

People Cry, God Listens
Exodus 1 & 2
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7 September 2014

Opening – Story

When I was new . . . You tell me your story and I'll tell you mine. Fred Felger.

A person is identified through their story.

Same with groups of people. We are a community not because of an agreement to get along. Not because of this great building or our policies and by-laws, but a shared story.

In fact what makes a community a community and not just an assortment of people is a shared story – a beginning, middle, and hoped for end.

And it is a community's story which answers all the big questions.

Want to know what is right and what is wrong?

Various big questions – meaning of life, etc., *ending with Who is God?*

So, let us tell our story. Our story as the people of God.

Exodus 1:1-7

The first thing we notice is the “And.” We are starting in the middle of a story. This let's us know that everything that happened in Genesis is important for understanding what is going to happen in this story.

Genesis – blessing, life, tapping into the goodness of God's creation, blessing others (though it took those folk some work to get that, with all the bad things they did to each other)

That story focused on a family. In these opening verses it is like the camera lens panning out to wide screen. From the twelve brothers to the clan of seventy to a vast multitude filling the earth.

There is a question hanging over the text. Will God's promises still hold, despite the changing situation. *Has your life been like that?* Have new life circumstances raised questions about core truths? Maybe a relationship ended, and it caused you to question yourself? Maybe an illness arose and your courage and hopefulness were tested? Maybe you lost your job and were left wondering, what next? How do the core truths carry through into changing life circumstances?

In Genesis this family struggled with fertility. God kept promising that they would be fruitful and now those promises have come true. The multiplication of the sons of Israel represents God's continuing work of creation. We are reminded that God is still creating. God is creating us. God is using us to create a new world.

Yet, we notice something sinister in this verse. I'm using the translation by Jewish scholar Robert Alter, which was intended to highlight scripture as a great work of literature.

Alter says, "the sons of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied and grew very vast, and the land was filled with them." The word he translates "swarmed" is connected with the creeping things back in Genesis 1. There is a dark side to this language. The fast multiplying people are like an infestation of insects or rodents. Or at least the Egyptians will think of them this way. Living after the Holocaust, we can't help but read these verses through the lens of anti-Semitic propaganda. And immediately we realize that the story we are reading isn't ancient history. The story we are reading is a true story because it has happened again and again throughout history.

In fact, if you listen to some of the language used against the refugees coming across our borders, you hear those old racist words. Just two weeks ago I listened to a Senator describe those children as criminals carrying disease and mental illness, and I recoiled at language, long-used by

anti-Semites, finding new targets.

In all the old creation stories, creation arose in a contest with the forces of chaos. It happens again in this story. And, once again, that's where we find ourselves in 2014. All our efforts to make a new and better world seem to be shattering with wars in the Ukraine and the Middle East, the outbreak of Ebola in Africa, and frightening new terrorist threats around the globe.

As God's creative work continues, the forces of chaos will work to stop God's work.

Exodus 1:8-14

The King of Egypt remains unnamed because the particular historical setting is not the issue. The author of this story wants every generation to fill in the blank with whoever is Pharaoh in their setting. Who is our Pharaoh? Who sits impassively, living off of another's labor, another's oppression?

This passage is crafty in that it is filled with irony. Everything that Pharaoh tries to do backfires on him. Everything meant to destroy the Israelites leads to further blessing and more life.

Here's another irony. What are the Israelites supposed to build? Store houses for grain. Pharaoh's plan is for people to die building something that symbolizes life and hope. This story is a struggle over life and blessing.

Exodus 1:15-22

Ironies abound!

Pharaoh, the most powerful man in the world, supposedly a god, is thwarted by two midwives. Take a moment and think about how many times in the Bible God uses the powerless to bring down the powerful. That is one of the most common themes in scripture.

Once, again we have a symbol that life is the central theme. The Nile River was the source of life and blessing to the Egyptian people. Pharaoh now wants to make it an engine of death. But God has other plans!!!!

I'm a huge fan of Shiphrah and Puah, these daughters of God who saved the sons of Israel. I think these women are the most courageous heroes in the entire Bible.

Exodus 2:1-10

Daughters continue to be the heroes of the story. Moses may be the father of the nation, but only because five women conspired to give him life.

Pharaoh's orders are ineffective. Even his own daughter rejects the genocidal vision of her father. Again there is irony. The Nile which Pharaoh intended for death, becomes a source of life and blessing through the work of these women.

God intended this world for good. Great powers may attempt to prevent that goodness. They may even be successful for a time. But God's goodness will overcome. Our role, as we live the story, is to remain courageous and cunning.

Exodus 2:11-22

What are our responsibilities when we see someone else suffering? What should we do when we know that another is treated unjustly?

The differences between the two times of preaching this text.

Exodus 2:23-25

And now, after all that prologue, the main character of the story is revealed—God enters the scene, and . . .

. . . in three brief verses God's character is revealed—when the people cry, God hears, God remembers, God sees, and God knows.

And everything else, everything else in our entire religious tradition flows from those verbs. King David, the Psalms, the prophets, the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the existence of the First Central Congregational Church as a congregation that welcomes and includes everyone. If these three verses had never been written. If they were not true. Then you and I would not be here today in a church which proclaims that everyone is “More Than Welcome.”

For this **is** our core testimony and the central narrative of our story. This is good news that you can use. When people cry: God hears. God remembers. God sees. And God knows you.

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.