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### **Choosing Sides**

Exodus 2:11

One of the interesting facets of the history of the Scots Irish settlers in America was their relationship with Native Americans. Since the Scots Irish were so often pushing the boundaries of the frontier they were frequently in contact with the Indians. Some were Indian fighters who learned how to fight Indian style. But many interacted with Native Americans in more positive ways.

Sam Houston grew up in a Presbyterian family in a frontier region of Tennessee. As a boy he sometimes became restless with the strict regimen that was enforced at home. Periodically he would leave home for a few days and hang out with the Cherokees who lived across the river. He learned their language and became familiar with their culture, religion, and family patterns. As a teenager he disappeared for two years and was adopted by a Cherokee chief and given a Cherokee name. Sam's experience with the Indians later made him very valuable to Andrew Jackson as a scout and interpreter for Jackson's campaign against the Creek Indians.

As an adult Sam Houston's dual identity became a burden for him. With Andrew Jackson as his mentor Houston became governor of Tennessee as a young man. He married a young woman from one of the most prominent families in the state. Once again Sam became restless and threw it all away to go and live with the Cherokees, who by then had been forcibly removed to Oklahoma. Some might wish that modern day governors could drop out of sight like that. This time Houston spent three years with the tribe before returning to Anglo society once again to help found the state of Texas. It took Houston most of his life to finally resolve the question of who he was within the multi-cultural world of the American frontier.

A similar dilemma was played out in the life of Moses. The book of Exodus tells us that he was raised in the most powerful family in Egypt. Having been adopted by a daughter of Pharaoh, he is part of the privileged class of Egyptian society. But at some point he learns that his birth parents are Hebrews, the people who form the underclass of that society. As Moses watches the Hebrews suffer the effects of slavery and genocide it becomes increasingly difficult for him to live with his dual identity.

The moment of crisis comes when Moses witnesses an Egyptian administering a violent beating to a Hebrew slave. As he watches this assault take place he is confronted with a decision which goes well beyond the question of which ethnic group will claim his identity. It is now a question of justice. Moses finds that he can no longer sit on the sidelines giving tacit approval to the persecution of other human beings. He intervenes to rescue the Hebrew because it is the right thing to do.

In the beginning Moses assumes that he can keep his action a secret and thereby retain his privileged position in Egyptian society. But word of Moses' intervention leaks out. Pharaoh is incensed by the news and Moses must flee for his life. In acting for the oppressed Hebrew Moses made a choice that he did not fully appreciate. He has in fact chosen sides. This decision to leave his dual identity behind is one that he will live with for the rest of his life.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew's Gospel we find Jesus leading people into the process of choosing sides. The disciples ask Jesus why he so often teaches in parables. He tells them that the parables are meant to uncover the mysteries of the kingdom but they do not function that way for everyone. Not everyone has the frame of reference to understand these mysteries. Only those who embrace the kingdom that Jesus came to bring will receive this gift of understanding.

Jesus' ministry is about bringing people into this realm of understanding. This is why Jesus is so often leading people to a point of crisis. He confronts them with a decision they may not want to make. They must decide whether to be disciples who live to serve God or to continue to be people who live to serve their own interests. A dual identity is not an option. Jesus forces people to choose sides.

When Moses chooses sides and moves into the wilderness of Midian he is ready to enter this new realm of understanding. He is ready to learn what it means to serve God. Life under Pharaoh was about the exercise of power and the accumulation of wealth. This emphasis on wealth and power was about enhancing the self at the expense of others. Pharaoh had no problem justifying the use of genocide to achieve personal goals. What Moses learns in the wilderness is that he has to relinquish this view of life. He must set aside what he learned under Pharaoh. It is not enough to try to make Pharaoh more compassionate. He has chosen sides and must leave the values of Pharaoh behind. Only then will he receive the spiritual insight to fulfill his calling of leading the Hebrews to the promised land.

I recently saw again the 1955 movie "Judgment at Nuremberg." I was struck by how skillfully the film explores the moral dilemmas faced by German officials under Hitler and the Americans charged with bringing them to justice at Nuremberg. Most of all I was struck by the extent to which the same dilemmas continue to haunt us today. Spencer Tracy plays the role of the American judge who presides at one of the trials. He struggles to understand the perspective of Germans who were living under Hitler. He is puzzled that so many decent people accepted the evils of the Nazi regime. He follows the testimony of the German judges who are on trial. He visits with the servants who are assigned to his house. He draws out the viewpoints of members of the German aristocracy that he meets socially. In every case he discovers that people are ashamed of what their government did. But they all said they did not know the extent of the abuses and they could never have imagined how far the Nazis would go.

A major break in the trial comes when the most distinguished of the German judges, played by Burt Lancaster, decides to change his plea to guilty. He takes the stand and tells the truth about caving in to pressure from the Nazis to condemn people who were being tried on political grounds. He explains that it was the only way he could keep his job and protect his pension. In the final scene of the movie the Spencer Tracy character goes to visit the Burt Lancaster character in prison. The German judge says to the American, "I know that what I did was wrong and that my prison sentence is just. But please understand that I did not know that my government was going to kill six million people." The American judge answers, "The first time you decided to condemn an innocent man to die you knew exactly what would happen."

In less dramatic ways we make the same decision every day of our lives. Sooner or later we discover that we cannot serve both God and Pharaoh. Our calling is to choose sides and leave Pharaoh behind.