



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The Land was Filled with Them Exodus 1:1-22

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January 13, 2019 – Epiphany 1

Who are we as a people? What is our place in the world? We're people of faith, but what is it that underlies that faith? What gives it significance and meaning? And as we face difficulties and trials, how do we or how should we respond, knowing who we are?

This morning we're starting a journey through the Old Testament book of Exodus. These are some of the questions Exodus addresses. We studied Genesis several years ago. Most recently we made our way through St. Paul's epistle to the Romans. Both point us to Exodus. It's the book that follows Genesis, but throughout Romans, St. Paul is always pointing us back to the events of Exodus to illustrate what Jesus has done for us in his death and resurrection. I think it's fair to say that the big theme of Exodus can be summed up in the Lord's words to Moses in Chapter 6: "I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God." That statement highlights at least two key points that get us started answering those questions I posed a minute ago. First, God, the Creator of the cosmos is present. And, second, he is uniquely present with his people, with those whom he has chosen.

Brothers and Sisters, that was true of the Hebrews four thousand years ago and it's also true of us today. We are as much God's people, we are as much his family as the ancient Hebrews were. We need this story: to know it, to be immersed in it, to be permeated by it ourselves. We need to know that, as the people of God, it's our story. We need it especially as we face the trials of life and, I think, particularly as we move into an age in which the

Church is no longer the dominant influence in our culture and in which to be a follower of Jesus even leaves us with negative social capital. Exodus reminds us that God's people are never alone and that God's plans can never be thwarted by the wicked. We belong to the one who Created the cosmos and we belong to the one who is Lord of history. Even as the Israelites told this story, they were reminded that Exodus 1 isn't the beginning. The story starts with the book of Genesis and with Creation itself. Even as the Lord hears the cries of his people in their Egyptian bondage, the story doesn't move instantly to the crossing of the Red Sea and to freedom, but takes more than a dozen chapters to remind the people who they are, that they are part of a family and a people that began with Abraham and are part of a story going back to the beginning of the world. For the Hebrew slaves in Egypt to know who they were was to look back on a long history of those who came before. What they were to expect of the Lord was rooted in how the Lord had dealt with that same family in the past. They were part of something bigger than themselves, and so are we. Imagine a communion rail. I know we don't have one here, so maybe imagine the lineup of everyone coming forward to receive the Lord's Supper. Imagine the line of people as you kneel or stand there. The person from the pew next to you is right there and a few people away are your friends from the pew behind, but further down the line are our brothers and sisters worshipping this morning in another church, further down are our brothers and sisters from generations past. Kneeling with our grandparents we might see Abraham Kuyper or Karl Barth. Down further we see John Wesley and George Whitefield and even further down Bishops Ridley, Latimer, and Cranmer near John Calvin and Martin Luther. Further down we can make out Augustine, Ambrose, Athanasius, Nicholas, Chrysostom. And beyond them, Paul and Barnabas, Luke, Matthew, John, Peter and the other

disciples. Friends, we're part of something bigger. But the altar rail doesn't end there. It goes on: Simeon and Anna, Joseph and Mary... John the Baptist; Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zerubbabel... Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Isaiah... Solomon, David, and Samuel... Joshua and Moses... Joseph, Judah, Jacob, Isaac, Abraham... and way down, farther than we can see... Seth and Eve and Adam. Brothers and Sisters, their story is our story. If we want to know who we are as God's people, we need know the story of God's people and how God has dealt with his people throughout history. Exodus is our story, because it is the story of the people of God.

As we begin, the author of Exodus highlights the continuity of this part of the story with the last part—with Genesis. It doesn't come across in our English translation, but in Hebrew he begins with the letter *waw* appended to the first word as a prefix. That's the Hebrew way of saying "and". "And these are the names..." he begins, picking up where Genesis left off. If you have a chance this week, read Genesis. It's the first chapter in the story. Exodus is the second. It's worth noting that Leviticus and Numbers begin the same way. In the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, only Deuteronomy leaves out this "and" as it begins, but the book itself leans on the first four in many other ways. They're all tied together as one big story. The Bible tells us that we are people who hope in the future, but it also reminds us that we can only understand that future hope when we know our own past as the people of God. So here we go, Exodus 1:1-7.

These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. All the descendants of Jacob were seventy persons; Joseph was already in Egypt. Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation.

But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

Remember that Genesis ended with Joseph as Pharaoh's second-in-command, inviting his family to escape the great famine by coming to Egypt and settling in the Nile delta. Exodus reminds us who they are and stresses here how the Lord's promises to Abraham and to Jacob have been fulfilled. The Lord had promised that their family would become a great nation. Even though the Lord is never mentioned in the first two chapters of Exodus, we see him at work. He has made Jacob's family fruitful. It also highlights the Hebrew's fulfilment of the creation commandment to be fruitful and to multiply. Where our translation says, in verse 7, that they "increased greatly", the Hebrew says literally that they "swarmed" or "teemed". It's the same word used in Genesis 1 of the fish that the Lord caused to fill the sea. It's the same word used later in Exodus to describe the plague of frogs that overwhelmed Egypt. As much as Exodus tells the story of Israel, it also points to the big story of the Lord's recovery and redemption of his fallen creation. It's the story of re-creation in a fallen world. Israel is the starting point in a redemptive story that end in heaven and earth restored and made new.

