

## **Pentecost 12 August 23, 2020 proper 16**

One hundred years ago this week the 19th amendment to the United States Constitution was ratified giving women the right to vote. This legislation had passed Congress the year before and 35 states had ratified the amendment, but one state was still needed to pass it. The prospects looked incredibly narrow, only a few more states seemed to have enough public and legislative approval to get the amendment ratified, and by the summer of 1920 it all came down to Tennessee. The campaign both for and against women's suffrage became known as the "war of the roses," because the supporters of giving women the vote wore yellow roses and those who opposed it wore red roses. A national election was fast approaching and the supporters of women's suffrage put all the efforts into getting the amendment passed in Tennessee so women could vote in the upcoming presidential election. On a hot day in August, the legislature met, but seemed to be deadlocked in a tie, meaning that the amendment would be defeated. There was one young legislator, Harry T. Burn, just 24 years old in his first term representing McMinn County in the eastern mountains. Although Burn was personally in favor of women's suffrage, most of his constituents were not, and he was facing another election in November. The special session of the legislature dragged on for ten days, reputedly bribes and whiskey flowed freely, but the deadlock could not be undone. Burn wore a red rose to represent the sentiment of most of the people in McMinn County. His mother, Febb Burn, sat down and with her pencil wrote a letter from their hometown of Niota to her son urging him "be a good boy" and to give her the right to vote in the upcoming election. After reading the letter, Burn took a yellow rose, pinned it to the collar on his suit jacket, and strode into the capitol and cast the vote that turned the legislation into the law of the land. Asked about this afterward, Burn said that he believed that the best thing a son could do was to follow the advice of his mother. That is certainly one lesson of this dramatic story. But the other lesson that I take from Burn's action is just how important one vote can be; with his one vote, Harry T. Burn, a young man representing the people of the hills of east Tennessee changed the course of history in the United States. One vote, cast on a hot August day in the midst of an overheated political debate, one vote made all the difference.

Prayer: O God, this morning as we gather in prayer and praise, we hear your Word for us. May your Word show us your will and purpose for our lives. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

The story of the Exodus that we hear today, a story so central to the identity of Israel, is also a very strange story as well. The strange part of this story is not the ruthless tasks imposed on the Israelite slaves, because that is an old story and a very familiar one, too. Harsh kings and overbearing rulers are nothing new and not out of the ordinary at all. No, the strangeness of this story is that it begins with the king who did not know Joseph. This is a new pharaoh reigning over the vast empire of Egypt. Joseph, the Israelite who had entered Egypt as a slave had risen in prominence, eventually becoming the chief steward of the pharaoh's court, and when famine came to the land, Joseph was able to employ his skills and wisdom to preserve the kingdom, to provide for all the empire to sustain it through hard and difficult times. But as we hear today, all this was forgotten: Joseph's descendants, Joseph's people were oppressed and enslaved. Their labor was stolen from them as they built the great supply cities of Pithom and Rameses for pharaoh. Their oppressors, we are told, "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 were imposed on them." But still, all this hardship, all this cruelty, all this imposed misery did not kill off the spirit of Joseph's people. And finally, as a last resort, pharaoh planned to practice genocide against the people of Israel, pharaoh took up a final solution to murder off all the males so the people would be weakened beyond measure.

It is in the implementation of this diabolical plan that we see just how different this story is: pharaoh summons the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah to put his scheme into action. And that's what tells us this is a different kind of story: we learn the names of these two women. We don't know the name of pharaoh, it is never told to us and really, from the point of view of this story, pharaoh's name is not important; pharaoh is just one more harsh, cruel, murderous ruler in the line of history that records too many to mention, self-important, lying, greedy little men who use their position simply to take care of themselves and their cronies. But we do learn the names of these two women, Shiphrah and Puah, two women who defy pharaoh's murderous plot, who resist the evil he would have them carry out, two women who have the courage to stand up and refuse to follow pharaoh's treacherous plan. They even mock pharaoh as he demands an explanation, by insulting his people for their weakness. I think that this story of the beginnings of the Exodus, a story that celebrates two women and passes their names and identities to future generations, a

story that shows their courageous resistance in the face of pharaoh's evil plots is a different kind of story, and this is the legacy of the scriptures for us: a story told from the underside of history, of the faith and courage of those who stand firm in resistance to the ruthlessness of brutal but cowardly pharaohs and emperors, those who would bully and trample on the necks of the poor, thinking only of their own comfort and luxury.

