



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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AUGUST 24, 2014
THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

The Great Motivator Exodus 1:8–2:10; Romans 12:9-21

Having traveled rather quickly through the book of Genesis this summer, we better understand why this rich resource of stories occupies its important place at the beginning of our biblical literature. These ancient writings answer our very modern questions about genesis—beginnings: How did life begin? Why are we here? Why is there evil in the world? Why do we work to live? How did all these people get here? How did our particular faith begin? Why do we behave in the ways we so often do? What does God think about it all?

You might have considered other questions as we followed the exploits of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. One thing is certain, we see ourselves all over the pages of Genesis for this portion of scripture describes not only the origins of the Hebrew people but the earthy character of humanity in general. As God walks throughout creation, he calls not only Adam and Eve, but the rest of us hear our names as well.

Genesis ends with the family of Jacob (now known as Israel) reunited and safely quartered in the prosperous land of Egypt. The book of the Exodus begins on a similar high note. We are reminded that Jacob and his sons took refuge in Egypt during the famine thanks to the forgiveness and generosity of Joseph. We are also reminded that the promise was being fulfilled. The family multiplied and became abundant, just as God had said it would. Finally, God's plan was coming to fruition.

Then the next line jumps off the page like a lion pouncing on its prey: "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph" (Exodus 1:8). Pause for a moment and allow the impact of that statement to sink in. "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." Growing up in a small town, I know what it means for everyone to know your family. They vouch for you: "Oh, that's Joe's boy. He's a good kid." Or they help you out, "Aren't you Mary's daughter? Is there something I can do to help?" Or they might even offer a cautionary word: "That's Pete's son over there. I'd keep my eye on him if I were you." For the most part, being a part of a family everyone knows is a good thing and can be beneficial as the years roll by.

Some of you have moved here from other places and have no family connections. You know what it is like to find your own way, to make your own inroads, to prove yourself to other people. As much as we like to make it on our own, most of us will admit that we are grateful for the positive connections a good family name can make for us.

You understand, then, the import of those words, “Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” The Hebrew people no longer had an ally, a friend on the throne, a champion of their cause, someone to stand in their corner. Although they had lived in Egypt four hundred years, they were suddenly immigrants in a strange land. They were foreigners rather than neighbors.

It is perplexing enough to go from being a respected, contributing member of the community to be suddenly regarded as someone who does not belong, but almost overnight the new pharaoh decided that the Hebrews had become the enemy. These people, who had been living peacefully among the Egyptians for four centuries, were now regarded as Egypt’s biggest threat.

Even more puzzling—and sad—is Pharaoh’s action in response to this change in perspective. Instead of wondering how he might continue this tradition of peaceful coexistence thus making his kingdom stronger and more resilient, he decides instead that the Hebrews are a threat to his people and must be suppressed. He makes them slaves in their adopted homeland which, by the way, is the only home they have ever known. Their lives become tenuous and bitter under Pharaoh’s oppressive rule. They are forced into hard labor and toil under worsening conditions, but neither their spirit nor their numbers are diminished. And when Pharaoh attempts to reduce the population through genocide, the Hebrews manage to outwit him and continue to thrive.

Pharaoh was afraid of the Hebrew people and, as we all know, fear can be a great motivator. Of course, the Hebrews were not the source of Pharaoh’s fear; his own insecurity is what led him to the barbaric treatment of the Israelites.

It is a sad fact that we often look upon other people as our enemies when they have done nothing to harm us. We draw our battle lines based on our own insecurities. Think about the interplay of reactions that take place when a new kid comes to school. Some of the students will be excited to have a new friend while others will feel threatened that their place in the

popularity pool is in danger. New neighbors, new businesses, new leadership can all have the same effect. When we feel insecure we often find an object for our fear and react to it. Around the world ancient feuds persist because someone thinks they should. In the end, most people simply want a secure home, food to eat, education for their children, an opportunity to do meaningful work, and the freedom to worship in whatever way they believe. Our fear, however, sometimes causes us to consider other people as enemies rather than neighbors, as foes instead of friends. Imagine how different world history might have been had the Egyptians continued to live peacefully with the Hebrew people. How different life would be today if we claimed rather than rejected the people whom we fear.

The Apostle Paul knew a thing or two about fear and its dangerous consequences. His own fear of the growing faith in Jesus Christ led him to inflict oppression, abuse, and physical harm on the early Christians who were fellow Jews. And when he became a follower of Christ himself, he found himself on the receiving end of that unjustified fear. Paul was well acquainted with prison and beatings and unwarranted scrutiny. When writing to his friends in Rome, however, Paul made a significant observation. He wrote:

Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

And the writer of the Epistle of First John summed Paul's thoughts and Jesus' teachings by saying, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love" (I John 4:18).