So even though he's not directly mentioned, Exodus reveals the protagonist of the story: the Lord of Creation. And it shows him working with and through a people in whom, however imperfectly, we see his creation mandate. The antagonist is revealed in verse 8:

Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, "Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out,

they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves. (Exodus 1:8-14)

The antagonist is this new Pharaoh who did not know Joseph. Royal dynasties rose and fell throughout Egypt's history. Over roughly two and a half millennia there were thirty-one dynasties, ending when the Greeks conquered Egypt in the Fourth Century B.C. New dynasties were founded as new families took the throne, sometimes peacefully and sometimes through conquest. Dating Exodus hasn't been easy and not everyone agrees. In the past it was often dated as early as the Sixteenth Century B.C.—which is where Bp. Ussher famously put it—but historians and archaeologists now agree (mostly!) that these events probably took place in the Thirteenth Century. Archaeologists have never found any physical evidence for the events of the Exodus, but the biblical story fits better with what we know of Egypt in the Thirteenth Century and in Canaan, we see evidence of a new people group entering the land shortly after that time. It was at this time that the Nineteenth Dynasty arose in Egypt. This was the dynasty of Ramases. He rebuilt the storehouse cities of the Delta mentioned here: Pithom and Raamses. Several dynasties had come and gone since the Pharaoh who had welcomed Joseph. There had been some significantly disruptive events in Egypt in the time in between. It's entirely possible that this new Pharaoh

really had never heard of Joseph. It may just be that, being of a different family and dynasty, he felt no obligations to treat Joseph's people as anything other than foreigners. Rameses took renewed interest in the Delta, where the Hebrews had settled and where they had multiplied prolifically.

What the Lord meant as a blessing, Pharaoh saw as a curse. There were too many of these Hebrews. He feared that, being foreigners, they might sympathise with and help an invading army. It wasn't an unreasonable fear. It wouldn't be the first time something like that had happened in Egypt. Pharaoh makes a fateful decision. He chooses fear over faith. He rejects the wisdom and goodness of the Creator. Pharaoh repeats the sin of Adam and the sin of Cain. Instead of accepting the way of the Lord, he rejects it. He thinks he's being wise in trying to squelch the Hebrews, but as he treats the people of blessing instead as slaves and tries to manipulate the situation to his own advantage, the Lord turns his plans against him and Pharaoh is revealed as a fool. And his foolishness has tragic consequences both for him and for his people.

It's difficult to grasp the emphasis that the writer puts here on the oppression of the Hebrews. He heaps up words and phrases that highlight the absolutely crushing burden that Pharaoh puts on them. The proud people who once saved Egypt from starvation, the people chosen and called by the Lord, are reduced to being nothing more than lowly cogs in Pharaoh's machine. And yet, even though he's never mentioned, the Lord is with them. Pharaoh's plan to crush the Hebrews only results in their multiplying even more. So Pharaoh introduces an even more sinister plan. Look at verses 15-22:

Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you serve as midwife

to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live.” But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and let the male children live?” The 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.” So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live.”

Pharaoh refuses to acknowledge the Lord and is intent on thwarting the Lord’s plan to multiply his people. He summons the midwives of the Hebrews. There were certainly more than two for such a large population, but these two women may have been representatives or they may be the two out of many who refused to obey Pharaoh. Whatever the case, he orders them to abort the baby boys of the Hebrews at delivery. They refuse. It’s a remarkable story. These two women were, by worldly standards, nobodies. In fact, it’s highly unlikely that Pharaoh would have summoned them into his presence. It’s more likely he gave these orders through an underling. They were the lowest of the low: not just foreign (and the Egyptians held foreigners in utter contempt), but foreign women of low status even amongst their own people. And yet these lowly foreign women thwarted the plans of almighty Pharaoh, the demi-god who was supposed to embody the power and rule of the gods of Egypt. For their faithfulness, the names of these women have been recorded for

history, while mighty Pharaoh remains anonymous.

But Pharaoh’s heart is hardening. One who would first enslave a people and then murder their children is unlikely to repent. We see the same thing in those who advocate for the murder of the unborn today—a hardness of heart that, when challenged, moves from not just murdering children, but to the flagrant parading of those murders. There’s even a movement promoted now called “Shout Your Abortion” and other places where women hold signs showing their pride in killing their own children. This is what’s happening to Pharaoh. He digs in his heels in opposition to the Lord of Creation and hardness permeates his heart. When the midwives won’t murder the babies of the Hebrews, he calls on his subjects to cast the baby boys of the Hebrews into the Nile. Pharaoh takes the Nile, the God-given source of life in Egypt, and turns it into means of death.

