Sermon for the Great Vigil of Easter

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Saturday, April 20, 2019

Text: Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21
Title: The Lord of the Dance

It was January, 1963, and leaders of American Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant organizations were on converging on Chicago. The National Conference on Religion and Race, convened to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, began with a statement from then President John F. Kennedy. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., also spoke in the days that followed, but the opening address was given by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who began: “At the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses. Moses’ words were: “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me.” While Pharaoh retorted: “Who is the Lord, that I should heed this voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go.”

There’s a way in which tonight’s reading from Exodus recalling the crossing of the Red Sea recounts God’s response to Pharaoh’s hubris; to his hardness of heart. It is a harrowing and hair-raising tale of a courageous escape: people moved by desperation and desolation to flee the only homes they’d ever known, trusting that God would make a way, that God would see them through, as they crossed into a strange but promising new land. A land of hope and freedom. A land of milk and honey.

We’ve heard several stories tonight, together narrating what we call “salvation history.” It is a careful re-telling of God’s saving deeds throughout time: of particular moments - not all of them, for sure, but decisive ones – when God acted, revealing something of God’s nature to us and giving us a clearer glimpse of the world God is ushering into being, not only around us but with and in and through us. But the reading from Exodus is a uniquely important one in the arc of this reflection. The Book of Common Prayer offers nine possible readings for the first part of our vigil. At least two of these are to be read, but no matter how many are ultimately selected, one of them must be the tale of Israel’s deliverance. There is something in this story that is at the heart of the story of salvation and the story of our life in God.

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1 You can read his entire address here: http://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/heschel-religion-and-race-speech-text/
The story actually begins in the book of Genesis, not all that far behind the account of creation we also heard tonight (all things considered), when Joseph is sold into slavery by his jealous and treacherous brothers – remember that beautiful coat of many colors? “How he loved that coat of many colors?” – and ends up in Egypt. It turns out he has a gift for the interpretation of dreams, which comes in handy to Pharaoh (a predecessor of the guy so at odds with God and Moses), who welcomes Joseph into his home and makes him an advisor. Joseph foresees a terrible famine and manages to convince the upper management to start squirreling things away for the lean years ahead, which come with a vengeance. People from all over the ancient world hear of Egypt’s bounty and come begging for aid, among them Joseph’s own brothers, the sons of Jacob (also known as Israel). Eventually Joseph reveals who he is, mercifully welcomes and provides for them, and invites all eleven of his brothers to return with their father to Egypt, where he will be better able to care for them. And so, Jacob and his twelve sons – the twelve tribes of Israel – settle in this foreign land, and the book of Genesis concludes with the death of Jacob and, finally, Joseph, too.

The book of Exodus begins a generation later, with the children of the brothers, saying that the Israelites “were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.” And then a new King rose over Egypt, a Pharaoh unfamiliar with Joseph’s legacy, and when he looked out over the land he saw foreigners more numerous than natives. He feared for the integrity of his country with all those people - those Hebrews - about, and so he imposed harsh labor on them, eventually enslaving the whole nation. The children of Israel had come to Egypt to escape famine – a familiar experience for the tens of millions of refugees today driven by natural disasters and climate chaos – and the place that had welcomed them with open arms turns on them in suspicion.

It is in this context of oppression and exploitation, racism and violence, that God calls Moses. That God looks out over the land and says this simply will not do, heartbroken to see the children of Israel so poorly used and abused, and angry at those guilty of treating them so badly. “At the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses.” The story of the Exodus – of God’s deliverance of Moses and the Israelites through the Red Sea - has resonance in so many times and in so many places. For the Jewish diaspora - a people used to being refused and rejected – it speaks to a God who does not stand idly by in the face of injustice.
and brutality. A God who has little tolerance for ignorant kings and Egyptians obsessed with their purity. A God who liberates, leads, and enlivens: who sets people free from the ties that bind.

For American slaves, the story of the Exodus became a lens on the whole of scripture for much the same reason. They were a people, like the Hebrews, forced into harsh labor, denied their freedom and their dignity, who turned to God not only for comfort but for deliverance. The old spirituals witness to the importance of this story in their collective imagination. *Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt’s land. Tell old Pharaoh to let my people go.* This is Israel’s story, but it is their story, too, and because racism didn’t end with slavery, it remains relevant in communities of color. In 1963, when Rabbi Heshel referenced Moses and Pharaoh, he spoke to a people who had been forced into segregation, sharecropping, denied basic democratic rights. And to people who, like Pharaoh, looked on them with fear and suspicion.

