

Pentecost 13 August 30 2020 Proper 17

For the past few months our nation has been undergoing a racial reckoning of the violence too often faced by African Americans in our society. Beginning with the brutal murder of George Floyd on Memorial Day to the shooting this week of Jacob Blake, these police shootings have made many of us pause to ask how deeply racist policies run in our land. The Black Lives Matter movement is rightly demanding attention to this issue and many in our nation are paying attention with new energy and thought. One of the hallmarks of this movement is to keep the identities, the names, of these victims of police violence front and center. Lives which might have been forgotten only a short time ago, are now remembered, and remembered with the hope that their deaths will not be in vain. And that's why remembering their names is so important, for example, the name of Breonna Taylor, killed by Louisville Kentucky police officers while she was asleep in her bed, reminds us that the racist policies of the police such as using "no knock" warrants needs to be changed, and hopefully the legislation proposed by Rand Paul, one of the senators from Kentucky, will insure that this never happens again. It is in remembering these names, people who we didn't know, but still who we know were sons and daughters, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters and friends to others, and as they were children of God, they are our sisters and brothers as well, and so we remember their names in the hope that as a nation we can make the necessary changes to stop this violence and to secure equal rights for all.

Prayer: Most gracious and glorious God, this morning as we once more hear the Word of your mighty deliverance of your people, may we be inspired to live in your Way of love and share that love with others. This we ask in the most Holy Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

Last week we heard the story from Exodus of the two Hebrew midwives and their resistance to pharaoh's genocidal edict to destroy the Hebrew people by killing the male babies born to Hebrew women. As I mentioned this is a very different sort of story: it is foundational for the people of Israel, providing them a story of their origins and the direction that God will lead the people of Israel in their subsequent history. But the deep difference of this story is that rather than focusing on the powerful historical figures, rather than showing the power of pharaoh, the emphasis of this story is found elsewhere. Pharaoh is never named, because pharaoh simply represents a long line of brutal, tyrannical leaders out to serve only their own power and to enrich the lives of their cronies. The emphasis in the Exodus story is on those who resist pharaoh's murderous schemes.

We **are** told the names of the courageous women who resist pharaoh's evil plot: Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives who refuse to comply with pharaoh's order, and who even mock the weakness of the Egyptians. Their courageous resistance to pharaoh sets up the continuation of the story: the rescue of the infant Moses who will free God's people from the ruthless oppression of the Egyptian slave masters and the tyrannical pharaonic empire and bring them God's law and God's way for the life of the People of Israel.

This morning we continue this story as Moses, keeping watch over the flocks in the wilderness encounters the amazing sight of a burning bush that was not consumed. It is worth taking a moment and reminding ourselves how it was that Moses came to be taking care of the flock in the wilderness, as we left him as an infant being taken into pharaoh's court by pharaoh's daughter last week. We're told that he grows up as a prince in the royal court, but that one day he encountered an Egyptian overseer beating a Hebrew slave and seeing that the coast was clear, he killed the Egyptian. The next day he encountered two Hebrews fighting, and when he attempted to intervene one of the Hebrews said, "Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" So finding out that his crime was known, Moses fled to the land of Midian and married into a priestly family. Meanwhile the oppression of the Hebrews continued and their cry for help rose up to God. It is with this backdrop that Moses comes onto the burning bush in the wilderness, an event that will change his life and the lives of the people of Israel dramatically.

God calls out to Moses, calls out to him and tells him that he now stands on holy ground: in the encounter, now Moses is in sacred space, and God tells Moses, that God is the God of his ancestors, but even more importantly, God has heard the cry of misery, God almighty knows of their suffering under the cruelty of pharaoh's evil schemes, and God has a plan: God will deliver the people, God will free them from their oppression and misery and bring them to a good place, a good and broad land flowing with milk and honey. And now Moses is given his charge: he is to lead the people, Moses will overcome the evil of pharaoh not with violence as he had done earlier, but now Moses will lead the people in the Name of the God of their ancestors, in the Name of the God who led the people in ages past. So Moses asks the obvious question: what is your Name? And continuing the theme of this story, a story in which the powerful pharaoh is un-named but the courageous women Shiphrah and Puah are named and known, now we learn God's holy Name as well: pharaoh's name is not im-

portant, but God almighty's holy Name, "I AM WHO I AM," this is the name of God forever, the Name of the God who hears the misery of the poor and lowly, who hears the cries of the oppressed and who acts to free them, free them from the harsh taskmasters of the evil empire, who seek to bring the people to the place where they can flourish, where they can be free to follow God and to worship God in that freedom.

