

PERMANENT REVOLUTION

Texts on Sunday, February 27, 2011

Deuteronomy 26:5-11; Matthew 13:31-35

Some weeks back, we heard from Genesis how that unending threat to the survival of the tribe of Abraham and Sarah seemed resolved in Jacob's twelve strong sons, ready to make a nation. But soon the tale takes a bad turn. The good land of God's promise fails to produce. Facing famine, the family must leave their holy dwellings and to Pharaoh's Egypt go to buy the staff of life. According to the legends, that is how Israel—for now Jacob is called by his God-given name—came to dwell in Egypt.

The cliffhanger—*Will this family make it?*—only really ends in Egypt, in the land of the hated enemy, their axis of evil! Only there were they finally fruitful. You heard the instructions for the yearly Passover blessing, set down in Deuteronomy: *Say, 'My ancestor went down into Egypt few in number and lived there as an alien and there became a great nation, mighty and populous.'* There, says Exodus—"the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread them."

Thus, after a long affliction, there was a revolution in Egypt. The people had been treated harshly. Their labors were hard, their pay like slave wages. Then, on the wing of an exterminating angel moving swiftly over the land, the oppression in Egypt crumbled. According to Exodus, it happened one night. According to our newer news, it happened in one fortnight of February. Now, the whole world is astonished as Tunisia, Bahrain, Yemen, Iran, Libya, and even Iraq at last feel movements of the people against their oppressors.

It is too soon to guess what governance the people will secure in these lands. Trusting an ancient pattern, let us undertake to think clearly about our times by returning to Israel's central story of liberation in Egypt. Let us pray that a wind from Holy Spirit blow through our news and carry to us a word about real revolution.

It was said of Israel in Egypt that "the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression and brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm in a terrifying display of power." How does God's power come? Let us tread carefully here. God's ways are not our ways. When we speak of God's power, may we keep in our imagination a void wherein God may exceed every natural thought, lest we get stuck in a poverty of spirit where only a small god of small powers can rule. Let us say plainly the problem in taking Israel's story too literally.

If God were the sort of god who manipulated armies and pestilence and disasters to bring favor to his favorites and ruin to his rejects, then when the mighty works were said and done, such a god would still have a problem on his heavenly hands. He would have put a bunch of losers in control of the machinery, yet with no self-control, no governance, and no more faith than football fans need in the bleachers. Even the leaders would be losers, and such a god, if liberation really

interested him, would be obliged to start from the beginning building a people. A rookie error! But true God builds a people where they are, in their present situation, with leaders who learn to co-operate with God in forming the people. True God offers no Superman for Gotham and wastes nothing on fireworks to blaze the divine image in the sky.

What happened in Egypt is this. Oppression pressed the people into existence where God, who always and everywhere is, became known. Those who consolidate power and wealth, heedless of the persons whom they exploit, always run the risk that under the pressure of their greed, in the concentration of too much misery, true God will become revealed and real for a people. Now *there* is a mighty hand at work to bestir the soul; there, an outstretched arm and a terrifying display of power of which God need never repent; there, a power more vast and more mysterious than any movie mogul could conjure: when men and women whose thoughts were scattered, whose hopes were shattered, whose bodies battered and blood-spattered, whose lives mattered not to anyone—when people who have been no people rise in conscience to become one people, then God is in their midst revealing the power from which all creation springs, that living Word. This is what happened in Egypt anciently: slaves who were no people became one people by the powers of God. And to them God at last could make Godself known (for God never speaks to individuals alone and separate for their own sake) and that people turned and could hear as one people the word of their Lord, and could call their hearing “law”—Torah.

You know this truth from your own sorrows and enigmas in families and communities: God reveals Godself in a dark space, in a tight place. Why, Israel's name for Egypt is *Mizraim*, meaning “the narrow places”! Jesus says God's kingdom is like a tiny mustard seed from beneath the soil becoming manifest as a great tree; like a little leaven hidden in some flour, revealed as food for all. Of course Israel learned to tell the story of God's mighty hand with words so simple any child could speak them and come to love God, for whatever people fail to teach the children simply fail altogether. But it is equally sure that Israel nurtured the mature and faithful to put aside childish things at the right time, to leave the literal behind and see, as Jesus saw, that what is true can only be taught in parables; that is, in dialogues which prick those who are ready to wake from their sleepy ignorance and adolescent neediness into the possibility of becoming whole and one people, ready to serve the nations. Therefore, without a parable Jesus told them nothing.

We pray with and for Egypt and all the nations in the news that they may know their God truly and seek their liberation in a holy unity. But we would be unfaithful prayers if our holy hopes kept our eye from seeing the oppression in our own nation, in our own city, in our own church and failed to ask for that divine revelation coming to us a revolution and liberation, that we may see ourselves as one.

