

Sunday 23rd August 2020

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You, who are many, are transformed to
become one in Christ.

We, who are many, are called to worship God,
the Three in One.

Prayer

Ever-present God,
who is at the side of every creature in creation,
renew our lives so that we may discern and
do your will,
what is good and acceptable and perfect.
In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

Psalm 124

If it had not been the LORD who was on our side
—let Israel now say—

if it had not been the LORD who was on our side,
when our enemies attacked us,

then they would have swallowed us up alive,
when their anger was kindled against us;

then the flood would have swept us away,
the torrent would have gone over us;

then over us would have gone the raging waters.

Blessed be the LORD,
who has not given us as prey to their teeth.

We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers;
the snare is broken, and we have escaped.

Our help is in the name of the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

Prayer

Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made
heaven and earth.

Confident in this ever-gracious, never-failing help,
we come before the Lord, confessing our sin
and seeking forgiveness.

Forgiving God,
we confess that we are conformed to this world.
We conform to this world's frantic pace,
too hectic to notice all the blessings you provide.

We conform to this world's reckless waste,
exploiting what you entrust to our care.

We conform to this world's shallow values,
oblivious to the giftedness of people different from us.

We conform to this world's impatient attitudes,
preferring the latest instead of the lasting.

Forgive our conformity and transform us, O God.
We pray in Jesus' name...

If it had not been the Lord who was on our side,
we would now be lost in sin.
But it is the Lord who is on our side.
And so we are forgiven.
Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made
heaven and earth.

Amen

Hymn

Exodus 1:8 - 2:10

⁸Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰Come, 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."

¹¹Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. ¹²But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. ¹³The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, ¹⁴and 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.

¹⁵The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶"When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." ¹⁷But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ¹⁸So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?"

¹⁹The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” ²⁰So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. ²¹And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. ²²Then 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.”

²Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. ²The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. ³When 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. ⁴His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. ⁵The 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. ⁶When 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.

⁷Then 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?” ⁸Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother. ⁹Pharaoh’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. ¹⁰When 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.”

Reflection

*God of revelation,
mere flesh and blood cannot reveal divine truth;
only your Spirit can give that gift.
Be in my breath and voice, be in our ears
and understanding,
that through these words your Word
may be known. Amen.*

Today’s reading from the Old Testament book of Exodus is one that is very familiar, of the way in which Moses was saved from death as an infant by being placed in a basket and set afloat on the river Nile, rather than being thrown into it to drown, as Pharaoh had commanded. We know the rest – how Moses was discovered among the reeds, eventually adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter, and became the leader God chose to lead Israel out of slavery towards a the promised land where they would be safe, and could prosper.

Today’s story ends well, for Moses, and it is one often told to demonstrate God’s faithfulness, loving care, and protection in times of danger. These are themes that are echoed in today’s Psalm, which speaks powerfully in praise and thanksgiving to God for rescue from great peril, the saving of life, of deliverance from the hands and violence of enemies like a wild bird released from a hunter’s snare. The references to Israel’s escape from Egypt under Moses’ leadership are clearly to be heard.

Yet the Exodus passage is really a story in two parts. The first part giving the background to the seemingly miraculous story of the baby Moses' rescue. And it is true, that often we do not dwell too long on the first part of the story, yet it is that first part that contains much that should give us pause, to read and listen carefully, and to acknowledge the horror and tragedy of what is described, but which we are reluctant to acknowledge, preferring to move swiftly on.

For that first part of the story speaks of fear, suspicion, hostility and violence that we know has been a part of human history from the beginning, as it was in ancient Egypt, and which we must also admit is still prevalent in many places in this world; the truth we know, that in war-torn regions where violence and brutality are an everyday occurrence, it is so often the innocent – civilian populations, including the elderly, also women, and especially children, whose lives are torn apart by those who take up arms against one another.

