

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

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Proper 16A 2008

In the Name of our One Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures comes only a few paragraphs after last Sunday's reading that concluded the story of Joseph saving his family and Pharaoh giving Joseph's family some of the best land of Egypt in gratitude for Joseph's having saved Egypt from famine. Today's readings introduce us to a new narrative – the story of Moses and the flight from Egypt. It opens “Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” This new king fears that the Israelites have become too numerous and too powerful and may be a fifth column in event of war. What to do? First he tries oppression, but they continue to multiply. Then he tries violence, enslaving them to build his monuments. Next he tries murder. He commands the midwives to kill all newborn males. When they thwart him by their guile, he resorts to that great evil – genocide –inciting his people to cast all young Hebrew boys into the Nile.

It is a very human journey – that journey from gratitude to forgetfulness. It is the journey from appreciation of and concern for the other to concern for self and fear of the other. It is the journey from “us” to “them”. We don't know how long it took the Egyptians to go from “us” to “them” and we don't really know why this happened, Exodus seems to gloss over that. But does it matter? Biblical scholars and archeologists tell us the Israelites arrived in Egypt around 1800 BC and Moses

our public lives, in our families and in our hearts: The journey from gratitude to forgetfulness; the journey from “us” to “them” and, finally to the only thing that is truly valued: “me”. It is the dead end of human history when it runs amok.

Into this violent and messy situation a child is born and miraculously not only survives but is placed squarely at the center of things. Moses, the Israelite baby boy, through human wit and grit is saved and adopted into Pharaoh’s household. So begins the story of a great biblical truth: God cannot abide violence and injustice and will always call us out of this destructive chaos. The tricky part is letting go of fear in order to see the other possibilities that God provides and valuing these possibilities more than the fears that block our seeing beyond our own selves.

Our Gospel lesson is a familiar one to many of us. It is usually read in the context of the Christian Church that came into being centuries later and it has acquired many layers of gloss and interpretation. I would suggest that we simply look at within the context of Matthew’s narrative. Jesus has gathered his inner circle and acquired a large number of followers as he went through Galilee. He healed the sick, gave great teachings, fed the multitudes, walked on water and did other works of wonder. John the Baptist is killed by Herod and Jesus is being criticized and rejected by the religious authorities of his day. He has found more faith from a Canaanite woman he tried to reject than from the Jewish leaders whom he tried to convince. Jesus is at a critical point in his ministry and he checks in with his disciples.

Interestingly, we find him in Caesarea Philippi, a gentile town on the frontier where no respectable Jew would be found. It represented to the Jews the oppression of the Roman Empire and the foreignness of the Gentiles. It is here after he realizes that he has been rejected by the Jewish leaders yet accepted by a Canaanite mother that He asks his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” In other words, what’s the buzz about me out there? They tell him some think he’s John the Baptist,

others Elijah and others think he's some of the other prophets. But Jesus isn't interested in what other people think. He brings the question down home and personal: "But who do *you* say that I am?"

All three Synoptic Gospels tell this story in different ways; the only thing that is the same is the question: "But who do *you* say that I am?" It is a question the authors of the gospels poses to us the readers. How we respond determines what sense we will make out of the rest of the story. Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one of God, the One who is to come to redeem Israel is the key to all of the Gospels. Is Jesus just another dead prophet killed by the world of oppression or is he the Living Christ, the One still with us, leading and beckoning us to the world as God sees it becoming?

The question Jesus poses is personal and relational – "*What do I mean to you? What does that relationship mean to you?*" How does a person answer a question like that? I think this brings us to another biblical truth – the mind is important and rationally informs our decisions, but it is the heart that is the ultimate decision making muscle. What possibilities will I acknowledge? What will I allow to happen? What will I refuse to allow happening?

Peter, ever the impetuous one, answers that Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One of God and Jesus responds by saying that this awareness is from the Father and it is what his community will be built upon. It is called faith.

We don't know exactly what Peter meant by his answer. What messianic image did he have? But is that the right question? I think the Gospels point us not into Peter's head but into his life. His answer ultimately allowed him to see beyond his fear, beyond the shame of his denials of even knowing Jesus, beyond the cross and the tomb. His

answer allowed him to see the Living Christ and to show the possibilities that that opens in our lives to others. It changed the world.

I once heard a priest in this Diocese tell a clergy gathering that others “don’t really know who Jesus is.” I thought that comment was beyond cheeky – in fact I thought it was downright arrogant. Like Peter, none of us know the total reality of Jesus. Each of us, I think, at best can glimpse as Peter did that Jesus was God’s love and faithfulness still and ever present in the world. We each can only see and experience this within in the context of our own lives and it changes everything. It keeps wonder and gratitude present in our lives.

Who do you say that I am? Let’s not look first to the Bible for that answer, nor to church doctrine, nor to religious leaders. The answer is found in our lives and in the possibilities we are willing to see. Is there something there we see that has moved us beyond our fears and self-preoccupation back from forgetfulness to a place of gratitude and wonder?

Amen.