

Life and Death in the Darkness
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
June 28, 2015
Rev. John Cleghorn

Moses and Pharaoh had been going at it for a while,
neither yielding, neither giving an inch.

Now, the conflict had reached the ninth round ...
and the two combatants were tired
of seeing each other's faces.

Like Rocky Balboa and Apollo Creed, they circled each other,
slowly, wearily, warily, looking for the chance
to land a knockout punch.

In Pharaohs' corner, false gods and idols
and all the mighty armies of Egypt.

In Moses' corner, only the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ...
and that would be enough.

We may know the story of the plagues
from childhood Sunday school or vacation Bible school.

Or from Cecil B. DeMille's classic movie,
The Ten Commandments, featuring
Charleton Heston as Moses and Yul Brenner as Pharaoh.

We remember the story of the plagues because it captures
our imagination with vivid images ...
of water turning to blood, flies and gnats, boils and frogs.

But underneath its blockbuster qualities,
it makes a vitally important claim.

It is the story of God as liberator.

You remember, don't you?

The children of Israel, God's chosen people,
had suffered in bondage for generations
under a cold-blooded man we only know as Pharaoh,
the presumptively divine leader of the wealthy
and powerful nation of Egypt.

God's man in the struggle was Moses, as agent and negotiator.

In the words of the old spiritual,

When Israel was in Egypt's land,
oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Go down, (go down) Moses, (Moses)
way down in Egypt's land;
tell old Pharaoh
to let my people go!

As the spiritual reminds us Pharaoh enslaved the Israelites
to hard labor under horrific, even deadly conditions,
all as a way to keep the Hebrews in their place.

By not letting the Israelites worship and serve their God,
Pharaoh was on the wrong side of God ...
The very-much wrong side.

Yes, this story comes from a long, long time ago.

But then, as now, the identity of God's people was rooted
in their worship and service of Yahweh.

The sweep of the books of Genesis and Exodus
is God's selection, adoption, liberation and delivery
of God's people ... all so that Israel would bear witness
to a way of living, a covenant community that said
to the world

“We belong to God and we belong to each other.”

The same frame of life applies here at Caldwell.

Or at least that is the life we are trying to live into.

Our identity as a congregation is shaped by our diversity
and our mission.

The gift of our diversity brings with it many different
types of people.

The gift of life as God's people in this particular place
plays out here in many different narratives.

Friday was a good example.

Virtually in the same hour, our hearts mourned with those in Charleston ...
and celebrated with those whom the Supreme Court recognized
as equal when it comes to marriage.

Our path presents change and new horizons on a regular basis.

Inevitably, sometimes we may disagree
about how to convey God's love and justice to a hurting world.

But, as with the children of Israel, we belong to the Lord ...
and we belong to each other
in worship and service ... maybe not always perfectly ...
sometimes with blind spots ...
but always at least trying to bear witness to God's shalom
in the world.

That reminder of identity, that clarity of purpose for us,
as with the children of Israel, is something important
we can take away from this story.

* * *

Then there is one of this story's most troubling elements.
And it must be dealt with.

The text says Pharaoh's heart was hardened against the Israelites.

Plague after plague ... round after round ...

negotiation after negotiation, Pharaoh's hardened heart
stands in the way of the release of the Israelites.

I don't know about you, but this one hits close to home for me.

As a person who doesn't exactly wear his emotions on his sleeve,

I've wondered:

Could my heart be hardened?

Could anyone's hearts be turned to stone,
rendered incapable of empathy and compassion?

Maybe, deep down, at some time,
you've wondered the same.

This idea of a hardened heart also raises questions
about the way God works.

Is God some kind of puppet-master, playing games
even as life and death hang in the balance?

What might that say about how we can trust the God
of history, of today and of tomorrow?

These questions demand answers,
and a careful reading of the story.

In some plagues, the text says God hardens Pharaoh's heart.

Others seem to say Pharaoh's heart was hardened already.

This mish-mash of phrasing and description blurs the picture.

And as scholars and theologians have concluded
it is best to back away from this idea
of a hardened heart as an indication of how God works in the world
and in us ... and take it more as a way the writer
advances the conflict between Moses and Pharaoh.

That frees us to refocus on the contest between
Pharaoh and God's agent, Moses.

Remember, now, they've gone eight rounds already.

They can't go on much longer. Something has got to give.

So, God elevates the stakes. God ups the ante.

No more gnats and flies to bug Pharaoh
into releasing the captives.

No more boils or hail or locusts. Now the conflict hits its climax.

Through Moses, God commands the darkness to envelope the Egyptians
leaving the Israelites in the light.

This was no ordinary darkness.

Scripture says it was a darkness so thick it could be felt.
It seemed to literally paralyze the Egyptians.

They lost sight of each other. They groped around in the dark.

At the darkest of the dark, they couldn't even move
from where they were standing.

For three days, scripture tells us, they existed in isolation,
cut off from each other and the rest of the world.

Isolated. Immobilized.

We have seen this kind of darkness, haven't we?

We have felt its effects.

The kind of darkness that shrouds some people so completely
in one ideology, one way of thinking, one set of convictions
... that they lose sight of other people and other truths.

Like the Egyptians, they become isolated, immobilized,
unable to see other people,
unable to see beyond themselves.

We know this kind of darkness, don't we? We have felt it.