The Exodus also found deep resonance among the people of Latin America where, in the latter half of the 20th century, it kindled hope in a context of terrible poverty and social injustice. Their articulation of God’s concern for the deliverance of those on the margins evolved into Liberation Theology, an enduring movement in Christian thought and practice which has profoundly influenced black theology, queer theology, womanist theology, and which continues to resonate with immigrants from south and central America today.

For those identifying as women, there’s Miriam – Moses and Aaron’s sister – to celebrate, herself a leader in Israel, who tonight offers an ancient song of triumph.

It seems like every population who has ever been persecuted can find themselves in this tale. It even speaks to our personal experiences of deliverance from addiction, depression, anxiety, loneliness, and grief. Have we not all known something of this God who looks on our world and our lives with compassion, who longs for our liberation, and who makes a way where none seems possible? A God who sets us free?

There’s part of this story, though, that we often overlook. That we might prefer to ignore. And that is that God makes a way for Israel but crushes Pharaoh and his followers. “Horse and rider God has thrown into the sea,” the reading ends. The Bible is full of stories about God the creator and God the destroyer. God who brings something new into being but also God who does away with the old. We tend to celebrate the former and be, understandably, squeamish about the latter. But if we turn to a story like this for hope, if we point to it as a lens on all of salvation history, we might just miss something essential if we won’t face the story as a whole.
In 1963, songwriter Sydney Carter wrote lyrics for a hymn which he set to a simple Shaker tune. It begins: “I danced in the morning when the world was young; I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun; I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth; In Bethlehem I had my birth.” *The Lord of the Dance* tells the story of the life of Jesus – his parables, his miracles – with a catchy refrain that invites us to “dance, dance, wherever you may be.” Of Good Friday, it says, “They buried my body, they thought I was gone; But I am the dance and the dance goes on,” and of Easter, “I'll live in you if you live in me; I am the lord of the dance, said he.”

It might surprise you to know that when he wrote this beautiful, Christian hymn, Carter had sitting on his desk a statue of Shiva Nataraja, the Hindu God of destruction. You’ve probably seen one of these without knowing precisely what it was: a many-armed figure standing within a circle of fire, one foot at the bottom resting upon the body of a child. For many Christians, the idea of a destroying God seems strange, until we remember that such a God seems to feature prominently in our Bible, like at the Red Sea. But Shiva Nataraja is not, for Hindus, a scary figure. It represents the destroyer who paves the way for new life. It reminds them that death comes before rebirth, like the cross that comes before resurrection. It acknowledges that sometimes some things need to be torn down, taken apart, dismantled, in order for us to be truly free, in order for God to usher in something new. Shiva Nataraja also has another name in Hinduism. He is called “The Lord of the Dance.”

In an interview in 1974, Carter explained that when he wrote his hymn he was not simply dressing up a Hindu idea in Christian language. Instead, he saw in both faiths an attempt to describe something which is simply true, something universal about the nature of human experience and the structure of reality, like gravity and the cycling of seasons: namely, that life and death are two sides of the same coin; that creation and destruction are both part of new life; and that we need not fear one more than the other.

For Jews in the wake of the Exodus, it wasn’t enough to simply get out. God went the extra mile in ensuring they could never go back, or be dragged back. It wasn’t enough to leave this tragic and traumatic part of their past behind them: the very possibility of return was removed. That’s real freedom. In the wake of the Holocaust, governments, camps, and buildings

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had to be torn down. In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, “colored only” signs had to be removed, schools redesigned, systems dismantled and laws re-written. Recovering alcoholics often joke that once an addict stumbles into a 12-step meeting, once they really know that another way, exists, drinking just doesn’t work anymore. God has put away the Egypt of oblivion and, like it or not, there’s just no going back to things as they were. In our own experiences of healing, we sometimes need God to remove our anger and hate, to throw our compulsions into the sea, not only to free us from harmful habits but to turn our old ways to dust. Not only to set us free but to change us so that we never need fear falling back. That is the power of deliverance: a God who goes the extra mile to liberate, lead, and enlivens.

That is the hope and promise of Easter. The hope and promise of this holy night. The hope and promise of a God who holds all things and makes all things new. “They cut me down and I leapt up high; I am the life that'll never, never die; I'll live in you if you'll live in me; I am the Lord of the Dance, said he.” Happy Easter. May we join in the dance of rebirth, the dance of new life, the dance that will never, never die, this day and forevermore. Amen.