

Sermon 16A 2014

This week is the ninth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. On August 29, 2005 the category 3 storm made landfall near New Orleans. The devastating storm killed a least 1,833 people and was estimated to have caused property damage of 108 Billion Dollars. I personally saw the devastation and heard the stories of suffering when I was a member of reconstruction mission team from St Lawrence Episcopal Church, Libertyville.

History is filled with stories of suffering, violence, and loss. Natural and man-made disasters have claimed millions of lives and destroyed property, artifacts, and the land itself. Stories of tragedy for individuals or groups, indeed, whole peoples have met with utter destruction, death or lived with enormous physical or mental pain and loss.

The news of the day ranges from shootings, rioting, wars and horrendous atrocities. Some are far, far away but others are in our land, at our borders, in our cities and even just down the street sometimes. People seem to have failed to learn the lessons from past events and history.

Certain elements are usually complicit in such sadness: race, religion, politics, money, and power to name a few. The Bible itself describes terrible events containing these same forces.

Our faith teaches and our hope begs that God does not stand by unmoved. Our God is not a “watchman god” who sets things in motion and walks away. God is engaged in history and works through people, even simple folks. Our actions guided by the Holy Spirit make us instruments of God in the face of violence, tragedy and repression.

This is what we learn in the passage from the Book of Exodus read to us this morning. It is a very familiar story of how God lays the groundwork for the salvation of the Hebrew people. It is an insight into the way in which God thwarts even adversity or evil to bring about deliverance and goodness.

In the Exodus Narrative God puts into motion his purposes behind the scenes taking the first steps in response to the suffering of the people whose ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, had been promised abundant blessings and a land of their own. Even though everything seemed hopeless, the situation will be transformed through the acts of God and in spite of the opposition of Pharaoh. However, as so often happens with God, the transformation will come in unexpected, surprising ways.

The Hebrews, once welcomed as resident aliens, have continued to multiply to the point where they can be rightly called a “nation”. Their vitality is seen as a problem rather than a gift.

To put this into our day, we hear echoed the thinking of Pharaoh in the discussions about immigration of Latinos and Hispanics, our “resident aliens.” I remember some years ago while doing a sabbatical study in Pasadena, California a saying that was going around. People were saying, “Thank God for Mexicans” because they were the cheap laborers making the gardens beautiful, cleaning up after people in restaurants, homes, and city services. They were the people sweating in the fields picking crops to put on our tables and other places paying low, low wages. But just like in the days of Moses, now they are growing by vast numbers and intimidating the locals.

Every wave of immigrants were categorized similarly. The Irish, the Poles, the Italians, the Germans, who built the railroads, worked in the factories and sweatshops seeking a life of safety and security. And above all Peace and Happiness.

God works through everything and everyone who make themselves available. God’s compassion, God’s faithfulness, God’s tender care are linked and extended by our own faithfulness, compassion and caring. Long ago it was a pagan princess, clever midwives, a loving mother and a brave sister who protected a baby that would grow up to be the savior of his people.

The waters of the Nile, floodwater imagery which connects powerfully with actual tsunamis and hurricanes or floods. But these are metaphorical waters of disaster and suffering that wash over God's children in many different forms.

Can our sermons this summer avoid what is happening in our cities, including the riots in St Louis over another young black person shot dead and the questions that trouble those left behind, the sense of outrage and long-endured injustice? Can we ignore children being screamed at on our borders, when they are escaping the flood of hunger and deprivation that makes their parents so desperate that they send them away to another land that will not receive them? Are we able to preach good news in a world where refugees from war are starving and people are being executed for their religion, their sexual orientation, for reporting the horrors of armed conflict, or just trying to live in the hope for a more just world?

We claim to be a people of faith, a people of promise and hope. We know that God loves and watches over everyone of us. But do we believe God seeks a place in the hearts of everyone else too?

Such times require faith, the kind of faith we find in Psalm 124. (look back into your bulletin with me now.) One commentator (Brueggemann) writes, “ The power sustaining heaven and earth is mobilized on behalf of us in our particular crisis.”

We may live in danger every day, and we are acutely aware from the evening news how fragile our lives are. It was that way for Israel, too, but they have survived by faith.

That faith includes this: the capacity to read, listen, see and then discern how to live life under threat but always in solidarity with God. Surely, your voice joins the psalmist speaking of trust, hope and confidence about living a special life with God. A life beyond threat, utterly liberated a life of blessed assurance. May be it so. Amen.