We saw it and felt it 10 days ago at the Mother Emanuel AME
Church in Charleston.

It poisoned the mind, heart and soul
of a white supremacist, who tried to divide America
between black and white in a depraved act of tragic violence.

As with the four little girls who died in the 16th Street Baptist Church
bombing in Birmingham in 1963, the nine who died in Charleston
were practicing their identity as people created
to worship and serve God.

History will view them as martyrs. God will view them as saints.

* * *

So, what about us? What about today and tomorrow?

The old spiritual Go Down Moses meant something to enslaved people
in the South because it was about more than this Exodus story.

It was about their lives ... and it is about ours today. It goes on to say.

*So the God seyeth, Go down, Moses way down in Egypt land
Tell all Pharaohs to let My people go*

*Yes The Lord said, Go down, Moses way down in Egypt land
Tell all Pharaohs to let My people go*

Yes, they had their pharaohs to face.

And there are still pharaohs and there are still people who are held down.

The events in Charleston may leave us anywhere along
the spectrum of pain and anger, disgust or despair

about race in America.

Perhaps a first step is to name where we are on that spectrum.

To practice some healthy self-awareness
and identify what is going on within us.

But there is so much more to do.

We also need to name and identify where we are as a nation.

We have all felt it over the last few years.

Some may connect it to the election of the first African-American
United States president.

Some point to the enormous wealth gap between
whites and blacks in America.

Some see its acceleration in the seemingly unending police shootings.

Things are not good in the state of the union in regard to race relations.

Things are not good for the state of black America.

I wonder if we take the wrong approach if we try to think about the trajectory
of race relations in America as some kind of straight line
that we should trace from slavery up through the Civil Rights era
and so on.

Marking it as a long, upward climb risks grounding us
in a kind of complacency as a nation,
when those who have the least among us,
those with little to no opportunity ...
those who send their children to sub-standard schools ...
those who shop at the corner store and bank at the pawn shop
because super-markets and banks won't come to their neighborhood,
those who are on the wrong end of power ...

they are feeling anything but complacent.

So rather than that straight line, the reality is that the advancement
of race relations in America is more like a loop.

Forward moving over the long run, yes, but sometimes moving forward
and then looping backward in the wrong direction ...
before there is real progress that moves us forward ...
then come those moments when things finally do get better,
when black lives matter and are valued by the nation
that has too often devalued them.

(Come to think of it, maybe that image applies to our search and journey
near at Caldwell ... where things are not
always perfect for everyone ...
but by the hand of God moving in the right direction.)

So, now – in our national dialogue on race - we are talking about
finally putting the Confederate flag in a museum, where it belongs.

That is a decent start.

But there is so much more to do.

Three weeks ago when I was last in this pulpit, I mentioned
a Race and Equity Workshop that several of us have attended.

More of us need to take that workshop as part of our initiative called
Discipleship of Race and Class.

Three weeks ago, I quoted one of its leaders, who said that racism
is like Bigfoot for some people.

Some treat it as a rumor, a myth ... but it leaves big footprints
out in the open.

Well, friends, now we have seen Bigfoot with our own eyes,
if somehow we had not before.

There is more to do.

We can attend the weekly, city-wide “can we talk” conversations hosted
by Mecklenburg Ministries and our friend Danny Trapp.

These conversations will help lead us to a crossroads moment for our city
later this summer – the trial of the Charlotte police officer
in the shooting of Randall Kerrick.

We can help out at the Freedom School on our campus this summer,

to touch the lives of the next generation of African-Americans.

We can redouble our efforts and pray more fervently that God would help us
find the right partners and use our campus
to build bridges across race and class.

We can tell our school board we won't stand for the re-segregation
of our schools ...
and we can look for other ways to root out systemic injustice.

We can surely deepen our own relationships across race and class
as a family of faith, as the body of Christ ... none claiming
to be an expert or the authority ...
but all humbly listening to each other.

Whatever we do, this isn't a time for half-hearted effort
and lukewarm conviction.

We are way past that point, aren't we?

Think back for a moment on our story in Exodus.

Pharaoh finally does tell Moses the Israelites
can go worship Yahweh ... but he won't permit them to take
their livestock for sacrifice, what they knew as true worship of God.

Maybe Pharaoh wanted to keep Israel from worshipping as it wanted to.

Maybe he really intended to seize the valuable livestock – we don't know.

But Moses isn't having any of it.

"No deal," Moses says. "Not a hoof shall be left behind."

Moses knew that God didn't want half-hearted worship ...
and he surely wasn't going to let Pharaoh dictate the terms
of their worship.

Perhaps we need to adopt that same attitude ...
that we will not serve the Lord with half-hearted,
lukewarm efforts to do justice.

* * *

We are, after all, called to live in the light.

Our story in Exodus is clear about the palpable darkness that froze
Pharaoh and his people for three days long.

But it also says that God's people, the children of Israel,
"had light where they dwelt."

God held them in light and gave them life.
We are called to be people of the light.

We shouldn't overlook that Exodus says this contest
between darkness and light lasted for three days.

We know something about what can happen in three days.

For three days, the followers of Christ felt the darkness
that seemed to descend on the earth after Christ's crucifixion.

There was chaos. There was hopelessness.

Then Easter came, and the light of the world emerged from the closed tomb.

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness shall not overcome it.

Thanks be to God. Amen.