

From Passover to Praise on Palm Sunday

Exodus 14 and Matthew 21:1-11 by Patty Friesen (April 9/17)

Last Sunday, Terri Lynn and the youth introduced us to the Book of Exodus and Moses. Exodus 1 begins with the civil disobedience of the two Hebrew mid-wives Shiphrah and Puah who didn't kill the Hebrew baby boys as Pharaoh commanded but pled ignorance of their births by telling Pharaoh that the hearty Hebrew women birthed their boys before the midwives got there. Shiphrah and Puah sound like they might be twins or sisters at least. They sound like the famous four Macdonald sisters of St. Paul, Minnesota where Patrick and I lived. Kate, Brigid, Rita and Jane Macdonald were blood sisters who also joined the Catholic order of The Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. These Catholic sisters had a spiritual awakening about the civil wars the US was conducting in Central America in the 1980's. They protested the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia where the US army trained Central American mercenaries. The sisters were arrested for trespassing at the School but that didn't stop them. They also protested every Wednesday morning outside Alliant Tech Industries in St. Paul, which produced landmines. They stood at the gate chanting: "Dear Alliant, We're defiant, We'll be back with many friends. It's like David and Goliath and you know how that one ends!"

Shiphrah and Puah and Moses' mother Jochobed and his sister Miriam and Deborah and the Macdonald Sisters are a long line of strong females who refused to comply with violent pharaohs and presidents. In the book of Exodus, what goes around, comes around and because the midwives save the Hebrew children, God gives them children of their own. And Pharaoh who takes the lives of Hebrew children, will lose his

own son. The writer of Exodus is careful not to paint all Egyptians as bad and the fifth strong woman in Exodus 2 is Pharaoh's own daughter who discovering Moses in the basket in the Nile, knows exactly what his ethnicity is and in defiance of her father, adopts him and raises him, inadvertently raising the leader of the Hebrew rebellion.

This is a delightful reversal on the Hebrews as well, lest they lump all Egyptians into one camp of evil oppressors, here is an Egyptian woman who doesn't fit the mold. Basic human values of compassion, justice and courage are present in any of God's people including Egyptians. God is not explicitly mentioned in the first 2 chapters of Exodus but is silently working through the courage of the first five women of the story. They set the tone of deliverance for the whole book of Exodus and the whole of human history of the deliverance of the oppressed whether they are the children of Israel escaping Egypt, Jews escaping Europe, Mennonites escaping Russia, African American slaves escaping the southern US or Syrians escaping to Saskatoon.

It is the Passover, the deliverance of God's people through the plagues and their ritual of worship with bitter herbs and unleavened bread and the lamb life given for their freedom, which we will enact here on Thursday evening at 6:00. As God kept vigil over Israel that Passover night, so God went before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night in a physical assurance of God's presence with them. They are prepared to fight the Egyptians but God won't let them fight. Moses tells the people, Do not be afraid, stand firm and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today. The Lord will fight for you, you only have to keep still.

In Mennonite theologian, Millard Lind's book Yahweh is a Warrior, Lind describes God's type of warfare, which uses the natural world like insects and frogs and

blood and water to defeat enemies like we saw in the movie *The Prince of Egypt* here a week ago. God commands trust in the midst of this kind of natural world warfare that seems to defy human rationale. It requires great trust in God to stand still in a non-violent stance and let God do the work through creation.

Don Mosley, founding member of Jubilee Partners, an intentional Christian community in Georgia writes about their community's efforts to bring Central American refugees across the Mexican border in the 1980's. At one such crossing, four tornado funnel clouds formed at the border like giant fingers searching for the earth. Mosley writes: "The US border checkpoint came into view. It was clearly open for business. All the yellow lights were flashing and barricades funneled single lane traffic through the checkpoint. The Border Patrol bus was there to haul Central Americans back to Mexico. There was a brief temptation to turn around and take our refugees back to Mexico but we kept going, with the tornadoes dangling high above us like observers from another world. We drove up to the passport window and all the lights were on but there was no patrol inside. We didn't stop to ask questions, we drove into Texas and our silent passengers exploded into laughter and spontaneous thanks to God.

"Senor," said one of the Salvadorans, "now I know what the children of Israel felt like when they were coming out of the Red Sea!"

Chinese theologian Watchman Nee puts it this way, God is waiting for us to give up control and violence. When we give up control, God will begin. Have you ever tried to save a drowning man? The trouble is that his fear prevents him from trusting himself to you. When that is so, there are just two ways of saving him. Either you must knock him out and drag him to shore or else you must leave him to struggle and shout until his

strength gives way before you go to his rescue. If you try to save him while he has any strength left, he will clutch at you and drag you under and both of you will be lost. God is waiting for us to give up the need to fight and control before God can deliver us. Then like the Israelites, we will stand on the shore and see our salvation.

This non-violent standing and civil disobedience is not a fearful passivity and crouching in fear but a standing in trust and confidence. It's not a cowardly running from the fight but a standing up in courage for God to do the fighting. Andre Trocme, the French pastor of the village of Le Chambon, who led his congregation to hide Jews during the Holocaust, tells this story of the intervention of weather. He was given the order to ring the church bells at noon on August 1, 1941 to commemorate the Nazi takeover of France. Pastor Trocme told the church custodian not to ring them in civil disobedience of the Nazis. The custodian was named Amelie, a small sturdy French woman. At noon the bells were silent. Two women from town came looking for Amelie and scolded her.

“You're not ringing the church bell today, Amelie. It is a national holiday and there are orders from the marshal.” Amelie replied, “The bell does not belong to the marshal, but to God. It is rung for God only otherwise it is not rung.” Amelie planted her small self in front of the church door, under the lintel of the doorway, arms spread out. The town women were standing in the courtyard when a tremendous rainstorm came up and poured on the women while Amelie stayed dry under the lintel. The women looked at Amelie for awhile, then left dripping wet like the Egyptians in the Red Sea.

Our Mennonite pacifism is based on this Exodus story and this kind of non-violent trust in God's deliverance in the face of persecution for 500 years. One such

deliverance occurred on the night of January 30, 1947 when Peter and Elfrieda Dyck, Mennonite Central Committee workers from Saskatchewan living in East Berlin, loaded 1100 Russian Mennonite refugees onto US Army trucks to go to a freight train to take them out of the Russian sector. This illegal escape of Soviet citizens was called Operation Mennonite. The Russians held up the train for 12 hours and the Mennonites held their breath, fearing being sent back to Siberia. Suddenly the guardrails went up and the train crossed to the British sector without incident. Peter Dyck said: "We had come to the Red Sea and it had parted. Singing began in one railcar and spread to the others. Soon the entire train was singing that great hymn of praise, Nun Alles Danke Gott, Now thank we all our God. It was the modern day Exodus. We had cried to the Lord in distress and there was a dramatic victory. The only heartfelt response was praise."

Taking a non-violent stand and letting God do the fighting is the Exodus tradition in which Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey on this Palm Sunday. There are so many parallels between Jesus who on this Passover week, claims the Exodus story of non-violent deliverance of his people. There are bitter herbs of suffering as he trusts in God to save his soul and ours as he crosses over the Red Sea of crucifixion. There are acts of nature that will accompany his death in thunderclouds and earthquakes that split open tombs. There is a dangerous scary crossing but God will bring him safe to the other side of resurrection with praise.

Let us pray for ourselves and for our world this Holy Week: God of salvation, thank you for your powerful acts of deliverance in history and through your Son Jesus. Help us to stand in courage, faith and trust and non-violence. Amen.

Sing: Now Thank We All Our God, #86 HWB