

PENTECOST 13

Proper 16 - Year A

This Bible study was written by Lea Colvill of the School of Theology at Sewanee: The University of the South in 2014.

Exodus 1:8-2:10

⁸ Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. ⁹ He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰ Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." ¹¹ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. ¹² But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. ¹³ The Egyptians subjected the Israelites to hard servitude ¹⁴ and made their lives bitter with hard servitude in mortar and bricks and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

¹⁵ The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶ "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live." ¹⁷ But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ¹⁸ So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this and allowed the boys to live?" ¹⁹ The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." ²⁰ So God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very strong. ²¹ And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. ²² Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live."

2 Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. ² The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. ³ When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child

in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. ⁴ His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

⁵ The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. ⁶ When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. ⁷ Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" ⁸ Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. ⁹ Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. ¹⁰ When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

Commentary from Lea Colvill

We enter this reading on the on the happy note of how God saved Israel from hunger through Joseph and enter the story of why Egypt did not remain the home of the fruitful and strong nation. If the nation could have been lost in Joseph's story by betrayal of brothers, then this story is about the betrayal by others, neighbors really. The death of every boy would also leave mothers and sisters without clans to protect and appeal for them. The women have their own means of resistance to oppression. We see honor given to the nery midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. Their names are recorded while the Egyptian princess remains unnamed. This time, God would use another son, Moses, lost in Egypt, drawn up from the water (instead of a well) to save his people.

Discussion Questions

How do we talk about God's redemption of the bitterness in our lives?

The communion of saints includes the named and unnamed. Are you more comfortable with those whose lives have been recorded or those known only to a few?

Psalm 124

- ¹ If the Lord had not been on our side, *
let Israel now say;
- ² If the Lord had not been on our side, *
when enemies rose up against us;
- ³ Then would they have swallowed us up alive *
in their fierce anger toward us;
- ⁴ Then would the waters have overwhelmed us *
and the torrent gone over us;
- ⁵ Then would the raging waters *
have gone right over us.
- ⁶ Blessed be the Lord! *
he has not given us over to be a prey for their
teeth.
- ⁷ We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the
fowler; *
the snare is broken, and we have escaped.
- ⁸ Our help is in the Name of the Lord, *
the maker of heaven and earth.

Commentary from Lea Colvill

This psalm recounts God's extraordinary acts to aid the escape of the whole people of Israel. It is meant to comfort the individual in times of trouble and may have been recited by pilgrims headed to Jerusalem. It is a fitting complement to the Exodus story and it is easy to imagine the Israelites telling similar stories as they walked in the wilderness. There are repeating phrases in this psalm, such as "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side," for poetic emphasis and to aid in recollection. This repetition is common in Hebrew poetry. The phrases that begin with "then" are meant to build on each other. The climactic declaration "Our help is in the name of the Lord" is the thanksgiving for Israel's deliverance and ours.

Discussion Questions

Escape is a common biblical theme but not one we speak of often in contemporary culture. Reflect on escape. Did you feel God's presence more acutely after an escape?

What does the name "Maker of heaven and earth" mean to you? Does that image make God seem nearer or farther from your circumstances? Are you comforted by your understanding of God's intimacy or holiness?

Romans 12:1-8

¹I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. ²Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

³For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the encourager, in encouragement; the giver, in sincerity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Commentary from Lea Colvill

This is one of the most beloved passages in the New Testament for its egalitarianism and accessible imagery. It begins Paul's instruction on Christian community that contrasts our bodies, which stand for our entire selves, with the community as a body. He calls for faithful, sober, and wholesome living (often translated as "perfect") in contrast to the passions in Romans 1:18-32. Paul supports an austere, communal life with times of ecstatic prayer but was not a believer in marriage and family life.

Discussion Questions

What social structures and practices support Paul's exhortation for faithful, sober and wholesome living today?

How do we reconcile his image of the church as one body with a variety of household types?

Matthew 16:13-20

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴ And they said, “Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Commentary from Lea Colvill

This passage is a climax for Jesus’ teaching, healing, and feeding in Matthew. The Pharisees and Sadducees want yet another sign at the beginning of the chapter, but ordinary Peter is confident that Jesus is the Messiah.

Peter receives honor in each of the gospels, but in Matthew, there is a direct reference to the Church. There is no Church without the confession of Jesus as the promised Messiah, and even at this moment, the Church is in conflict with “gates of Hades” (NRSV). Further, the Church is aggressive against the gates of hell, entrusted with authority and ultimately victorious. It is done. Death is permanently defeated but continues to terrorize and deceive unaware souls. Fear of death is not the same as death.

Discussion Questions

Is confession of Jesus as Messiah an aggressive statement in your community or more customary?

In your spiritual imagination, what do you understand to be Peter’s keys?