

Exodus 3:1-15
Luke 6:32-38

Grace Congregational United Church of Christ
September 29, 2019 Kim M. Henning
"Moses: A Necessary Reverence"

Grace to you and peace from God who comes to us decisively in Jesus of Nazareth. Amen.

Harold Kushner used to be the rabbi of a synagogue. A rabbi is a teacher. One of the classes he taught was modern Jewish history. Of course, Kushner spent a good amount of time teaching the Holocaust.

The Holocaust took place during the 1930's and 40's. He taught them about Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass. He taught them that six million Jews were killed. Why? Six million Jews were killed because they were Jews. The Holocaust stories that Kushner taught were difficult because the evils that humans did to humans were unimaginable.

Kushner reminded his teenagers that they would not be in his class had not been for their grandparents. Some of their grandparents fled. Some were protected by conscientious people. And some courageously survived the concentration camps.

Kushner says that his classes were intense because of the hatred shown towards the Jews. On the last day of class, Kushner asked his students, "So....why was Hitler wrong?" His students are confused. Wrong? one student asks incredulously.

"Do you mean its ok to say that Jews are an inferior race?" "Do you mean it's ok to murder?"
"You can't just kill people because you don't like them."

But Kushner responds, everything in Germany was done according to law. The government passed laws sanctioning everything they did. A student replied, "You can't pass laws permitting the gassing of little children because they're Jewish." But they did.

So here's a question for you: What makes something wrong or right? Is a law to be revered even if it harms someone? Is a law to be revered even if it rubs against religious conscience?

What makes something wrong or right? You and I are told of a God who insists upon justice. You and I are commanded to stand up for the most vulnerable. "As you have done it to the least of these, you have done it onto me."

What makes something right or wrong? We are commanded to obey the Ten Commandments. Jesus commands that we love---even our enemies.

What makes something right or wrong? A story.....

The offspring of Abraham are living in Egypt. A new king arose who said, "look, the Israelite people are more numerous and powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them. They set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. The story goes that the Egyptians were ruthless..... and they made their lives bitter with hard service.

Do you hear what happened? The Egyptians are fearful of these foreigners who live in their country. What do they do? The Hebrews are made into slaves who work seven days a week. When they complain about the amount of work, they are given more work. On top of that the king of Egypt commands mid-wives to kill all the baby boys born to the Hebrews.

And then the story goes..... “The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out.” You know the song: “When Israel was in Egypt’s land, Let my people go. Oppressed so hard they could not stand, Let my people go.” Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning. God remembered his covenant. God looked upon the Israelites and took notice of them.

Something is wrong when people are powerless to change their own lives;
Something is wrong when people cry, when they groan; Something is wrong
when life is all misery, no worship, make more bricks, make more bricks.

Enter, now.....Moses. Well, that’s not accurate. Moses is actually minding his own business. He’s a shepherd tending sheep in the mountains. And he’s also a fugitive---but that’s another story.

But enter, now.....Moses. The story goes that an angel appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush. Moses looks. He sees a burning bush. But that was not the oddity. The story goes that that bush was burning, but it was not consumed.

Moses pays attention. And then he hears, “Moses. Moses.” I’m not making this up. Moses knows there are no humans in that area. He responds, “Here I am.”

The voice says, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” And then, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

And Moses ‘hid his face.’

What is a person to do with the wrong in this world? What is God’s response?

In one of the premier stories of our faith, God hears the groaning of people and God raises up a leader to respond to the crises. Isn’t that interesting? God hears the groaning and then God says, “you and I have got a problem.”

Now Moses could have responded, “You and I? I’m a shepherd. I’m working for my father-in-law. You are God. Isn’t it possible for you to fix this problem by yourself?”

“No. I have observed the misery of my people. I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. I know their suffering. The cry of the Israelites has come to me. I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh.....”

3200 years ago the wrong committed by Pharaoh and Egypt was slavery. 3200 years ago the wrong committed by Pharaoh and Egypt was racism. 3200 years ago the wrong committed by Pharaoh and Egypt was prejudice.

It’s a timeless problem isn’t it, the problem that doesn’t go away: slavery, racism, and prejudice. The scripture talks openly about Egyptian fear, fear always leads to something irrational. Why else did Roosevelt say, ‘we have nothing to fear but fear itself’? The scripture also tells us that the Egyptians acted shrewdly.

And God took notice. God took notice. On the sly we think we can get away with a lot of things. But beware when God takes notice.

What is God to do? God says, "So come, I will send you to Pharaoh....." Pharaoh. We're not talking about a trip to the high school principal. We're not talking about writing a letter to the newspaper. We're talking Pharaoh. I will send you to Pharaoh..... God says.

That's enough to make anyone shrink.

So how does God bolster the chutzpah of Moses? First he provides a burning bush that refuses to be burnt up. Second, God says, "Moses." Third, 'take off those sandals; you're standing on holy ground.'

I love this story. Moses was.....just a shepherd. Who of us hasn't said something like that? I'm just a cheese maker. I'm just a teacher. I'm just a carpenter. Don't ask me to go up against Pharaoh. Moses was just a shepherd until he was taught reverence before God. "Be quiet. Take off your shoes. I'm talking to you, Moses."

Do you recognize the name, Greta Thunberg? Greta is a 16 year old from Sweden who is concerned about climate change. She sees the melting of glaciers. She knows about carbon dioxide levels rising.

Last week Greta spoke before the United Nations. Wasn't that amazing? A sixteen year old?

As a sixteen year old, she wasn't asking to be given a cell phone; she wasn't asking for a later curfew from her parents; she wasn't asking for a car or cigarettes or more freedom. She was asking.....with some passion that we pay attention to our planet.

What makes something wrong? What are the wrongs you're wrestling with? Is it climate change? Is it alcohol or drug addiction? Is it trafficking? Is it racism? Are you working against the prejudice we show against those who have physical disabilities or mental disabilities or autism or those who are gay?

3200 years ago, Moses was scared. I suspect Moses woke up in the middle of the night like I sometimes wake up.

What if people don't listen? What if others become angry with me? What if they say I'm a lunatic? What if they say, "You're fired"?

3200 years ago God bolstered the inner fortitude of Moses by showing him reverence. Moses is not 100% on board. He asks, "If people ask me, "What is your name? What shall I say to them?" God responds, "I am who I am."

I am who I am. With that name, God sets himself above Pharaoh. With that name God sets himself above all his personal insecurities. As you know, Moses does everything in his power to resist God's call. Who am I before Pharaoh? I'm just a shepherd. I'm not a speaker. I'm scared.

But the problem of evil was real. Moses, I will be with you. Moses, I will speak through you. Moses, I will give you power to rise above the wrong you see.

How does the song end? "Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land; tell old Pharaoh: Let my people go!"