

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Sunday closest to August 24

Year A

Proper 16

RCL



Exodus 1:8-2:10

Psalms 138

Matthew 16:13-20

The Collect

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road

though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.¹

¹ Thomas Merton

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, “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.” Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and 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.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one

of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah,
“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.” But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to 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 became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then 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.”

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

The 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. When 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. Then 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?” Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Yes.” So the girl went

and called the child's mother. Pharaoh'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. When 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."

Isaiah 51:1-6

Thus says the Lord:

“Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness,
you that seek the LORD.

Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.

Look to Abraham your father

and to Sarah who bore you;

for he was but one when I called him,

but I blessed him and made him many.

For the LORD will comfort Zion;

he will comfort all her waste places,

and will make her wilderness like Eden,

her desert like the garden of the LORD;

joy and gladness will be found in her,

thanksgiving and the voice of song.

Listen to me, my people,

and give heed to me, my nation;

for a teaching will go out from me,

and my justice for a light to the peoples.

I will bring near my deliverance swiftly,

my salvation has gone out

and my arms will rule the peoples;

the coastlands wait for me,

and for my arm they hope.

Lift up your eyes to the heavens,

and look at the earth beneath;

for the heavens will vanish like smoke,

the earth will wear out like a garment,

and those who live on it will die like gnats;

but my salvation will be forever,

and my deliverance will never be ended.”

Psalm 138 Page 793, BCP

Confitebor tibi

- 1 I will give thanks to you, O LORD, with my whole heart;
before the gods I will sing your praise.
- 2 I will bow down toward your holy temple
and praise your Name,
because of your love and faithfulness;
- 3 For you have glorified your Name
and your word above all things.
- 4 When I called, you answered me;
you increased my strength within me.
- 5 All the kings of the earth will praise you, O LORD,
when they have heard the words of your mouth.
- 6 They will sing of the ways of the LORD,
that great is the glory of the LORD.
- 7 Though the LORD be high, he cares for the lowly;
he perceives the haughty from afar.
- 8 Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you keep me safe;
you stretch forth your hand against the fury of my enemies;
your right hand shall save me.
- 9 The LORD will make good his purpose for me;
O LORD, your love endures for ever;
do not abandon the works of your hands.

Matthew 16:13-20

When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

SERMON

One of my favorite sayings is this: “If you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans.” We’re pretty much control freaks. We make great plans that fall to pieces, which we then take as permission to make more great plans. Take what’s happening in Ferguson, Missouri currently. The military was swamped in surplus armored personnel vehicles and assault rifles. You can’t sell grenade launchers at the Army-Navy store, so they sold them for cheap to police departments, which was viewed as a win-win solution for all. We’re now learning that this great idea, intended to help police and get rid of surplus equipment, wasn’t such a great idea after all. I could have told them that. I was a young cop once. If someone had given me an APV, I would have drooled all over myself for an opportunity to play army with it. I’m confident we’ll come up with some other

great and equally wrong-headed plan to replace this one. I can't wait to see how THAT turns out.

I suppose that's why the great library we call the Bible contains so few stories of God working through the great plans of man. More times than not, these stories depict man going about his great plans while God works through something tiny – a baby, or a tiny village in fly-over country. It's as if all of history is a field of dominoes. Big plans just knock the dominoes around but God knows the one domino to tip, ever so slightly, so that they all fall as necessary to make what God intended. Our efforts, by comparison, are laughable, and those who puff themselves up with their accomplishments are the real clowns – Pharaoh, for instance in our text this week.

Great Pharaoh is busy making great plans to protect his people from the threat he believes the Hebrew peo-

ple posed. What's the name of this great mover and shaker? Nobody knows. We know Moses. We know his mother's name, Jochebed. We know his sister Miriam and brother Aaron, but the Pharaoh of the Oppression? Meh! And the Pharaoh of the Exodus? Double meh. They don't get a mention. Throughout the Bible God seems singularly disinterested in joining in our great plans, preferring to work through the most astonishing cast of nobodies.

By contrast, we seem able to recognize greatness and the hand of God only in retrospect, so thoroughly involved in our great plans as we are. Even worse, we sometimes see the actual hand of God working through His chosen people as something to be opposed, just as Pharaoh saw the Hebrew people as a threat to him. Such myopia is not limited to Pharaoh. Get a load of a drunken speech on the Senate floor by Delaware's senator

Willard Saulsbury:

I never did see or converse with such a weak and imbecile a man; the weakest man I ever knew in high place. If I wanted to paint a despot, a man perfectly regardless of every constitutional right of the people, I would paint the hideous ape-like form of Abraham Lincoln.²

A Wisconsin newspaper editor named Marcus M.

