

Beach Balls and Burning Bushes

A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 13A
Exodus 2:23-25; 3:1-15; 4:10-17; John 8:58

One of my favorite professors in Seminary used to teach the order for a typical Sunday worship with an inflatable beach ball as a prop. He would stand UP FRONT in the place of the worship leader, holding the ball. While holding the ball, he would lead the call to worship. Then he'd toss the ball into the class. (The students were his "congregation.") The congregation (now holding the ball) would sing a hymn praising God, then they'd toss the ball back up front. This professor would call his students to confess their sin and pain to God, then he'd throw the ball back. The students would pray, mindful of their brokenness The professor would speak words of God's forgiveness The students would CELEBRATE that forgiveness And the ball would sail back and forth. This professor meant to emphasize how, in worship, there is this call and response – it is both between the worship leader and the congregation, AND ALSO, on a deeper level, between the congregation and God.

I thought about that as I read today's story from Exodus, because in today's text, and in the chapters right around it, God and God's people engage in some back and forth. We read about a God who is receptive to human outcry, who engages human beings and works through us, and who adjusts a pretty major plan according to what people need. It isn't just one-sided. There is give and take . . . call and response.

In this particular story, the first speaker is Israel. Walter Brueggeman, when he wrote about this part of Exodus, said that Israel may have been groaning *BEFORE* the outcry we hear in the verses preceding today's text, but if so, their groaning had been stifled. When the king died – the oppressive king of Egypt – the voices of the people rose, with all the rage and resentment of *YEARS* of servitude. *There is only SO MUCH a human body can take.* Israel found its voice and sounded its pain. And this cry of pain is the beginning point of the Exodus. Israel groans, and God responds! God hears the people groaning . . . and HEARING, God is moved to remember. God remembers the people to whom God made promises in the book of Genesis – Abraham and Isaac and Jacob – particular people to whom *God is committed.* God connects the slaves God sees in EGYPT with promises made years before, and God *UNDERSTANDS*: understands their suffering . . . and also understands that *something must be done* for God's promises to come true.

This story is one of many places it becomes clear that the Bible is political, and that faith in the God described here simply *MUST BE POLITICAL.* Because God identifies with a particular people – an oppressed and enslaved people. As we read the story, if we care about God, we must also care about the lives of these people God has identified with. We have to care, as God cared, about the power of the Pharaoh, and Pharaoh's labor policies, and all the various ways Pharaoh acts to oppose God's will and hold God's people captive.

It reminds me of the Belhar Confession. It was written in South Africa in the years of apartheid, and in recent years has been added to the Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church USA, which is how I know about it. The Belhar Confession challenges us to appreciate how, in a world full of injustice and enmity, God “is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged.” And God “calls the church to follow God in this [Belhar says]; for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry . . . God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind . . . God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly.”

Exodus describes God’s promises in much the same way, only it’s God speaking, telling Moses, “I know about my people’s pain and have come down to rescue them. I will bring them into a good and broad land, a land full of milk and honey.” This is what *GOD promises* to do. But you probably noticed what happened partway through the reading. What had been God’s pious promise (sort of *OUT THERE*) abruptly becomes God’s righteous demand (right here!). “So get going,” God tells Moses. “I’m sending *YOU* to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt.”

It’s like that in the Belhar Confession, too. God’s grand intentions become specific human responsibilities, human vocation. It is *WE* who must do what God said. “God wishes to teach the church to do what’s good and to seek what’s right [says the Confession.] The church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need . . . the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” *What God has promised, WE must act to bring about.*

It is IMPORTANT FOR ME TO SAY THAT *whenever we read about the Exodus*. It is important for us to hear again GOD’S CALL to help people in suffering and need. Because for many of us it’s an option, as it was for Moses, simply *not to get involved*. We could stay in our places of relative safety. Yet God shows us in this story how to listen to people in pain, remember our connection to them, and *DO what is good* for all of God’s people.

