

God of the Oppressed

“How could somebody do that to another human being?” It’s a phrase we often hear in the wake of a news story about one or another of the terrible things that people do to each other – assault, rape, murder – events that seem all too frequent these days. Perhaps, even as I said it some recent event presented itself to your memory. In my mind, for some reason, I hear it in the voice of a Southern woman, perhaps my mother, although I don’t have a specific memory of her saying such a thing. But my mom, sweet and loving as she was, would, I think, have been outraged at any number of the stories that have dominated our news in this past year.

But, of course, the fact of the matter is that, despite our outrage, people do terrible things to one another. We do terrible things to one another, sometimes, without thinking much about it, despite our sense of moral outrage. How does that happen? At the heart of human violence against others, whether it be in thought, word, or deed, is the denial of equal status to someone else. The recipient of the violence has, for some reason, become “other” to the perpetrator of the violence. “They” are not like “us.” Some of you will remember Pink Floyd’s song, “Us and Them,” on their groundbreaking album, “Dark Side of the Moon:” “Us and them / And after all, we’re only ordinary men.” We create a divide between “us” and “them” by tribe, nationality, skin color, education, socioeconomic level, gender, and so many more human-devised lines.

In both of today’s stories, we see the results of such dividing lines, how the dismissal of beloved children of God as “other than us” results in loss on both sides: on the one hand, the failure to live enriched lives of health and happiness; on the other, maltreatment, oppression, and even death. But, as the Bible never fails to teach, there is hope for all, for our God is the God of the Oppressed and the Good News of Jesus, first for the poor, can heal oppressed and oppressor alike.

Let’s begin with our Old Testament reading for the morning. After a happy ending for the story of Joseph and his brothers, part of which we heard about from Pastor Denise last week, we find at the beginning of the Book of Exodus that the situation has changed, radically. Several generations have passed and there is a new Pharaoh in Egypt. Some scholars believe that there may well have been a dynastic change. Not only has Joseph been forgotten, but so has all that he did to save the Egyptian people. The services he rendered to the old dynasty are scarcely of interest to the new regime. With the memory of the blessings brought by Joseph discarded, the foreigners living in the now-desirable land of the Nile Delta are no longer welcome guests, but a problem for the new Pharaoh to solve.

We see the beginning of the transition from welcome to rejection in the language used by the writer of Exodus. Listen to the translation of verse 7 by John Durham, author of the volume on Exodus in the Word Biblical Commentary: “But the sons of Israel were fertile, and so they became a teeming swarm. Indeed, they became so many they were a strength to be reckoned with by their numbers alone. The land was simply filled with them.” Durham has made his word choices based on the Hebrew original. “The fertility of the sons of Israel in Egypt is dramatically underscored by the use in verse 7 of the verb... which generally refers in the OT to the swarming multiplication of frogs or fish or other animal life.” Durham notes that this verb is used in only one other verse in the Old Testament – in the blessing of God upon the sons of Noah, leading to their rapid repopulation of the earth. What the author of Exodus is pointing out

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is that, in the eyes of the Egyptians, the Hebrews were breeding like animals. This is step one in their dehumanization.

The next step comes from the mouth of Pharaoh: “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, 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.” In other words, and they may sound familiar, “They are not like us. They are a threat to our homeland security. They are ‘resident enemy aliens.’” I’ll come back to the familiarity of those words in a minute.

Pharaoh’s solution is chattel slavery for the Children of Israel. In that time and place, this was a status normally reserved for those conquered in battle. Chattel slavery was an involuntary servitude, lifelong and often inherited. This is not the kind of slavery that was permitted under the later Mosaic Law. In Torah, both in Exodus and Deuteronomy, slavery is the last resort of the debtor. In the “Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary” volume on Exodus 1-19, William Johnstone writes: “Debtors who cannot pay off their debts in any other way have to supply their creditors with their work for the strictly time-limited period of six years of indentured service. Thereafter, the debtor, unconditionally discharged, resumes position in society as an equal, free citizen.” Johnstone notes that the debtor may choose to stay in service following the redemption of the debt and that children born to the debtor subsequently are born into service but only if the creditor has supplied the debtor with a wife. None of these restrictions were applied to the Hebrews in Egypt.