Pomeroy wrote that Lincoln was

“but the fungus from the corrupt womb of bigotry and fanaticism” and a “worse tyrant and more inhuman butcher than has existed since the days of Nero.” With the election of 1864 looming, Pomeroy wrote, “The man who votes for Lincoln now is a traitor and murderer. ... And if he is elected to misgovern for another four years, we trust some bold hand will pierce his heart with dagger point for the public good.”³

Lincoln, our best-loved president and the man history has bestowed its greatest honors upon, in the eyes of

² “A Brief History of Wingnuts in America; From George Washington to Woodstock”, John Avlon <http://www.thedaily-beast.com/articles/2014/08/17/a-brief-history-of-wingnuts-in-america-from-george-washington-to-woodstock.html>

³ Ibid.

these two geniuses is a tyrant and inhumane butcher. When we imagine that we are absolutely right, we get absolutely stupid. One of the consequences of being absolutely stupid is that we are very likely to believe we are absolutely right. Wisdom's first gift is humility.

Moses, of course, is the one who will bring the Law to the Hebrews, but that's only after he leads them out of Egypt. Our story of Moses in the bullrushes is set be-
fore God gave the Law to the Hebrews. God will work through him to bring about sweeping change in His people, but first, Moses must survive Pharaoh's genocidal decree. He does so through the hearts of three wonderful women – his mother and sister and Pharaoh's daughter, who rescued the rescuer of Israel from the great plans of Pharaoh.

This is a critical point. Pharaoh, we are told, was acting from fear of the Hebrews. He saw his “job” to be to

protect his people from the threat posed by these foreigners living within his borders. Since this is a worthy goal in his mind, anyone who interferes with him is acting for the harm of Egypt and is doing evil. As in the case of Lincoln and Dr. King, Rosa Parks and Gandhi and all the other far-sighted leaders of our time, Pharaoh branded any impediment to his genocide as unforgivable. Jewish tradition names Pharaoh's daughter Bithiah. When Pharaoh found out what she had done he banished her. Busy little Pharaoh was beating his chest, but Moses was saved by the hearts and courage of these women. Joseph was sold into Egypt by his brothers for their own ends, but ends by saving his brothers and his father from starvation. Moses was ordered to be drowned in the Nile but was saved by these women so that he could play out his part in this story, saving his people by leading them to the promised land and deliv-

ering to them God's Law. Tiny pushes to just the right domino by a hand unseen to those at the time.

Did Pharaoh have the slightest idea of the momentous forces he was dealing with? Not a clue. My favorite atheist and all-round troublesome person, Frederich Nietzsche, put it like this:

“If I wished to shake this tree with my hands, I should not be able to do so. But the wind, which we see not, troubleth and bendeth it as it listeth. We are sorest bent and troubled by invisible hands.”⁴

The course of history is formed more by unseen hands than by our great plans. That's perhaps why one thinker said that the secret to happiness lies in enthusiastic co-operation with the inevitable. God's will is inevitable. We would do well to co-operate enthusiastically with it.

What started me down this road of inquiry was the nightly news. Israel killing Palestinians. Hamas killing

⁴ “Also Sprach Zarathustra”

Israelis. Some group called ISIS killing journalists. Flooding in the Midwest. Drought, death, fire, murder, wingnut conspiracy theories, climate change. I don't know where to turn! I'm scared silly. I have a granddaughter invested in a future that looks to me dystopian. I can see all the big plans. The nightly news rubs my nose in them! It's the drumbeat of our lives. Diane Sawyer tells me that there are Americans who have gone to fight for the screwballs that killed the journalist. Pharaoh was concerned. I'm terrified!

But...then I think about little Moses in the bullrushes. I think of Jesus telling his disciples to tell no one that the Messiah has arrived. And I think of cranky old Frederich and his windblown trees, troubled and bent by unseen hands. And lastly, I recall Jeremiah's prophesy:

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.⁵

The talking heads on the nightly news wouldn't have reported on the finding of a baby in the bullrushes, but the salvation of God's people was in that tiny ark. The commentators on Sunday TV wouldn't have discussed the conversation in which Simon son of Jonah declared, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Nevertheless, the salvation of the world was in that room. I don't know what tiny feet are even now dancing about Vivanie's future to secure it for her welfare and not her harm. But if I am to claim the name Christian, terrified as I am, I must believe that God plans a future for her for we are reminded that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen⁶. Through my terrors and anxiety for her, I will comfort myself in

⁵ Jeremiah 29:11 NRSV

⁶ Hebrews 11:1

the words of Isaiah:

Thus says the Lord:
“Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness,
you that seek the LORD.
Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.”⁷

The truth is just as we prayed this morning from Thomas Merton's great prayer. I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following God's will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

We all of us march blindly into an unknown future. Unbelievers do so with a sense of dread and uncertainty or just decide not to bother their heads about it. Believers carry with them the promises of God. To me, that represents the better course.

AMEN

⁷ Isaiah 51:1

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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