

Are you paying Attention?
Matthew 16:13-20; Exodus 1:8-2:10

Prayer meet with us as you did with the disciples so long ago, and help us to see more clearly who you are and how you are working in our midst.

Let me begin by saying that I consider it both a pleasure and a privilege to be serving as the preacher today, sharing with you. But I must admit that as I was preparing I was quickly reminded of the challenges of preaching in the middle of August.

To begin with, this is what the Romans called the dog-days of summer – gone is the anticipation in Spring and early summer of warmer, sunny days and barbecues – replaced by the repetitious daily heat.

a bit the same in the Christian year! we started with advent - celebrating arrival of Christ, moved through his ministry to Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost, and now we are in ?? “ordinary time” —a time of reflecting on the meaning of it all, but again easily distracted – something Jesus recognized even in his disciples, as we see in the gospel reading today: like a teacher seeing pupils gazing out the window and clapping her hands:

“Who do people think I am?” and what about you? the messiah, the Son of the living God – could look like Peter gets the gold star — BUT as text continues it becomes clear Peter does not yet understand, because he is trying to fit Jesus into his assumptions about what the Messiah should be and do – death has no place.

Why fail to recognize? Perhaps because have not been paying enough attention to the “good news” (or gospel) that God has been trying to share with us all the way along. It does not start with Christ and the gospels in the NT. In a real sense, the first “gospel” in Christian scripture (or story of how God is actively seeking to redeem humanity) is the book of Exodus! Biblical scholars have long recognized that while Genesis is the first book in the canon of the OT, it would never have been written without the events of Exodus – God’s promises to Abraham, etc. would have long been forgotten, if not for God’s gracious faithfulness to those promises in delivering the Hebrew children from Egypt. So it is fitting that it is precisely during this time of the church year (and the dog

days of summer), when we so easily lose focus, that the lectionary leads us through the highpoints of the Book of Exodus – and its account of God’s saving ways. If you are not one who follows lectionary, encourage you to read Exodus, and I will try to help by focusing on the lesson in Exodus in this sermon and next week.

So let’s begin by reading the lesson for this week. Exodus 1:8-2:10

The book of Exodus opens by reminding readers of how Joseph had brought his family/tribe to safety in Egypt. But starting with 1:8 it makes clear that the land of safety has become a land of servitude

It is hard to pause just as the action is getting intense, but this is where the lesson ends, and it is enough for us to step back and comment on the book as a whole.

Let me start by saying that the most important realization I have come to in years of studying the book of Exodus is the importance of bearing in mind that it is not just a story of human struggle against unjust political systems (though it is that)

At a more fundamental level it is a story of a contest between 2 gods!

Pharaoh as embodiment or representative of Egyptian God - Rah
Moses as YHWH’s representative (Ex. 7:1) (like God to Pharaoh)

The contest is over whom the Hebrews will *serve* (Ex. 6:6-8)

(Eved stem used 97 times in book) serve/worship

not a story of delivery from servitude to independence but of creation of the possibility of *voluntary* dependence upon the true God

The Exodus meant to help people *know* who YHWH is

meaning of “to know” *yada* not just abstract knowledge
but personal experience, intimate knowledge
in political contexts “to acknowledge the authority of”

While the Hebrew children knew the divine name YHWH before,
only with the Exodus do they come to know what it means, that God
is the one of covenant faithfulness who acts to redeem.

But this brings us to the key question — HOW does the true God choose to act?

In Exodus we see that Pharaoh (the false god) tries to impose rule by force, taking away human freedom or choice

While the true God (YHWH) works through the creation God has graciously bestowed in powerful ways to make deliverance possible, but never reduces anyone (not even Pharaoh) to a mere slave (hardening of heart)

Indeed all of God's mighty actions (the plagues) take forms that leave room for "the eyes of faith" or the spin of denial – locusts, dust storms, red tide

For we who are Wesleyans this should be familiar – God works *strongly but sweetly* because God loves each person too much to reduce them to mere enactors of God's will. God calls, models, and empowers, but we can resist

Another way of saying this is that in the book of Exodus the true God seeks to set things right for the Hebrew children less by brute power than by wisdom, and with a sense of humor! Sometime miss the latter because we tend to read holy scripture mainly in a solemn mode (as I did); but in the case of the early chapters of Exodus (as in several other parts of Scripture), we are supposed to be chuckling at points. Because, as God comments in chapter 10:2, Pharaoh's wisdom has been exposed as foolishness.

go back through text a bit – looking for this

- 1:9 Pharaoh says "the people of Israel are more numerous and stronger than we are" perhaps in a very limited geographical setting; but more likely a gross exaggeration showing Pharaoh's paranoia.
Deut 7:7 "you were the smallest of nations"
How can 2 midwives deal with all Hebrew women if that numerous?
- 1:10–12 Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, ... oppress them with forced labor. but this only made them stronger and spread them out.
- 1:15–18 Calls the midwives; they disobey, he calls back for a report
- 1:19 "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." literally the midwives say the Hebrew women are just like animals!

Note Pharaoh does not challenge this explanation!

But note also that God's resistance to Pharaoh is coming through in part in the midwives' creative disobedience (since they "feared" God more than Pharaoh) (a common biblical theme – JW work out because God is working in you)

1:22 Now the tyrant lost his sense: he no longer just "speaks" but now *commands* his entire people. "throw all Hebrew boy infants in Nile"

1:22-2:10 points out the irony is that pharaoh's last command is "every daughter you shall let live" and then daughters, including his own undermine the success of his program.

Moses's mother follows the command (with an addition)

Moses's sister keeps watch

Pharaoh's daughter takes Moses out of the Nile and raises

2:9 "Take this child and nurse him and I, *even I*, will give you your wages."

Story of Moses – but so far more the story of women – God using the foolishness of the work to confound the supposed 'wisdom'

Note, I say God is doing this; but actually in the first 2 chapters of Exodus God never appears! And maybe this is the most important lesson we can draw from this text for today. It is so easy to get caught up in the dramas and traumas going on all around us in this time, and begin to wonder why God has abandoned us. But if we take Exodus as our guide, there is no time and no circumstance in which God is not graciously at work, encouraging and supporting those who truly know God to work for God's ways in the midst of all the brokenness and evil. But to see this, we need to look less at the Pharaohs of our day, and more at the midwives, who are standing with God in birthing greater love, justice, and wholeness in our world. After all, we seek to emulate a messiah who embodied God's saving mission not as a conquering General (what Peter had expected), but an obedient and suffering servant. In the coming weeks may we come to see Jesus as Messiah in this sense.