This must begin as a critique of a certain kind of unity, for that word too easily garners praise. Have not armies which despoil small nations unity? In America, have not the politics of Republicans and Democrats long been unified in support of huge corporations, each party kneeling to drink to drink from cataracts of

corporate money? Are not many citizens grievously unified in their opinions that taxes are bad, that poor people deserve their lot, that prisoners are evil, that city schools will always be awful, that America is the greatest nation and has nothing to learn from any? Unity is not necessarily a good thing; it is a condition for action, whether good or evil.

Today we must confess that Pharaoh's Egypt is here, on these American shores; in the amber waves of grain owned by agribusiness; in the thoroughfares across the wilderness beaten from the first nations, slaughtered by our armies. Every seventy years or so, thus far, this nation has collapsed from the internal contradictions of greed and oppression which our lawmakers rarely dare limit. Before the cataclysm of the 1930s, Louis D. Brandeis said: "We can have democracy in this country, or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both." Yet now for thirty years past, power has been partitioned from poverty with something like an iron curtain in our minds. Only two or three of them we elect to the Congress risk talk of balancing our ruined books with new taxes on those who benefit most richly from the systems the people have built with their money and their sweat. Our engine of greed depends on patterns that disrupt and distract communication among the oppressed, so that they are atomized in their work and in their homes and in their misery and never become conscious of themselves as one people; and true God, though ever present, is never seen in power within them.

On Friday, Bob Herbert of the *New York Times* wrote, "The predators at the top, billionaires and millionaires, are pitting ordinary workers against one another. So we're left with the bizarre situation of unionized workers with a pension resented by nonunion workers without one." Such an old story. Howard Zinn's *People's History of the United States* tells the casualties of our violent and greedy practices across every generation of our people's history. His is the portrait of America under a Pharaoh so diabolically dispersed across structures and assumptions that unlike Egypt of a fortnight ago, there is no one here who actually goes to work with the job title "Pharaoh." Our evil is far too ruthless to stand unhidden like a modern despot. But despite the name, oppression works the same. In Paulo Freire's insight-laden analyses from 1970, we read: "When people lack a critical understanding of their reality, apprehending it in fragments which they do not perceive as interacting elements of the whole, they cannot truly know that reality." (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 104) This is how oppression works: by separating every misery and crime and error into tiny stories of individual responsibility only, shouting that no ill is related to any other; there are only bad apples, lousy parents, sick individuals, and unhappy workers—but nothing amiss at the top. Why, when Moses went to Pharaoh warning of one plague and then another, did not Pharaoh apprehend each in turn as but a fragment, rather than "interacting elements of the whole." He did not truly know the reality in which he stood. It is almost always thus with power; it thinks itself the top of judgment and cannot see the whole revelation of the power of God to bring down the mighty from their thrones with power distributed all through a people being made one in the pressure of a tight place, when the holy word comes alive.

Our cliffhanger—*can any nation so conceived long endure?*—is like Israel’s. It can only really end in Egypt, in the land of oppression. This is where the people meet their God in a total vision, in a full revelation. We of the Riverside Church are not ready, I think, with a total vision—not yet. There is so much concern for power and money here. We can hardly escape it. Look at our foundations, feel the ravenous appetite of this great edifice for human energies and capital. Why, this very pulpit, safely surrounded with stone balustrade and capped with wooden canopy may secretly teach that the Word is captured in a predictable place. Regardless what surprise the preacher may pronounce, privilege and power are projected beneath— and revelation easily turned from its revolution. This great nave turns all faces one way, seeing not one another, where God is in the midst of you, but the holy height only. This was not Jesus’ way. Not for this did he speak only in parables.

Our critique of oppression in our nation and in our city must begin here with a critique of systems we never question, yet which drive us on and on, as masters drive the workers, heedless of their humanity. Since some systems of oppression do fail at a puff of breath from the Spirit, would it be implausible to imagine our reckoning with the Lord of Lords asking, *Did you not see that your world was pinned together by your love of building towers to heaven, by worship set and scripted with no space for grace, by by-laws requiring scores of souls to fill slots each season to keep the ecclesiastical machine humming?* But the kingdom of God is not like a machine at all. The kingdom is like a tree growing naturally which even birds know to shelter in; like a loaf expanding in power and mystery to feed all. This is the reality, this is the revelation Christians must be curious for. H. Richard Niebuhr calls it a permanent revolution. “What we mean by revelation . . . is this conversion and permanent revolution of our human religion through Jesus Christ.” (*Meaning of Revelation*, p. 139)

In this time between—this interim ministry—it is our intention to shift the conversation from the known toward the possible; from the necessary to the gift; from oppression and the silence and ignorance on which it leans to liberation in speech and dialogue and question-asking. If to some this process will feel threatening, only know that you too must learn your tongue and communicate in hope and love that cast out fear. With Freire, we affirm that “it is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours.” (p. 96) Friends, come toward the possibility of a total vision of our world, our nation, our city, our church, and our faith, wherein by the power of God we are bound as we had not thought possible in one spirit of liberation, a permanent revolution. “Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.”

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

The Riverside Church
in the City of New York