the Pharaoh's own prejudice against him by saying they can't obey since the Hebrew women give birth so quickly, before they get there, which in his prejudice the Pharaoh believes. Then he grows even more cruel and he demands that the Israelites throw their own baby boys into the Nile. The Nile is the source of life in the desert, but in this case the water is being used as an instrument of death. And in the middle of all that we have an extraordinary moment. Moses' mother, whose name was Jochebed, gave birth to Moses and when she looked at him the text says she saw that he was a "fine baby." But in Hebrew, the text says she looked at him and saw that he was "tov," the word that means good. This exactly mimics what God saw in the beginning of creation, when God was creating the world. God made each thing and looked at it, and God saw that it was good. That word "tov", good, always has the connotation of future life in it – it means generative, it means the carrier of the sacred future. Jochebed saw that Moses was good, she saw the sacred future in him, and so she determined to save his life. She put him in the Nile, but in a basket where he might have the chance of being rescued, and then she sent Miriam Moses' sister to watch what happened. The Princess, an Egyptian and Pharaoh's daughter, found the basket and And when she saw Moses, instead of looking with fear and loathing, her humanity stirred and she just saw a crying baby, and she drew him out of the water and saved him.

It was time for God to act. And God did act, as we will hear in the next several weeks. We don't hear the whole story in the lectionary – it skips the ten plagues, and lots of other critical moments in the great drama. But God acts through God's people. God moves God's people, the Israelites. God calls Moses out of a burning bush to rescue them from their oppression. God calls the Egyptians too. God calls them to surrender and release their slaves and to repent, and they refuse this call. We will hear some of this in the coming weeks. That was a time that they needed God to act because the anti-creational forces of Pharaoh's prejudice had

reached monstrous proportions. It was a time that the water of the Nile which should have been life-giving had become the water of death and destruction. It is always in just such a time, according to the ancient memory of our spiritual ancestors, that God moves to draw the helpless out of the water and save them. God moves those in power to repent and cease their fear and dread and oppression of those who are different from them.

A number of years ago I had the good fortune to speak to a Pakistani woman who was an Episcopal priest. Her husband was a Bishop in the Anglican church in Pakistan, where she was not yet allowed to be ordained, so she was in the U.S. She told me that in Pakistan she had led many Bible studies among young women there. Since many of modern day American young women are not as interested in Bible studies as the women in Pakistan seemed to be I asked her how she got the women interested. She said, because the Bible is so clearly full of stories of liberation of the oppressed. The Bible is full of stories like today's story, when it is time for God to act, and God does act by moving in God's people for the sake of healing and justice and the end of the violence that all prejudice ultimately leads to.

There are times in the life of the world that it is time for God to act, and now is one of them. The anti-creational forces of prejudice that deny the goodness of people of color and immigrants and Muslims are increasing in our country, and we have seen where this goes. We have seen it in history and we have seen it in the foundational stories of our own scriptures. The story of Moses and the Israelites is not a metaphor for our own day. It is the story of our time. We do not read the stories of scripture; we experience them. We discover ourselves in their pages and find out we are living this story. When we heard Nazis chanting "Jews will not replace us" on the streets of Charlottesville a few weeks ago, we saw the Egyptians who looked at the same people, the Israelites, with fear and loathing. It is in just such a time that God acts by pulling the innocent from the water. God acts by offering each of us the chance of new life, a life in which we abandon systems that oppress the innocent and recognize the dignity of every human being instead, as our baptismal covenant affirms.

Today we are going to baptize babies and an adult too. We are going to pull people from the water like the Princess pulled Moses from the water, but the water of baptism is the water of dying and rising again with Jesus – it is the water of dying to the old ways of fear and prejudice and sin, and rising to Jesus' way of

love which sees every other person as a sister and a brother worthy of dignity and respect. It is time for God to act, because the anti-creational forces of prejudice are strong and entrenched, and we need all the power of God to resist them, in ourselves and in our systems.

Jesus teaches us that the power of God is to love. It is to love all without conditions, and to repent of sin and prejudice because the kingdom of heaven is at hand. The way we do this is gentle, and full of life and joy. It is about laying down our rhetoric and our assumptions and our fear, and beginning again. It is about looking into the face of each person you encounter, especially those you disagree with or would otherwise make you nervous, and seeing first a human being created for goodness. It is about following in the footsteps of Shiphrah and Puah, those fabulous midwives who stood up to Pharaoh and would not do violence in his name. It is about following in the footsteps of Jochebed, who saw *tov* in her baby boy and would not abandon him to the water of chaos, the water of prejudice. It is about being the Princess, an Egyptian and a person who had power, who looked at baby Moses and refused to obey her father, refused to give in to loathing, and saw an innocent instead. It is about following in the footsteps of Jesus, who chose love and nonviolence even at the cost of his own life.

It is time for God to act, and God will act, today, in the river, in Minnehaha Creek. God grants God's Spirit to us in baptism, as well as forgiveness, and a new life, again and again and again each day. God acts each week when we share Christ's table and experience the communion of the body of Christ with one another. God acts when we are sent from this table out into the world to love, to resist evil, and to strive for justice and peace among all people.

It is time for God to act, and God will act. May we be instruments of God's action to recognize *tov*, goodness, in one another, and to bring about the sacred future. Amen.