This makes me think about the work of mission co-workers around the world. We used to call these folks missionaries; in the Presbyterian Church they are now “mission co-workers” and my congregation supports particular mission co-workers in Haiti and Ghana and Congo. These are folks who decide to leave places of safety and comfort, to “get going,” like Moses did, right into the thick of things – to stand with people in particular need. These mission co-workers work to amplify the voices of people who live far away (in many cases), people who are suffering, no less than those Israelites were suffering, people whose cries have pierced God’s heart. They work alongside those people to pursue God’s justice and peace.

My congregation works locally, too (I hope you ALSO work locally) to listen to the cries of people close by. In one of our justice ministries, the annual calendar includes a period for listening specifically! We ask one another: What concerns keep you up at night? What injustices do you see in your neighborhood, or in this city, nation, and world that

FRIGHTEN you, or that make you angry? We are part of a coalition of faith communities whose listening in recent years has led us to advocate for more affordable housing, more effective teaching strategies in schools, and policies to reduce gun violence. The goal of this advocacy is GOD'S SHALOM, meaning peace and justice and wholeness for God's people.

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As we listen for the groans of people in particular need and work to stand with them and help them, it is important, I want also to say, that we *not silence our own groans*, but pay attention to our own pain, too. At some point last week, watching some of my friends who have young children, I got to remembering how I'd felt when my children were young. I adored them – sweet little people. But also, I felt perpetually exhausted by parenting, even to the point of despair. Those were hard days for me . . . and I felt bad about that, like many mothers do. Because these were beautiful children, and I loved them, and as a relatively privileged person in America, I had plenty to feed them and nothing life-threatening to contend with. I'd think about moms in Congo or Afghanistan or the projects of Atlanta, where we lived at the time. *How could I feel bad, when (compared to others) I had it so good?* I still remember how relieved I felt when a friend told me not to compare like that. *Your pain is real pain*, she said to me. That she acknowledged it helped me deal with it!

Since then I've read the research that you can't love others more than you love yourself. This is related: how it's hard to appreciate and feel compassion for another person's *groaning*, if you haven't acknowledged your own. The good news of this passage is that God hears *ALL OUR GROANING*, and wants to bring *all of us* into places that are good and spacious – places we can breathe more freely. So, no matter what we're facing, it's worth acknowledging where, in our own lives, we feel hard pressed.

Where are *YOU* up against something that's confining or weighing you down? Maybe you'll think about an illness . . . or a debt . . . or a hard part of your job. Perhaps you'll *FEEL something* you can't quite name. Brené Brown, who did that research about the importance of loving ourselves, suggests a whole range of things that can oppress us: things like perfectionism . . . or caring too much what other people think. . . or comparing ourselves to other people . . . or thinking we have to be productive all the time . . . or staying too-busy generally . . . or doubting ourselves for no good reason . . . or trying always to be cool and in control. Such habits are burdensome, and the God of Exodus wants us to let them go. Remember Jesus saying, "Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest." Remember how he invited people to come out under the open sky – to consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, and in the space of that beauty to trust their place in God's world. Jesus welcomes us to good and broad places where we can lay our burdens down and experience God's care.

Before we leave the book of Exodus, I feel compelled to note three more things I see *as gracious* in the call and response of the story.

1) I've never seen a burning bush, or heard a voice from the flames; I don't know many people who'd say God has been *THAT CLEAR* calling them. But as God asked Moses to help people *he had a connection to*, I believe God asks you and me to pay attention to our lives. Sometimes we can see in our histories, our families, our yearnings, where *WE ARE CALLED* to make a difference. Not everywhere . . . maybe someplace we already feel a connection.

2) We are never, not ever alone. God didn't tell Moses his path would be easy, but God promised to be with him. That was Christ's last promise to his disciples, too: *Carla, I'll be with you always, until the end of the age*. Often, I think, God's company comes in the form of human company! When Moses argued that he didn't have what it took to speak to Pharaoh, God didn't try to change Moses, God gave him help; God gave him Aaron! Together, we can do what God wants us to do.

And 3) like Moses, we are not perfect people. We may feel like deeply flawed people . . . even *the WRONG people*. Still, we are the people God calls into action. God will put to use whatever gifts we have.

So we keep going back and forth in worship and in life. We call, and God hears. God promises, and we wonder. We hunger. God feeds. We object. God reassures. We say thanks. God tells us to get going. Then it's our turn again. What will we do?

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