

Sermon for 12th Sunday after Pentecost

Lectionary readings: Exodus 1:8-2-10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.
Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise....

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.ⁱ

I couldn't help but think of Maya Angelou – what I read was the beginning and the end of her poem “Still I Rise” – when I came to this story about the increasingly harsh and ruthless treatment of an enslaved people. It speaks of the power of survival in the midst of oppression, in the midst of cultures in which people are regarded as primarily as “the other,” performing the hard labor on which an economy depends. Our passage from Exodus includes the rescue of the baby that Pharaoh's daughter called Moses. Yes, it was the daughter of Pharaoh's agency and power that enabled the Israelite baby to be saved from the death her father had commanded for all Hebrew babies. Years later, when the child grew up, she remembered that it was *she* who rescued him – actually, it was her maid who had pulled him from the water.

Our text begins ominously “Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” Joseph, the foreigner, who had saved Egypt from famine by his wise leadership. I’m focusing on this first of two stories in our passage, because it’s the one that reminds me of our life today, with the fears and hatred and untruths about immigrants and people of color, when, in fact, our country could not flourish and grow without them. Winton Boyd writes: “What’s interesting about the king’s assessment of the Israelites in verse 9 is simply not true — the Israelites have not grown more populous than the Egyptians. And what he says in verse 10, further compounding his false statement, is a clear strategy to create an ‘enemy within’ and to stir up fear of the foreign or immigrant other. The Pharaoh then wastes no time in putting a plan together to deal with this dangerous element in their midst. This is an ancient and modern tactic — try to wipe out future generations. There is always a tension between the death seeking empire and the life force of the oppressed. The empire tries to crush hope by humiliating work, the oppressed respond with a yearning for life beyond themselves (children).”ⁱⁱⁱ

Shiphrah and Puah were two wily and courageous working women from more than three millennia ago, who deserve to be remembered for risking their lives by disobeying the orders of the king (or pharaoh) to kill all the male Hebrew babies they helped to deliver. There is poetic justice in the fact that they are named in the text while pharaoh, with all his power and wealth, is not—he is named merely by function, but not by essence. Nor is his daughter given a name. Shiphrah and Puah were God-fearing women. They knew where their ultimate allegiance belonged. They were clever enough to play on the prejudice and fears that the ruling classes almost always seem to have about those who do their hard labor and other dirty work for them: the presumed toughness of their bodies, the imagined slowness of their minds, and the need to have many children so that some of them will survive. Moreover, as resident aliens in a ruthless regime marked by escalating fear and terror, it strikes me that Shiphrah and Puah had insight into the system in which they found themselves and were practiced enough in masking their emotions to seem believable even to the Pharaoh — and so it is, often, with members of an underclass or oppressed minority. I believe there’s a lot we can continue to learn from their example. I think they embody well Jesus’s advice elsewhere in Matthew’s gospel in commissioning his disciples: “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”¹ They were cognizant of, but, using St. Paul’s words to the Romans, not conformed to the world in which they found themselves.

The story today from Matthew’s gospel is an important one, appearing in some form in each of the other gospels.² However, it is only in Matthew’s account that Peter’s confession of Jesus’s identity is linked to the founding and building of a church. The gospels are more simply and basically about Jesus — his life, his death, his resurrection. In fact, there is only one other specific mention of the church in the gospels — also in Matthew, where again there is a reference to binding and loosing and its correlation or congruence between earth and heaven. (The developing church is, of course, a major part of the epistles, Acts of the Apostles, and Book of Revelation.)

¹ Matthew 10:16.

² Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-21; John 6:66-69.

I don't know that we live very easily with this congruence between heaven and earth, in spite of the frequency with which we pray the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Many of us tend to think that when it comes to our own actions that heaven comes somehow *after* our life on earth. Unless we're like Shiprah and Puah, who risked their lives to save others, we tend to live as if we will have time to get our act for God together after we have taken care of the seemingly more urgent affairs of our life on earth. Yet it seems here that Jesus implies that we exist in some eternal present, that the actions of the church in which we find and to which we commit ourselves are truly part of the kingdom of heaven through the authority he gives it. Moreover, he implies that our deepest understanding and knowledge of him are, above all, gifts of God.

In spite of all the opinions of the world and the people of faith, Jesus seeks a very personal answer in his question from those he loves: "But who do you say that I am?" I think he wants them to answer from their core, from what they and we would be willing to, in the words of St. Paul, present our bodies as a living sacrifice for, as Shiprah and Puah did? We do not have the advantage that Jesus' close disciples had of being with him in his earthly ministry, but we do have the advantage of perspective, we have the gift of God's living Word through the scripture, we have Jesus's promise to send an Advocate to be with us forever, and we have the testimony of the church. And we have the ability to listen closely to what God seeks to communicate with us about God's identity and about God's son Jesus Christ. In this time that is so significant for the life and future of our country, it's a key question. Who is Jesus to you? Who is Jesus to you today? How does that affect your life, your values, and your actions? I think that our response to this question of identity should be more living than fixed.

"But who do you say that I am?" How do you respond to this most important of questions – for yourself, for your classmates and friends if you are a young person, for children and grandchildren, if you are older. Do they know what you say? Are you comfortable with your answer? Does it come from your core? Is your confession of who Jesus is manifest in your life, your family, your work, and all your relationships? I hope and pray that this question of who we are because of who Jesus is for us may guide every aspect of our lives – on earth and in heaven.

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ⁱ https://poets.org/poem/still-rise?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI4bmr4ZSs6wIVjrbICh2apApcEAAAYASAAEgLgefD_BwE

ⁱⁱ <https://www.orucc.org/shiphrah-and-puah-do-it-afraid-winton-boyd-7-22-18/>