We’re getting ahead of the story here, but we see again that the Lord’s plan cannot be thwarted. Pharaoh is first thwarted by two humble foreign midwives. Now, his third plan will be thwarted by his own daughter, who unwittingly saves Moses, the future deliverer of the Hebrews, from the river. Later, in an act of profoundly poetic justice, God will send his angel of death to take the lives of the firstborn of the Egyptians and will then, himself, drown Pharaoh’s army under the waters of the Red Sea. Brothers and Sisters, God is not mocked.

That’s the story so far and that’s as far as we’ll go today. But what does it mean for us? Remember we started with some questions. In the midst of difficulty, how do we respond? On what do we rely? That’s true whether we’re dealing with the ordinary problems of life and death or the problems that face the Church in a hostile culture. Brothers and Sisters, we need to start by asking who we are.

Who are we? We are Christ’s. By faith we are united with Jesus the Messiah. We are his people. More specifically, we’re his adopted brothers and sisters and that makes us the children, the family, the people of God. And this is why it’s so important to remember that Israel’s story is our story. This is why it’s important to remember that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. How he has dealt with his people in the past is how he deals with his people today and how he will deal with us in future.

Exodus—even just this first chapter—reminds us that as God’s people, we’ve been given a mission. We are the mediators of his grace and of his kingdom to the world around us. The calling of God’s people has always been to bless the world around us by being the people through whom he, the Creator, restores knowledge of himself to a people lost in idolatry, rebellion, and sin. It’s true that God so loved the world that he sent his Son. But it’s also true that God so loved the world he chose a people. And it’s important to remember that God has chosen his people not because they were special or particularly holy, but as an act of grace—of unmerited favour. The Israelites were reminded of this every time they marked their sons as elect in the Old Testament sacrament of circumcision. At eight days old, the boys had done nothing right or wrong to merit being in covenant with the Lord. It was by the Lord’s gracious election. The same goes for us. We baptise our children into God’s covenant before they have done anything to merit it. It’s a picture of grace. It’s a reminder that baptism is God’s promise, not ours. And that baptism into Jesus the Messiah, Israel’s representative, incorporates us into Abraham’s family as we’ve seen Paul stressing repeatedly in our study of Romans. Israel’s mission is now our mission. We are called to mediate—to witness, to preach, and to proclaim that Jesus is Lord, that the King has come, and that

new creation is breaking into the world.

Dear Friends, this should be a reminder that our election into God's family means that we are called to *go out* into a hostile world. Too often Christians retreat into the Church in the face of hostility. We circle the wagons and wait to be rescued (or raptured) from hostile forces. Worse, we're often like the Jews of Jesus' day, praying for the condemnation of those hostile forces rather than charging into their midst with the light we've been given. We forget that because sinners stand condemned, Jesus came not to condemn, but to redeem. We are to follow Jesus. The Lord gave hope to Eve, promising that her seed would crush the serpents head, but not before the serpent struck his heel. Our mission is to witness, to preach, and to proclaim even as Jesus promised that, as his people, we would face persecution for his sake. It has been this way from the beginning, when the Lord promised to Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse" (Genesis 12:3). To this day, just as with Pharaoh, the people of the world are judged by how they respond to the elect of God and to our Gospel message. Consider again that this means our calling is not to retreat, but to charge into the darkness. No one curses a silent people living in solitude. We're called to go out. And the proof of our faithfulness is not health and wealth, but the confession of faith by those who believe our Gospel proclamation and the hostility of those who reject it. There will always be new Pharaohs and so, as Jesus promised, the people of God will always face some measure of suffering. But, as Paul told us in Romans 9, the hardened hearts of the unrepentant become the very place where God reveals his power: "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth" (Romans 9:17).

Brothers and Sisters, stand firm in faith—like the Hebrew midwives. Know that the Lord is our God and that we are his people. Know that he is faithful and that nothing can thwart his plans. Trust in him for our vindication. He is the one who brought low mighty Pharaoh and he is the one who raised his humbly-born Son from the grave to sit at his right hand as Lord of all. Trust in him and hold your light high in the midst of the darkness, for the day is surely coming.

Let us pray: Father, in the Collect today we asked that we would know the things we should and that you would give us the grace to act on them. Remind us again that you are our God and that we are your people. Remind us of our baptism into Jesus the Messiah. As you led Israel through the Red Sea and into the Promised Land, Jesus has led us through baptism, is with us in the wilderness, and will see us into your new Creation. On the way remind us that you will deal with our enemies if we are faithful to trust in you and to proclaim the good news that Jesus is Lord. Amen.