Even for chattel slavery, the treatment of the Hebrews by the Egyptians is incredibly harsh. Johnstone notes: “The term ‘slavery’... is too weak for Pharaoh’s institutionalized atrocities that transgress the limits of any legal restriction. For these atrocities, (the author) uses (words such as) ‘oppression, affliction...’” But not even the oppression of the Israelites stops God from blessing them with children. So complete is their dehumanization in the eyes of Pharaoh that it is then an easy step for him to move on to the order to kill their babies. From oppression, he moves to extermination.

Toward the end of his commentary on this story, John Durham notes: “The importance of this theme to the narrative’s purpose is made clear by the paragraph piling up descriptions of the indescribable and inhumane extent of the forced toil. We are not only given to know that some relief *must* come, we are compelled to long for it, even as we abhor such treatment of human beings.” I confess that Rev. Dr. Durham has a more optimistic view of human nature than do I. Are we “compelled” to long for relief for those we see as “other?” Do we “abhor such treatment” of those we consider “other?” A review of history suggests otherwise. The descendants of those who suffered in Egypt continued to suffer – in the Promised Land, in the diaspora following the destruction of the Second Temple, under the Spanish Inquisition, in the pogroms of eastern Europe, in the Shoah, in the recent recrudescence of anti-Semitism. Scarcely a generation of the Chosen People has gone by without hardship instituted by their neighbors.

Nor are they the only group to be the victims of dehumanization and oppression. South Africa is still coming to terms with the legacy of apartheid. The Armenians still mourn the genocide of the last century. Bosnia, Uganda, Myanmar: all these countries and more have yet to recover

from the recent or ongoing ethnic clashes in which one or both sides saw their neighbors as “less than human.” I don’t think anyone who hears me today would deny that our hands are also not cleansed from the blood of our neighbors. America’s original sin is the dehumanization of our First Nations peoples. Like Pharaoh, we condemned our African siblings to a brutal form of chattel slavery, followed up by Jim Crow and “New Jim Crow” laws designed to perpetuate the divide between “real Americans” and those with dark skin. Oh, and remember those words used for the fertility of the Hebrews by the author of Exodus? The ones that added up to “they breed like animals?” Of how many immigrant groups to the United States has that smear been applied? To the Irish in the northeast, the Germans in the Midwest, to the Italians at the turn of the last century; all of those “undesirables.” In the wake of the Coronavirus, we’ve seen a resurgence of hatred directed toward our Asian sisters and brothers, much like the “Yellow Peril” nastiness of the last century. You may have recognized that when I gave Pharaoh the words, “resident enemy aliens,” regarding the Hebrews, I was actually quoting the infamous Executive Order 9066 by which Franklin Delano Roosevelt interned our Japanese neighbors. And I need scarcely remind you of all of the hateful rhetoric directed towards our Latinx sisters and brothers in recent days.

But our dehumanizing of our neighbors does not need to sink to this depth in its beginnings to result in the same deadly end. Let’s turn now to our Gospel reading from the sixth chapter of Mark. Why did the people of Nazareth take such offense at what Jesus had to say? Why weren’t they ready to support him as a hometown hero? Why was he so limited by their unbelief?

I read the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* pretty regularly on-line, mostly for the sports section stories about the Cardinals and the Blues. On Friday, there was a story about how comfortable it is to be at the Cardinals training camp in Florida for their long-time ace, 39-year-old Adam Wainwright. The headline was “Familiarity breeds contentment for Cardinals’ Wainwright.” I’m sure you all recognize that as a deliberate misquotation of the old saying, “familiarity breeds contempt.” That was part of Jesus’ problem in Nazareth. “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” Jesus was simply too familiar to his childhood neighbors. They couldn’t believe that the snotty nosed little kid they all remembered was now a prophet with the moral authority to speak words of comfort and challenge to them. As Jesus says in the next verse, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” In their eyes, he was reduced from who he actually was to who they expected him to be.