It begins with the new Pharaoh identifying the Israelites living in Egypt as the enemy in their midst; and alien people growing in numbers and becoming perceived as a threat to the native Egyptian population. These Israelites being the descendants of the people who came to Egypt in the time of Joseph, forced out of their own homeland by famine, to seek asylum and refuge in a foreign country. At first welcomed, providing a new source of labour and contributing to the wealth of the country, when they become more numerous, their lives are endangered, the powers that be turn on them, and persecution, slavery and death follows.

It is an old story, and one that has been repeated throughout history, most recently in the 20th century in Nazi Germany, but also in the 21st in other places, as immigrant populations, at first welcomed for their contribution to the economy, come to prosper and increase in number, and then suffer the same unjust and dangerous prejudice that the Israelites came to endure under Pharaoh. For there is no suggestion that the Israelites really posed a threat to Egypt or to Pharaoh's power: the problem was Pharaoh and the Egyptian's fear of a foreign people, different in language and religion and culture from themselves, acting in concert with surrounding hostile nations to destroy Egypt itself. Prejudice, paranoia, xenophobia, all create a poisonous situation, which leads to violence and terror.

The order to the Hebrew midwives to kill all the boys born to Israelite women, is clearly an attempt at a form of genocide: the adult men and women used as forced labour, worked to death, while the male children are to be put to death, while the girls, in what can only be seen as a sinister intention to assimilate the Israelite into the Egyptian population through a form of enforced sexual slavery.

When we pay attention to the background to the story of Moses', we may find it very difficult to deal with; but we cannot simply turn the page and ignore this account of what actually happened, harrowing as it may be, but which has a strong and unavoidable ring of truth about it.

Then, when we come to terms with the awful brutality and evil of what was perpetrated against the enslaved Israelite population, then we can understand how great a thing God

did, in rescuing the Israelites; then we can understand the terror from which they fled; then we can understand how significant Moses is in their history, and the history of God's salvation; then, we can understand the heartfelt thanksgiving offered to God by the Psalmist.

Then, too, we can turn to look at our world, and see its suffering: see the violence committed against women and children; see the unfounded prejudice towards people of different cultures, languages and faiths; see the oppression of unjust totalitarian regimes; see the wars that destroy human lives and societies; see the hungry, and the sick, and the desperately poor who live in a world of plenty, but whose riches are so unequally shared; see, and pray that we might respond as Christians and the people of God to the challenges they confront us with.

For if one thing should be clear to us, it is that God does not want the world to be this way, nor for people to live as they do. God desires fullness of life for every single human being, free from fear, free from violence, free from persecution. The good news of the kingdom, the good news of Jesus Christ, is the power of God to change the world, and to change people heart and soul and mind, that we become the means by which God re-creates and renews the whole of creation. Like the Psalmist, we can thank God for our salvation, for our rescue from evil and death, for lives that we can live to the full in safety; but in response, we must be ready to show God's love and grace, and demonstrate that life-changing power of God that seeks both justice and peace not for ourselves alone, but for all the world.

Prayer

God of all,
thank you for hearing these prayers:
For the human family with whom we share
this world—
those closest to us and those whose names we will
never know—
we give you thanks and ask your help in living into
our identity as your children.

For the world we share with all creation—
the plants and animals we see each day and
the wilderness we have never seen—
we give you thanks and ask your help in living
into our identity as stewards of your earth.
We pray

For local, national, and international leaders
We pray

those whose policies we appreciate and those

with whom we struggle—
we give you thanks and ask that you be at their side,
guiding them to act in justice and mercy.
We pray

For joys and concerns that occupy our
thoughts today—
those we have spoken aloud and those we
ponder inwardly—
we give you thanks and ask that you be at
our side,
guiding us to recognise that our help is in the
name of the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.
Hear the prayers we lift in silence. . . .
Accept and heed all these prayers,
through Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Do not lead us into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For yours is the kingdom,
the power, and the glory,
now and for ever.

Amen.

Hymn

Benediction