

Sermon "The Road to Independence"

Scripture: Exodus 1:6-14, 22-2:10, Matthew 11:25-30

Sunday, July 5, 2015

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Our first scripture reading in Exodus 1 and 2 sets the stage for the remainder of the book. God's promises are fulfilled for the Hebrew people despite the oppression of Pharaoh and his regime. The wisdom and courage of a few advocates for children preserve the future for Israel and facilitate the emergence of a leader in the person of Moses. God uses the seemingly powerless and dependent to bring about God's redemptive purposes and independence. This is a story rich in irony! I will read verses 6-14 of chapter one and begin again at verse 22 through chapter two, verse 10. Hear now the Word of God.

6 Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation. 7 But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them. 8 Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. 9 He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. 10 Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." 11 Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. 12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. 13 The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, 14 and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them. 22 Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live." 1 Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. 2 The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. 3 When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. 4 His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. 5 The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. 6 When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. 7 Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" 8 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. 9 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. 10 When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

Our second scripture reading brings us to another time and place in our faith history. Several centuries following Moses, another babe comes into the world to reveal the unexpected ways of God. In Matthew 11, verses 25-30 Christ is praying following a disappointing journey into Galilee. Many are not responding and Christ is reminded that it is not the *wise and learned*, but *the infants*, who are open to what he has to say. Why? Because *infants* make no pretense of knowledge; whatever they have is given to them. They do not judge God by some preconceived criteria. Rather, they let God be God on God's own terms. Jesus extends an invitation to *the wise and learned* who are overburdened by preconceived notions of religious obligations to discover anew the kindness and gentleness of the God whose burden is light. Let us open our hearts and minds to the Word of God.

25 At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to babes; 26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 27 All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. 28 "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

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Text: "...you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants..." Matthew 11:25b

Let us pray. Loving God, who bends down to lift infants and whose understanding is unsearchable, thank you for coming to us time and time again in unexpected ways. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you, our Redeemer and Strength. Amen.

At the conclusion of a weekend filled with festivities celebrating the independence of our country, we gather together for worship to acknowledge our dependence as children of God. We come to be nourished by God's word, inspired to do the right thing and comforted as individuals who carry our own particular burdens.

In the story of Moses' humble beginnings, we are introduced to the ancient Hebrews struggle for independence. It's the prelude to the Exodus—God's people crossing the Red Sea out of bondage into the Promised Land. The historian who recorded this prelude is a person of faith, a person who trusts in a loving God even when life's circumstances would indicate otherwise. Part of the beauty of the Moses narrative is the wonderful use of irony which reminds us that things are often not as they appear.

In the midst of troubled times under the inhumane rule of an Egyptian king who attempts to control the world around him by oppressing and destroying life, God is taking initiative in unexpected ways.

The oppressive work placed upon the Hebrews to break down their endurance becomes God's tool in building a stronger people. The command to kill the Hebrew sons at birth is ignored by midwives who practice creative *civil disobedience* because of their reverence for God and life.

Ironies continue to abound in the story: Pharaoh's chosen instrument of destruction, the Nile, is the means of saving Moses. When Pharaoh's daughter *draws Moses out* of the river, she is doing for Moses what Moses will do for the Hebrew people years later. "Draw out the people" from their bondage in the crossing of the Red Sea. The man whose primary agenda is to destroy the Hebrew people becomes God's agenda in bringing them their independence.

"...you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to babes..."

And so the grand and glorious story of the Exodus -- the celebration of freedom, of coming home, the Declaration of Independence for the Hebrew people begins very simply with a

child...an infant—the story of his vulnerability in an unjust world and his utter dependence upon life itself and those who advocate for him as a child of God.

The babe Moses, who became the leader of the Hebrew people, began his journey as each of us, helpless and dependent. This is a lovely reminder that every journey toward independence begins with dependency and all of life is an interplay (a back and forth) between the two. Only those who recognize their dependence in this life can be truly independent.

As a part of a culture that emphasizes independence and self-sufficiency, not only for our country but also for individuals, we would be wise to pause, to listen to God's message revealed to babes and to remember we have a God who has been taking initiative on our behalf in ways beyond our understanding; working through those we least expect to lighten our burdens and redeem our lives on our individual journeys to independence. There are no self-made men or women! We have many to thank along the way of our lives. By the grace of God goes each one of us!

Studies in human growth and development have shed light on the optimum circumstances for children to grow up and become independent. When children know and experience that their caregiver is supportive, taking initiative on their behalf and encouraging them to explore the world AND when children learn to trust their caregiver's dependable presence because when they do venture out and return their caregiver is consistently there, then children learn to become independent on their journey into adulthood.

Of course, growing up and becoming independent is always a struggle. It was for the ancient Hebrew people under Moses' leadership separating from an overbearing and cruel Pharaoh. It was for the United States of America separating from our mother country across the pond who burdened us with levies and taxes, and it is for every human being even with the optimal caregiver.

The object of growing up and becoming independent, however, is never to become so self-sufficient that we no longer need each other. Neither does independence mean that we are no longer responsible for the less fortunate or weaker among us. There is an irony that the more independent one becomes the more dependable he or she is within relationships. A true interdependence is a greater possibility among independent people.

For Israel, according to Terence Fretheim, the exodus does not constitute a declaration of independence as much as a declaration of dependence upon God. The affliction and burden they endured in Egypt and their dependence on God's deliverance of them became a part of their faith and identity, mandating their relationship with the less fortunate among them. The recalling of oppression; the memory of the past was to be used to center the people on (1) what God has done for them and (2) how they are to respond to the unfortunate in every generation.

Bill Moyers points out a parallel theme as the United States of America gained independence. He wrote the following in an article entitled "This is Your Story..." (June 10, 2003):

All of us know that the American Revolution ushered in what one historian called "The Age of Democratic Revolutions." Page Smith reminds us that the founders "ambition was not merely to free themselves from dependence and subordination to the Crown but to inspire people

everywhere to create agencies of government and forms of common life that would offer greater dignity and hope to the exploited and suppressed.

Bill Moyers continues, *For all the rhetoric about 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,' it took a civil war to free the slaves and another hundred years to invest their freedom with meaning. Women only gained the right to vote in my mother's time. New ages don't arrive overnight, or without "blood, sweat, and tears."*

The journey to independence is never easy or without sacrifice and struggle along the way.

As we celebrate our country's independence on this festive weekend, may we, as people of faith never forget our dependence on the God we trust; the God who has been revealed to babes and who came to us as a babe. May we never take for granted the unexpected initiative of God on our behalf and may we never stop taking initiative on behalf of those who are less fortunate than we.

And as the most powerful nation in the world celebrating Independence Day, let us not forget the divine irony played out time and time again in scripture... Rather than using power as it is usually exercised in the world, God works through persons who have no obvious power. Again and again, God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.

Jesus said, "Come unto me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart. And you will find rest for your souls." So be it. Amen.