

A Founding Story: A Visionary Leader and a People Set Free

History of Israel: Its Liberation and Birth as a People

Text: Exodus 1:8; Exodus 3: 2, 6-7, 14

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." Exodus 1:8

"There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed." Exodus 3:2

"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob... I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry." Exodus 3:6-7

"God said to Moses, 'I will be there'.. ('I Am who I am.' or 'I will be what I will be.')" Exodus 3:14

Now imagine, if you will—six hundred years later or so—this same people, this community of faith now down some generations, are once again in a situation of captivity. The people of Judah are in exile in Babylon, and their faith is wavering. They are ready to give up. All of these great promises: the covenant of grace, God's special choice of this people, God who was supposedly God alone, Creator of the heavens and the earth. Where was God? Babylon seemed to hold sway. As their hope was fading and their faith was flickering someone said, "Let me tell you a story." He told them a story that we've just read, a story of where this people, even six hundred years before, had been in a situation more oppressive and more hopeless than anything that the present exiles in Babylon had known. Someone said, "That's a great story." And someone else said, "You ought to write that story down." And a third person said, "Xerox it off and spread it around. That's a good story." They started to believe again. Maybe what they were experiencing in their present circumstance was not a dead end. Maybe that was not all there was. Maybe this God really was God after all, a God who could create newness, who could do the unexpected. Maybe this was God who would surprise by grace, as God had to their fathers and their mothers centuries ago. The prophet picked it up and he began to speak in the name of God. Second Isaiah, Isaiah 43:14—listen to the images.

"Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: 'For I will send to Babylon and break down all the bars, and the shouting of the Chaldeans will be turned to lamentations. I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King.' Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: 'Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert...'"

Six hundred years later and the old founding story of liberation and the birth of the Israeli people becomes a catalyst for this same people to begin to believe again, to begin to hope again, to begin to wait on the Lord again, and to expect the salvation that comes from God.

The story is familiar. Israel is terribly oppressed. Moses, who had been raised in all of the pomp and circumstance of Egypt, with all of that culture and civilization, blew it badly through a temper that flared up when he killed an Egyptian. Now he's out there tending flocks. In *Wanderings*, the Jewish novelist Chaim Potok tries to get inside the skin of Moses to figure out what must have been going on in this man as he tended sheep and sensed something within, how he was confronted with a bush that burned and was not consumed, and who heard a voice, within perhaps, but as thunderous as any thunder, saying to him, "Things are not right in Egypt. Go. Set my people free."

He goes, and it is a contest of wills. But the judgments of God, we call them the plagues, counter all of the "no's" of Pharaoh, until finally he says, "Take them out." And Moses leads them to freedom, through the Red Sea, into the desert, gathering at Sinai to be formed as a people specially created by the Eternal God, the Creator of the heavens and earth, the God of their fathers and mothers: Abraham & Sarah, Jacob & Rachel, Isaac & Rebekka and Joseph. Now they are on their way to a new beginning and a promised land. They celebrate this story as their founding story, the story of a God who sets people free, who uses the likes of a Moses to lead a people into God's intention for their humanization, for the full realization of all for which God had created them.

Wonderful, wonderful story, and in that story we can see Israel's faith. Israel's tradition is the tradition out of which the Christian Church has come, so the founding story is our story too. This God of deliverance, this God of liberation—this is our God. The things that Israel believed are the things that have shaped the whole western tradition as well, the Jewish Christian tradition. There are so many things one could say, but let me mention just a few.

The first thing I would say is that God in this story comes through as a God who is on the side of human liberation. God is a God who wants human freedom. God is a God, on the other side of the coin, who is against all slavery or oppression, or

totalitarianism. God is against the tyrants and the dictators and those who will use people and abuse people for their own ends. God is against every movement that used people as a means to an end, and not an end in themselves. God is for people. God is for the humanness of people. God is for the freedom and the liberty and the full blossoming of the human person and human community. That's in the story, I believe. Israel believed that. Its long tradition, even to the present, holds that to be true. And, therefore, the God of Israel, the biblical God, the God whom we worship, is a God who is engaged in the human story, a God who is involved in human history.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that? You say, "Oh, sure, doesn't everybody?" Yes, everybody does until they think about it. When you think about it, where is the puzzle put together, that is, the fiats that come out of the power centers of the world, the governments of the world, the Bill Clintons, the Helmut Kohls, the Saddam Husseins, the machinations of people? Is that all there is? Is it just maybe economic ties? Is it just political scheming and structuring? Is God involved in it? Well, sometimes it would hardly seem so. Who could see this invisible hand? Yet, what is the alternative? Is no one transcending all these human machinations? Then are we just pawns on the sea of fate, of political decision and economic trends?

Biblical faith says God is engaged. God hears the cry of the suffering people. God says, "I remember my covenant." God moves, through human agency to be sure, but God is engaged. God is involved. There is a spiritual power or force that is at work in the political decisions and the human scheming on the historical plane. So says biblical faith. A huge affirmation of faith is needed, because you can't get your finger on it, and just the moment you say, "There," something will reverse it. But it is true that the Jews went home from exile in Babylon believing as they believed, triggered by this Exodus story, that all was not over, that the present circumstance was not a dead end, that God could create some newness, some window for them.