That story which began centuries ago in Egypt continued on through time, a movement that eventually became the Way of Jesus, a way in which God's love is made manifest in our midst in Jesus. This story is also very different as well, that this one known as the Christ, as the messiah, the chosen one of God, Jesus will not become a great king and leader of the people, but rather the religious authorities will persecute him, will bind him and hand him over to the Roman Empire's governor, Pontius Pilate, to be executed in the most horrible and brutal fashion. Even Jesus' closest followers and friends cannot understand this and would stop it, but as Jesus tells Peter and the others, to be a follower of this Way is to deny ourselves, to take up Jesus' cross, to be ready to lose our lives that we might find them. This unexpected, unlooked for notion of the messiah is totally out of Peter's understanding. This is a very different story than he and the other disciples expect. Little wonder Jesus rebukes him with such strong language, for Peter sees Jesus as a powerful king or as a new pharaoh, but Jesus is having none of it. Jesus' Way, this Way of love, is the Way of the cross, a kingdom that comes through self giving love and not the power of oppression and evil.

This different story, this story of God's Way of love and freedom inspires Paul in his great missionary journeys. On his way to Rome, to visit with the small community of followers of Jesus there in the belly of the beast there in the shadow of the great and powerful Roman Empire, Paul tells these followers of Jesus that as part of their new story, as people who have found their deliverance in Jesus' Way of Love, they are now called to live in a different fashion. They are now called by God to live in a deep mutuality, a mutuality of affection, a mutuality of caring, a mutuality of love, "love one another with mutual affection." In this new and different way of life, they are called to rejoice in hope, called to share each other's burdens, called to live in harmony, taking care of those in need and showing hospitality to the stranger among them. So different from the "me first" power games of Roman society, seeking to get ahead of those around you, seeking to curry favor with ruthless leaders and the less fortunate be damned, Paul urges these followers of Christ to reject all these forms of evil, so that they are not overcome with the evil which surrounds them, but overcome



this evil with good, with the good they have been given through the love of Christ and in the power of God's Holy Spirit of love.

This story, this very different story that tells the names not of the powerful pharaoh or the emperor of the Roman Empire, but instead emphasizes the names of those who cry out in the misery of their oppression, those who resist the evil around them and seek to preserve the lives of the lowly, the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah, Moses and above all, God almighty, the divine, "I AM WHO I AM," those who deliver the people from the cruelty of pharaoh and his ilk, those who seek to restore justice and freedom. This story is our story, this story continues to this day and God still calls us as Moses was called to be the ones to bear divine mercy and God's loving kindness into our world. You and I may not encounter a burning bush in the wilderness, but still we too are standing on holy ground, in the presence of God almighty to lift up the. Lowly and the out-cast, to have our very souls delivered from the evil of our world and to stand in awe and reverence this day and in the days to come, seeking God's way for our lives. And like that small community of the faithful gathered in Rome, we too are called live in the mutuality of God's love, to seek to comfort one another and to continually praise God for the power of God's Holy Spirit of Love amongst us, rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep, overcoming evil with the goodness that God brings us in our savior Christ Jesus. Yes, this is an old, old story as the hymn says, but it is also new as we continue to live out this story in our lives, through the midst of the pandemic that rages in our world, through this time of seeking racial justice for all in our land, through this time when we too seek to resist the tyranny and evil of our world and to overcome it

with the goodness of God's love and mercy. May God, in whose Holy Name we gather, may God continue to provide us the grace and strength of our ancestors as we gather, and may our prayers and praise continue to set us on the course of deliverance for those who suffer that all God's people may live in the loving harmony with one another, in a genuine love and a mutual respect. Thanks and praise be to God for this grace and thanks be to Christ for the gift of the redeeming love. Amen.