

Sunday 3rd September 2023

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us, we worship together in God.

Story You can do it Sam by Amy Hest [Listen here](#)

Sometimes we find ourselves having to do something for the first time and it can be scary. Fear can lead us to imagine the worst and we feel very alone. We are never alone, for God is always with us and we can draw strength from God's presence, strength to enable us to find courage and grow.

Readings Exodus 3:1-15
 Matthew 16:21-28

Reflection

At the end of Genesis we found the people Israel settling as refugees in the land of Egypt. When we pick up the story in Exodus we find they are slaves. Refugees were often vulnerable to slavery and Israel was no exception. They have also grown in number and the ruling leader Pharaoh, is fearful a rebellion so he takes matters in hand and orders genocide, the killing of all sons born to Hebrew women. The midwives do not cooperate so the rule is changes and all sons are to cast into the river.

This is what happened to Moses but his mother was wise and put him a basket before putting him in the river where he was found by none other than Pharaoh's daughter who takes him as her own. The baby's sister is watching and quickly offers to find a nursemaid for the baby, and fetches her mother. If the story ended there we might imagine a happy ever after, but it doesn't.

Moses grows up with an identity crisis, on the one hand he is the son of an Egyptian family, the ruling family, but on the other is Israeli by birth. Which side would he take when he reached manhood? The decision was made when he was a Hebrew slave being beaten by an Egyptian. He instinctively perhaps took the side of the Hebrew and killed the Egyptian, the die was cast and he might have imagined he would be accepted by the Hebrews, even applauded. However, when he saw two Hebrews arguing he told them off and they both turned on him and he found himself belonging nowhere.

In disgrace he runs away and comes to an oasis in the desert, where there is a well. Some Bedouin women are trying to draw water but a group of shepherds are blocking them, Moses steps in and gets access for the women. They return to their camp and their father is so grateful that he welcomes Moses into his family and Moses marries one of the daughters. Finally he feels he belongs and again we might imagine a happy ever after, but no.

Out looking after the sheep on the edge of the desert he comes across a bush which is aflame but not burning. He goes closer to investigate and finds himself in conversation with the God of his ancestors. In the flames he is shown his people back in Egypt, still slaves, still oppressed and suffering more than ever. God asks him to return and help lead them out of captivity. Moses is very reluctant and makes many excuses including asking for the name of the one who sends him, saying Pharaoh will expect to know this. The reply is 'ehyeh asher ehyeh'. Academics have studied this for centuries and suggested various translations but the most well know is 'I am who I am'. Theologian and storyteller Trevor Dennis suggests a different translation, 'I will be there as I will be there' which alludes to Gods eternal presence and is important in understanding the place of this story within Hebrew tradition.

This is a story for which there is no factual evidence but Moses leading the people out of slavery and into the promised land is at the heart of Judaism and it is recited at every Passover celebration. Part of its importance is the notion that God was with the people before they left Egypt. It was a tradition and Story with which Jesus grew up as he attended Passovers with his family. It would have been told at the last supper which was a Passover celebration but for many of the disciples it would not have been familiar, they were not all Jews.

So we come to our reading from Matthew and a field trip to Caesarea Phillipi for the disciples. The town was a regional centre of the Roman Empire and had been an important holy site in the past. For Jesus to take the disciples here was a bit like a Jewish leader taking his followers to Auschwitz, or a Japanese leader taking a

group to Hiroshima. Amidst the religious relics left to worship Baal and Pan, Jesus asks that question – ‘who do people say I am?’ and then he asks Peter ‘who do you say I am?’ Peter’s answer is applauded and he must have felt wonderful, but then it all goes pear-shaped as Jesus begins to explain what must happen. Peter like many others sees Jesus as the Messiah and the Messiah is a figure anointed by God to lead an uprising against the Romans and eject them from the county. It will be violent and bloody like all uprisings. The Messiah cannot be conquered and defeated, he cannot die at the hands of the authorities but that is what Jesus had just said will happen to him.

Jesus is a peaceful rebel, a non-violent rebel and accuses Peter of seeing things through the lens of limited human understanding. Peter was confused and so would we be. We use the right words for Jesus, and talk of following him but do we really understand what he was telling us? The message of Jesus has always been that God loves everyone but God is with the oppressed and downtrodden, God is in the line of people walking into Auschwitz, he is in the midst of the Hiroshima, God experiences the worst of humanity and hopes for the best. That is what ‘I will be there as I will be there’ means.

As Jesus’ followers we are called to walk the path with the oppressed and downtrodden, to be there for them in their need and to offer them the hope that comes from God’s presence in the midst of creation. Around the world we witness the worst that humanity can do, we have witnessed refugees being enslaved in our own country, and we have witnessed our fellow neighbours reacting in a similar way to Pharaoh out of fear. Jesus was not afraid of death for he knew it was a gateway to another life. He did not want to die but he told his followers it was a possibility for any who followed him but he reminded them there was a choice. Jesus chose his path. He reached out to those who were outcast from society for whatever reason and he sat and ate with them.

At the last supper, he asked his followers not to keep the Passover but to remember his story and his message and to keep meeting together and eating together as a sign of our oneness and the hope that lies at the heart of his message. God is in our midst and we are never alone. Do not be afraid.

Listen to Gregory Porter – [Take me to the Alley](#)