Our Biblical faith shows us a different side of reality than our society teaches us to revere: the question of what is important in our lives is not what is decided by the lofty and powerful, no, what is important in our lives, our purpose and indeed our very souls, these are given to us by God, as God's gracious gift to us. Just as God rewards Shiphrah and Puah for their courageous resistance to pharaoh and their refusal to collaborate and collude with his evil ploys, so in giving us their courageous example God sets before us a path to see the world and our lives in it in a new and startling way: we are called along with Shiphrah and Push to resist the temptation to collude with evil and called to preserve the lives of the poor and the oppressed. Following God's call, this is who we are called to be and how we are called to live.

This is one of the big issues of human existence, one of the big questions we face in our lives: who are we? What is our identity? What is the purpose of our lives? In the Gospel lesson from Matthew, Jesus and the disciples are gathered in a town north of the Sea of Galilee, on the border of then historical Israel, and there he asks his friends, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they respond to Jesus by saying that the people see Jesus in the line of the prophets who come to bring God's Word of justice, love and peace to Israel. And then Jesus presses them more closely, and he asks, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter, the closest to Jesus says, "You are the Christ, the chosen one of God." With this answer, Peter tells us as much about himself as he does about Jesus. Peter recognizes in Jesus the very power of God, revealing that he sees in Jesus not only his humanity, but God's love made fully manifest in his life and for all the world. In the same way that both Shiphrah and Puah know God's power and God's call in their lives is more important than some un-named pharaoh bent on destruction and evil, so Peter sees the very essence of the almighty divine in this Jesus. This faith, this faith that Jesus is the chosen one of God orients and directs Peter's life, it tells who Peter is as a friend and follower of Jesus. It sets the purpose of his life as he continues to follow Jesus and as he seeks to build a new community and strives for the kingdom of God for the rest of his days.

Likewise, the apostle Paul, as he headed toward Rome to bring the Good News of Jesus to the capitol of the Roman Empire and to the entire world, sought to bring about a new way of life for the followers of Jesus. He intends to come to Rome not to engage in the spectacle of the vast wealth and luxury of the Emperor's court, but to transform the lives of the ordinary and everyday believers in Rome, so that they are no longer conformed to the world of empire, but transformed by the power of God's word, their minds renewed and set free to undertake the acts of mercy and love as they find the will of God for their lives, seeking what is good and acceptable and perfect. It is their lives, presented to God as holy and acceptable, that build the community of faith and the kingdom for God's love and mercy to take root.

As we gather here today, some of us still online and some of us in person for the first time in many months, we gather in this new and different story, a story that goes all the way back through the recesses of history to Shiphrah and Puah, a history of righteous women and men who have resisted the evil lures of pharaoh and his ilk, a people motivated instead by God's mercy in our lives to seek the welfare of God's people and to engage in the mission of bringing God's beloved community into existence. The great lights of our tradition are those courageous women and men who have refused the worldly claim of pharaohs and tyrants, who have refused the evil schemes of those who would enrich themselves and their cronies, but instead seek to preserve the lives of those most at risk, the lives of the vulnerable and the outcast, to relieve the oppression of harsh taskmasters and to build a community of goodness, kindness, love and care. This is who we are called to be as a people, as the people of God in the Name of our savior and friend Christ Jesus, brought together in the unity of the Holy Spirit, called to transform our lives in the power of Christ, so that together we can bring God's love to others, in faith we know that God is walking with us each step of the way, that in faith we can make the same confession as Peter does, that Jesus is the Christ, the chosen one of God who comes to free us and save us in his grace, who comes to lift us into service in his Holy Name, who comes to transform our lives that we might transform the life of our community. Thanks be to God for this great gift of grace in our lives, thanks be to Christ for the gift of salvation and freedom and thanks be to God's Spirit of love for the power to accomplish God's will in our lives and our world. Amen.