

Exodus 1:8 – 1:10

Romans 12: 1-8

Teilhard de Chardin – Trust in The Slow Work of God

Wow, what an epic, huh? I hesitated to include this whole story, given our recent commitment to sparing trees and paring down the size of our bulletin, but then I reasoned, okay, the whole thing is in the lectionary reading for today – I wondered, why is it all in there? I’m no fan of Readers Digest, but I suspect a condensed version might be featured in more than one church this morning.

So it’s an epic, but what a rich epic, eh? It raises all kinds of questions for me: How did the Israelite people allow themselves to become enslaved? They were more numerous already – did they not notice that they could have resisted? Why didn’t they?

This is a primo text for thinking about immigration issues, as well... Why were the Egyptians so scared of the Israelites (these homebodies who were more interested in having kids than resisting). How do we see ourselves in this country – heck, in this state – in the actions of the Egyptians? How are we acting out of fear?

And, of course, this is a text about how the women are smarter than the men, really in charge, and the agents of the Holy in all things. But that’s another sermon, too.

What caught my eye in reading this text, was how incredibly convoluted the story was. You almost need a list of the players, and a plot line. The story starts out simply enough: A new king rose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And the ending comes round to the remedy: When the child grew up, she (Moses’s biological mother) – brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and she took him as her son. So once again, the Israelites have one of their own close to the king, in proximity to the seat of power.

So, why all the turns and twists in this story? God could have just had Moses born into Pharaoh’s household – heck it had all worked out pretty well with Joseph, right? This story has a convoluted plot – and an amazing amount of detail: we know the names of the cities the Israelites built, the names of the Hebrew midwives, we all have to look up bitumen to find out what that is and there’s even some information about the ecosystem of the Nile. I imagine the first time I heard this story – I suspect I was anxious to find out if this baby was going to be all right – there’s suspense in this story, too – and I also suspect I might have been tempted to skip over the details.

And that would have been a mistake. You’ve heard the phrase the devil is in the details? (Flaubert) Well, I prefer Mies Van der Rohe’s version: God is in the details. God loves the details. In this story, (and in many others), let’s face it – we – or more specifically, in this story, the people - are the details – and they are the way the God gets things done.

God’s way includes we frail humans as God’s partners – God doesn’t choose to have Moses born into Pharaoh’s household – Rather, God relies upon Shiphrah, and Puah, and Moses’s mother, and Moses’s sister and Pharaoh’s sister to make things happen. God relies upon us, God’s hands and feet in the world – to bring about the way of the Holy.

This is not efficient.
This is not predictable.
This will not win any awards for cost-effectiveness.

God’s way is the slow way, the detailed way, the winding route, the labor-intensive, community-involved, we’re gonna take our own sweet time way. God’s way involves a lot of real estate, some serious time and a Cecil B. DeMille-sized cast.

St. Paul knows this – in his letter to the church in Rome, he writes to those early followers of Christ, Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. One of the many, many things that I value about this community, this church, is the way we wrestle with this challenge. We all know that this work of not being conformed, but of being transformed, is slow work, hard, work, but work that brings great joy.

God’s transformation is not the stuff of special effects, disappearing out of Egypt and apparating into the Promised Land, but rather the stuff of tadpoles becoming frogs, of caterpillars becoming moths, of bulbs becoming flowers. It is the transformation that causes strangers to gather together in a room at the Opera to worship, and then to find themselves, years later, gathered in another room to worship, but now as a wider, more spacious community, one more committed than ever to the slow work of God.

So, let’s review: which of these things is more akin to the way God works:

Dinner at McDonald’s? or Dinner at Grandma’s?
A tweet? or a Conversation?
Microwave? or Crockpot?
6-day Creation or Evolution?

Hmmm..... we’re not going there today, but it’s something to think about, isn’t it?

A few weeks ago, Alan asked how many of us knew what our Meyers Briggs type was, and when a number of us raised our hands, he asked us how many of us were J’s – I raised mine and I saw a few others. Basically, J’s are big planners – we like to know what’s happening, we want to know when it’s happening and we like to know the steps that are going to get us there. We’re the ones who make menus two weeks out, who call ahead for reservations the day before and who know which route we’re going to take on our morning run. Uncertainly and serendipity make us anxious. Alan said we Js might have a hard time with the next few months, so this sermon is a call to J’s (including me) to see the divine and the holy in the uncertain, to understand that patience is part of the work of transformation to which God calls us, to remember that discernment is a slow process that cannot be hurried. To remember that to rest in the uncertainty is, in fact, resisting conformity, as Paul tells us to do. My teacher Henri Nouwen put it this way:

To wait open-endedly is an enormously radical attitude toward life. So is to trust that something will happen to us that is far beyond our imaginings. So, too, is giving up control over our future and letting God define our life, trusting that God moulds us according to God’s love and not according to our fear. The spiritual life is a life in which we wait, actively present to the moment, trusting that new things will happen to us, new

things that are far beyond our own imagination, fantasy, or prediction. That, indeed, is a very radical stance toward life in a world preoccupied with control.

So, Bridgeport friends, spiritual planning? There’s no app for that. What there is, what there must be for us as a community, what God invites us to is trust – trust in the slow work of God. I don’t believe it will be epically slow – not 40 years in the desert slow. But it won’t be next week, either, before we know what God has in store for us. To re-phrase the other reading, Only God can say what this new spirit forming within us will be. Let’s give God the benefit of believing that God’s hand is leading us, and accept the anxiety of feeling ourselves in suspense and incomplete.

And let us give thanks for the grace of the journey, wherever it may take us.

AMEN.