

The 12th Sunday after Pentecost
August 27, 2017
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Exodus 1:8—2:10
Psalm 124
Romans 12:1-8
Matthew 16:13-20

We have a baptism scheduled for our later service this morning. I'm reminded on one of those old, old jokes for the occasion.

After the baptism of his little sister, little Johnny sobbed all the way home in the back seat of the car. His father asked what was wrong, but Johnny was too distraught to answer.

His mother asked him a second time, "What's wrong?" But Johnny only wept.

They finally pulled the car over and they asked him one more time. This time, Johnny managed to get out a reply: "That priest said she wanted us brought up in a Christian home," he sobbed ... "But I want to stay with you guys."

The point, of course, is that the priest wasn't trying to break up the family. The priest was simply telling those "with ears to hear" that being baptized, being part of the Body of Christ, being a person of faith, is supposed to make a difference in the way we live our lives.

As it happens, that's the salient point that runs through all of our readings this morning. First, I notice what St. Paul says in Romans:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God -- what is good and acceptable and perfect.

This isn't a call to become otherworldly, I hasten to add. Richard Rohr, among others, reminds us that "world," as that word is used here (and just about everywhere else in the Bible), doesn't refer merely to this planet or creation. From the beginning, the creation is good ... is very good.

No, in the Bible, "world" is generally a shorthand for the normal ways of being in this world. It's the status quo. It's the "system." Paul is calling on us to discern a different way of living in this world, to be countercultural in terms of what we deem vital and important. "Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking" (*The Message*).

In this morning's gospel, there's something of that same distinction between what "everybody" else thinks and does - *Who do people say that [I] am?* - and what Jesus' followers might discern about Jesus - *But who you say that I am?*

To this day, most folk would certainly admit Jesus was a remarkably good person, an insightful rabbi, perhaps a important visionary. But the answer Peter gives goes further. He says that Jesus is the one God has anointed to set an upside-down world rightside-up again.

And this “Q&A” all happens in a place called Caesarea Philippi. That’s more than an incidental detail. It’s not a Jewish region, but decidedly Roman. The Romans conquered the area, and Caesar gave the town to Herod the Great, who named it Caesarea. After Herod died, he passed it on to his son Philip, who added his own name. Hence, Caesarea Philippi. And it’s here that Simon Peter says to Jesus: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” These, of course, are the very titles Caesar claimed for himself, which makes all of this a decidedly (if perhaps uncomfortably) political.

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And our reading from Exodus this morning is all about countercultural acts of political resistance and civil disobedience.

You know, I’ve known the story of Moses and the bulrushes for ... well, just about for always. But what I never really appreciated until this past week is what a remarkable story it is. It’s as old as time itself and as current, I fear, as this morning’s news.

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.

He’s forgotten his history. He looks around at the Hebrew people and he doesn’t know how they came to be in his land or how they contribute to his prosperity. They’re outsiders, immigrants, and he fears them. He thinks that unless he cracks down on them, they will become a threat, so he acts to oppress them ... and to turn everyday Egyptians against them, as well.

And the plan works, at least at first. The Egyptians grow afraid. And then they become ruthless.

But Pharaoh never accounted for the women. The story, as I said, is remarkable. And the women in this story are, all of them, remarkably subversive.

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It starts with the “Hebrew midwives.” Shiphrah and Puah. It’s a bit surprising, when you think of it, that they’re even given names in this story; women so often are not in the Bible. The king told them to kill any boy child born among the Hebrew people ... “*But the midwives,*” we’re told, “*feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them.*” It’s nothing short of an act of political resistance and civil disobedience.

And when the king calls them in to account for their failure to follow his orders, they come up with an astonishing lie. Shiphrah and Puah play to his prejudices and his stereotypes about the Hebrew women and their breeding habits.

... the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.

So much for depending on the Hebrew midwives. That was Pharaoh's first mistake.

His second mistake was in underestimating the resolve and resourcefulness of Hebrew mothers and sisters. When Pharaoh's first plan fails, he comes up with another. He tells his people to throw baby boys into the Nile River. But the mother of one baby boy hid him for as long as she could, and then placed him in a basket and among the reeds on the bank of the river.

Now I remembered this part of the story after a fashion, but I don't think I appreciated just how actively engaged the mother was in what happened next, nor his big sister, Miriam. It's an act of desperation, of course, to place her baby boy in a basket and cast it off. But it looks to me like Miriam is looking for a way to do something more as she escorts the basket down the river.

And so it is that the little basket floats right into the hands of Pharaoh's daughter who, even though she must have known it to be one of Hebrew boys condemned to die, takes pity on the baby. And that's precisely when Miriam, who "just happens" to be nearby, offers to help. And she "just happens" to know of a woman who can nurse the child. And that woman, of course, is the baby's own mother. You see what's just happened here? Pharaoh's own daughter not only defies Pharaoh's cruelty, she also pays the baby's mother to help her to do so.

And Pharaoh's daughter names the child Moses, a play on words we lose in translation, but the point is that his very name speaks of how this woman draws him out of the water that was supposed to be his death, and in so doing delivers him from death into life. And we who know how the story will go on from here know that Moses will lead his people from their captivity to their freedom, will lead them through the Red Sea from death into life.

And that brings us back to baptism ... and the water that leads us to new life.

At every baptism, we all promise to be a little subversive. We promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons. We promise to strive for justice and peace among all people. We promise to respect the dignity of every human being. We promise, in other words, not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed in order that we might discern the will of God – in order that we might see who and what God deems good and acceptable and perfect.

I don't want to break up families. I certainly don't want to make anyone cry on the long drive home this morning. I want to stay with you – and hope you feel the same. AND I want us to take seriously our calling, emboldened perhaps by the remarkable disciples of Jesus who chose him over Caesar, emboldened perhaps by the women who said "no" to the injustice of Pharaoh in order to say "yes" to the God of all life.