Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 17 (A) – Sunday 30 August 2020 – Webex

Exodus 3:1-15

First, before I wander down the sermon path, I’d like to note that there are thousands of people, firefighters and residents, in California right now who, I suspect, desperately wish *most* bushes that burned “were not consumed.”

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And I’d like to take just a moment to raise them up – not that they are the only people facing crisis and catastrophe in this moment – Lord have mercy, not by a long shot – but they *are* the ones whose trauma and tragedy fit most closely with today’s text.

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Well then, Moses.

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Last we heard, he was born, in Egypt. This week we find him tending sheep in some place called Midian. And in-between there has been plenty of drama.

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Moses, at this point, is something of a lost soul.

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When he says “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?” it is more than just the sort of protest common to God’s prophets – it really is an existential question.

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Who is he, indeed? He’s a man who has never completely belonged anywhere.

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Dewey Beegle – I can’t help it, that’s actually the man’s name – notes that the term “Hebrew” was derived from “Habiru,” or “Hapiru,” a word which originally defined a class of people who made their living by hiring themselves out for various services.

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Over the course of the many generations Hebrews had lived in Egypt, however, they had come to be identified as a specific ethnic group; and because of their growing numbers, they apparently had become a threat and were enslaved by a Pharaoh. We don’t know which one, but probably Seti I.

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Raised by his enslaved Hebrew mother, Moses was adopted by one of Pharaoh's daughters, given an Egyptian name, and raised with the nobility, where we may infer – based on his later accomplishments – that he had leadership instruction in religious, civil, and military matters.

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When we was as a young man – most likely around 25 – he became aware of the difficult conditions that were the Hebrews’ reality.

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At one point he witnessed an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave and decided to intervene; but in the process he ended up killing the Egyptian *and* being rejected by his own people.

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He fled Egypt and the mess he had created there in his attempt to identify with the Hebrews, only to find himself identified as an *Egyptian* by the people of Midian.

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And now, the adopted son of royalty, educated, and accustomed to privilege, he is shepherding flocks – a less than prestigious job – for his Midianite father-in-law.

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But his undistinguished pastoral life is about to come to an end itself, and he is going to have to change his understanding of who he is yet again.

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He will need to assume the role of prophet, teacher, and leader.

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He will need to accept the responsibility for founding the religious community eventually known as the Israelites.

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He will need to concede to being the spokesman for not just any deity – and he knew many, including Pharaoh himself – but the god who self-identified as Yahweh, “He Who Brings Into Being;” a name which caused Moses to understand that the God of the Hebrews was not the sort of local god worshipped by other peoples, but the one who ruled *over* all the other gods, the sovereign Lord over nature and the nations of the world.

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And, his protestations notwithstanding, he will need to go back to Egypt.

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At this point in the story, I am going to make what I suppose is a radical and abrupt shift.

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I want to briefly – I promise – consider an “in the meantime” topic.

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And that is – what about Pharaoh’s daughter?

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What about Moses’ adoptive mother, who saved him from the fate her own father had decreed for other Hebrew male children – that they all be killed – who brought him into her own household, who provided for him, who offered him access, resources, and opportunities he could never have dreamed of otherwise?

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She is revered in Jewish tradition as a Woman of Valor, and given the name Batya, literally, Daughter of God.

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As is not surprising, however, *scripture* tells us nothing more than that she “drew him from the water;” and *history* tells us nothing at all.

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We can *infer* some things from what we know about ancient Egyptian women as a whole – their rights and privileges – which were remarkably similar to men’s – their culture’s marriage practices, family relationships, social structure, religious beliefs, ruling class, and so forth.

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But about her specifically, we are left to wonder.

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How strong was the mutual affection she and Moses had?

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How much time did they spend in each other’s company, and what did they do together as mother and son?

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What were her emotions toward him?

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How did she feel when his connection with his Hebrew “roots” grew stronger?

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What was her reaction when he killed a man?

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How did she deal with his sudden disappearance? Was she hurt? Sad? Angry? Confused? Relieved?

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Did she know he was in self-imposed exile? Did she fear he had been killed himself? Did she help him to escape? Did she try to bring him to justice? Did she know how to find him, as his brother and sister apparently did?

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Was she still alive when he returned to Egypt? If so, did he contact her? And what was her response to his newfound mission? To the disaster it brought to her country, the people in it, the rest of her family?

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Speculate all we like, we will never know.

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But there *is* something I believe we *can* safely assume.

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Midrashic stories of predestination or divine ordination notwithstanding, I think we can be confident that she did not grow up thinking “someday I will play a crucial role in God’s story of salvation.”

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That she did not spend her formative years planning and preparing to nurture a child who would grow to be a man revered by all Abrahamic faiths, and held to be the greatest of all mortal prophets by the Judeo-Christian tradition.

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That she not go down to the river that day intending to change the course of history.

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That she did not understand the child she drew from the water because she felt pity would become the spokesperson for a god far more powerful than the gods she worshipped, who would oversee the formation of a transformative religious community, who would become the leader of a great nation.

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In other words, I think we can safely assume that she did what she did not because of any particular prescience, but because she simply thought it was a good and right thing to do at the time.

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I don’t think *we* ever know what direction and course the results of *our* actions will take, either.

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Whose lives do our actions touch, what sort of impact does our interaction – whether fleeting or extended – have, what is the result of that impact?

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What are the long-term consequences of our reactions, responses, decisions?

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We can’t know.

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We would do well, I think, to remember that our actions *do* touch lives, impact others, and have long-term consequences.

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And *because* they do, I think we would do well to try our best to ensure our reactions are temperate, our responses are thoughtful, and our decisions are made acknowledging that it is our choice whether we toss the baby in the basket into the river, as is the law of the land; ignore him, as would be seemly for a member of the privileged elite; or make him part of our lives through our compassion.

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Often in today’s world, we are confronted with a situation that is beyond our capacity to rectify.

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Someone or something is crying out for our help, but we cannot solve the problem by ourselves; in fact, there seems to be *nothing* we can do that does not carry profound risk.

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To all appearances, by all standard criteria, a meaningful, safe solution is simply out of our reach.

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So we resign ourselves to inactivity, reasoning that the little we might be able to do won't change matters anyway.

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Pharaoh's daughter could not have saved every male Hebrew child, prevented the grief of every bereft Hebrew parent, liberated an entire enslaved people – even if she had wanted to.

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That would be impossible.

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But she heard one child's cry and reached out to solve the problem she *could,* *despite* the risk.

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And because she did, because – whatever her intentions or expectations – her hand did not hang idle while a fellow human being needed her help, achieving the impossible is exactly what she did.