The point is that our fears, real or imagined, logical or irrational, have a way of defining us and other people. Sometimes we are the pharaoh choosing our enemies and getting them under our thumb before they can hurt us. At other times, however, we are the supposed enemy, unjustly suspected of plotting harm to others. No matter where we find ourselves, before we act

out of our fear, we need to consider the pathway of love. Poet Edwin Markham said it beautifully,

“They drew a circle to shut me out:
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
“But love and I had the wit to win,
We drew a circle and brought them in.”¹

That is exactly what God did. It took time and a great deal of hardship and suffering, but God enlarged the circle to include everyone in his family. I love the way the story is told in the early pages of the Exodus. As Pharaoh attempts to eradicate all of the newborn boys, the midwives and mothers outfox him. While he is acting to rid the world of young Hebrew boys, God puts one in Pharaoh’s own household. The story of Moses being drawn out of the water and placed in the care of Pharaoh’s daughter is an example of God’s infiltrating love. What an opportunity Pharaoh had to experience firsthand the goodness of God’s people. How sad that he could not open his heart to his own adopted grandson and his people.

God did not give up. Throughout the centuries of oppression and struggle, of rejection and misunderstanding, God continued to find ways to enlarge the circle and include all of his children in his family. Finally, like a new Moses drawn out from the midst of the Hebrew people, God placed Jesus in the center of our lives and offered us the opportunity to see firsthand who God is and how much God loves us. Some people embraced Jesus while others saw him as a threat. Some people greeted him in love while others turned on him in hatred. Some approached him with acceptance while others regarded him with fear. On God’s part, it was a grand gesture of acceptance and inclusion. It was a profound example of how we should live in God’s world. Sam Wells, formerly Dean of the Chapel at Duke University and now Vicar of St. Martin in the Fields in London explains it this way:

Jesus doesn’t abolish difference. He’s the embodiment of harmonious difference. He brings God and humanity together. He brings Jew and gentile together. He makes possible, demonstrates, and renews a world in which Technicolor diversity can flourish while each entity enriches the life of every other.

¹Edwin Markham, as cited in David Richo, *When Love Meets Fear* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997),

That's the kingdom of God. That's what his life, death, and resurrection give us, now and forever.

So Jesus transforms our fears about being different.²

We are so different from one another—and thank God that we are. What a dull world it would be if we were all exactly alike. We need to understand our differences as a gift from God rather than as a threat to our way of life. We need to widen our circle of acceptance to include people who are different. We need to look honestly at our fear and decide if it is justified or simply a reaction of our insecurity. And we need to trust God to take care of us as he did with Moses for we might well be the one chosen to lead others to a new land of acceptance and hope and promise.

Would it not be wonderful if police officers and young men on the street began to see one another as allies rather than enemies? Would it not be world changing if nations were respectful of one another rather than aggressive in relating? Would it not change the way in which we think of one another if our borders were respected on both sides as gateways to freedom instead of escape routes to bounty? Would it not revolutionize our faith if we all worked together for good instead of competing in the name of the gospel? Would it not please God if we looked at one another first with the discerning eyes of love instead of the suspicious eyes of fear?

There are many pharaohs in our world who seek to define the rest of us by their fears but there is only one Christ who has accepted us all and claimed us as brothers and sisters. Fear is a motivator for many, but love is the great motivator and ultimately the only force that can change the world for good. Amen.

²Samuel Wells, *Be Not Afraid: Facing Fear with Faith*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 139.

August 24, 2014

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Holy and Ever-Present God, you have created us with hearts capable of loving and receiving love because you are a God of love, calling us into relationship with you and with one another. You have graced our lives with family and friends who support and strengthen us, who share the joys and sorrows of life, who call us to be our best selves. You created us to live in community, to join with others for work and worship, for rest and play, finding delight and encouragement in one another. You have placed in our lives people to whom we are called to extend hospitality and compassion, some we have never met and whose thoughts and ways are different from ours but who are our brothers and sisters because they are also your children. For the gifts of those with whom we share life, the ways we love and nurture one another, and every blessing and opportunity which we receive from you, we offer our thanks and praise.

We realize, too, O God, that loving one another can be a risky endeavor. When we love, we are vulnerable to being disappointed or hurt by the mistakes and shortcomings of others. We leave ourselves open to feeling their pain or realizing our responsibility to respond to their suffering. In our limited vision or feelings of self-doubt, we sometimes react to others from a place of misunderstanding or anxiety or fear. Out of the great love with which you love us and gave yourself for us, help us to love one another, Merciful God. Where we find loneliness, help us to be present. Where we find sickness of body or spirit, empower us to bring healing. Where there is poverty, give to us a generosity of spirit. Where we find violence, teach us to be messengers of your peace. Where there is division, enable us to promote unity. Where darkness and despair seem to reign, grant that we might offer the light and hope of Christ. Give to us hearts that are open to one another and to you, O God, that we might live and love after the example of Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

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