Some years ago, this story was a powerful story being preached in South Africa. The white South African government did not fall, apartheid was not dismantled because they did not have enough police power and enough guns. Apartheid was immoral. It was contrary to the God, the Creator, who was for human liberty and dignity, and when something is essentially immoral it will ultimately be politically disastrous. The Berlin Wall fell without a shot. The most powerful forces to move it were the candles and the prayers in Leipzig. We are people who don't claim to know how or where or when, and yet we believe that God is for justice and for righteousness, and for good, and for compassion and for mercy—that there is something operative beyond what is apparent to the human eye and the human perception, something more. There is a surplus of meaning that is on the side of human liberation. That's in this story that is effected through guys like Moses, who has a short fuse and kills a man and flees justice, a flawed man, and

yet a great leader. Really it's because that's all God has to work with—folks like you and me with our clay feet hanging out.

A man from the Nobel committee in Norway resigned on Friday when Arafat was given the Nobel Peace Prize, along with Peres and Rabin. He said that to give the peace prize to Arafat, so tainted with blood, terrorism and violence, is to prostitute that prize. At first I thought, "Good for you. You're right." Members of the right-wing conservative party in Israel said Peres and Rabin should not accept the prize because it would desecrate all the lives of those who had died in the violence. Where were they in 1978 when Menachem Begin got the prize – one of the greatest terrorists of them all? Then I got to thinking, "No, Mr. Christiansen, I don't think you should resign because they are not evaluating the moral character of those people; they are saying those people somehow in the ebb and flow of history have been at a vortex of action that has gotten some breakthrough and moved onward toward peace and justice." Arafat is no lily. Neither was Moses. It's all God has got to work with. So God uses what's there. The biblical God gets hands dirty and messed up with the ambiguity of the human situation.

And that's the fourth thing I would say: the movement towards liberation is ambiguous and it is messy. There are not white hats and black hats. There are not good guys and bad guys. There are not lily-whites and black evil. When David Hartman was in Muskegon he told this founding story, and he said, "You can tell it two ways. You can say 'Wow, what a story! Israel set free, isn't it wonderful?'" Then he told about some of the Rabbis way back in history who said, "God in heaven said, 'Why are you singing and rejoicing when the work of my hands, the Egyptians, are drowning in the sea?'" The Hebrew tradition does it better than we have done it. They have a sense of the ambiguity of the historical, human situation.

Recently I was at Normandy. It was very moving to be there and to review the countless crosses at Omaha Beach. I thought about the sacrifice of human life and of the hearts of parents that were crushed. But there were German cemeteries there too. Nothing is black and white in history. The movement forward is a messy movement. It is full of ambiguity. And every victory has the downside of tragedy. That's really the way it is, and maybe it is at that point that I read the story different than some of my colleagues and other advocates of the "U.S.A. No. 1" position. I name some people just so you know what I am talking about in the political arena: the Oliver North types, the flag waving, the identification of patriotism with righteousness and a strong America-and all that, or the television ministries of Pat Robertson, even James Kennedy, with their strong American defense.

It is a reading of the story as though the United States of America can be identified with the children of Israel, with the cause of righteousness and justice in the world, and the movement of God toward peace and justice. You see, if you

read this honestly, we at this point are the greatest power in the world and uncontested. We are not Israel looking for freedom. We are the House of Pharaoh. If we would read this Word of God and let it address us, it must address us as those who are in power, not those who are seeking freedom. There's nothing wrong with being in power. The only question is what will we do with our power? And if we would hear the word of God, if we would hear this founding story, then the Church of Jesus Christ must say to those in power who lead us that what God is concerned about in the world is not U.S. national security or U.S. GNP, or U.S. self-interest, or the oil or whatever. What God is concerned about is humanity, humanness, liberty, the dignity of the individual, the building of community, a compassionate world. We cannot so easily identify with the white hats of scripture.

Our Puritan forbearers came over here and saw this as the new Canaan. They came over here and saw this as a theocracy, the kingdom of God. And I think with all honesty they believed that. There was a time when we had to take our guns and our rifles and stand up for liberty in these states. There was a time when this nation was in that position. We could identify perhaps then with the story on that side. But if I would be true to the Word of God, I would have to say to you that the founding story of Israel confronts us with a question: Now that you have the power, what will you do in the world? And that ought to make us very nervous.

Three weeks away from an election, that would be a great question to raise to those running for office. How do you get elected by serving the self-interest of the people? What is popular? Patriotic rallies and flag waving, that's O.K. I love the nation. I am proud of the nation. As I said, I stood on Normandy Beach and I experienced vicariously, I think, the best of this nation. But never let the Church of Jesus Christ be co-opted by a political agenda as was the German Church under Hitler, as is Islam under Saddam Hussein. Whenever the Church baptizes the government's policy, the government will in time be in trouble, because what is morally indefensible is ultimately politically disastrous, because God is God, by God.