There was more, too. After all, he was just a carpenter. The Greek word, teknon, can mean a craftsman of any kind. It was the kind of job taken up by a farming family who had lost their land or who didn’t have enough land from which to make a living. That may have been the situation for Joseph’s offspring. It may be that Jesus was what we would call today a “finish carpenter,” a skilled craftsman who adds the details to homes and furniture. But it’s more likely that he was what we might call today a “framer,” the carpenter who bangs unfinished wood into place for the frame of a building before it is covered with siding, or who throws together rough and ready furniture or equipment. At about the time that Jesus lived in Nazareth, the new provincial capital of Sepphoris was under construction not far away. Jesus and his brothers and their father Joseph may all have been construction workers. With no unions in those days, Jesus may have been equally at ease with wood or stone. But it was not an elevated career. His

neighbors with land or who were merchants could easily have sneered at Jesus. Once again, they wouldn't have considered him anyone to pay attention to.

Finally, they might well have dismissed Jesus for another reason. "Isn't this the son of Mary?" Now, that's odd. Usually in that culture, it is the father's name by which the children are remembered. Scholars are divided on what it means for Jesus to have been called "the son of Mary." It may simply be Joseph is dead while Mary is still alive, so the Nazarenes refer to the living parent. Or it may be that the good people of Nazareth remember that Mary was pregnant before she and Joseph were married. My own guess is that it is this latter. I grew up mostly in suburbs of London, New York, and St. Louis, but my parents were both from small Southern towns in which I spent a fair amount of time over the years, and I know how small-town folks talk. A kid who'd been born under the same circumstances as Jesus of Nazareth would always be remembered for those circumstances, no matter how well he or she did in life. You'll have to excuse me for saying so, but to the synagogue-going people of Nazareth, Jesus would have always been "Mary's bastard boy." "Really? *That* kid is going to tell us about how to live?"

Mark doesn't tell us what Jesus said that day in the synagogue in Nazareth, but Luke does, and you may remember it as one of my favorite passages. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." That doesn't sound too controversial but remember that Jesus then went on to remind his neighbors that the Lord's favor wasn't confined to the "Chosen People." In fact, he told two stories about times when God specifically blessed "resident enemy aliens" and not their Israelite neighbors. Uh-oh. So incensed were the Nazarenes at this nobody from a bad family that they decided it was OK to try to kill him by throwing him off a cliff. That part of the story doesn't always get told. But Jesus simply walked away.

So, where are we in all this? Are we ready for God to bless the resident enemy aliens, whoever they may be, and not the good citizens of the United States of America? Are we sure? Do we see refugees from Central America as our siblings, even if they can't speak English or can't seem to hold a job, or like their *cerveza* a little too much? How about the Bosnians who want to turn a beloved old church building into a mosque? Or the Congolese who might be carrying the Ebola virus? Or the Chinese? Aren't they the ones who caused COVID? What about the asylum-seekers from Yemen or Syria or Afghanistan or some other country where the U.S. has been waging war? How do we feel about Euro-Americans becoming a minority in the U.S.? What about the "other" party? What about the "other" genders?

My sisters and my brothers, my siblings in Christ: we are given both warning and comfort by these passages. It is oh, so easy to take the path of Pharaoh and the Egyptians, or the path of the citizens of Nazareth. It is easy to be overwhelmed by fear of the other, to dismiss those who simply "aren't up to our standard," to put special value on what Arizona State Representative John Kavanaugh called "quality votes." It is easy to miss the blessing that God has planned for us if we welcome those neighbors who are "other." But take heart! Remember that we have nothing to fear because our God is the one who anointed Jesus "to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." There are no resident enemy aliens in God's eyes. All

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of us are God's beloved children. As I read at Bill Adams' funeral yesterday, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." For God's great love for us all, for the gift of Jesus and of the Holy Spirit, our Comforter, thanks be to God!