

Pentecost XV (21A)
Genesis 1.8-2.10/Psalm 124/Romans 12.1-8 /Matthew 16.13-20
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
24 August 2008

~Paul H. Friesen~

This morning we are required, by the Scriptures, to think together about two wonderful things: *God's secret work of grace in our lives* and *our own visible works of grace in each other's lives*.

What do I mean by *God's secret work of grace in our lives*?

I hope I mean what our ancestors meant when they told the story of their life in Egypt. It was a story full of God's gifts to them in spite of their grim circumstances. Whatever happened, when they turned around the darkest corner they saw God's light—not as they might have imagined it, not when they expected it, not that everyone even saw it, but there it was: a gift from God. God's gift was so strange at first sight that the story was full of divine comedy, full of humorous reversals.

What do I mean by *our own visible works of grace in each other's lives*? I

hope I mean what the Apostle Paul meant when he said: 'We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.' It's not that when we give gifts to each other we call in the cameras to record an act of charity. It's that giving and receiving God's gifts through each other can't help but change us as a community. These gifts were so real, so visible for the Apostle that he used 'body language' to describe them.

First, what about *God's secret work of grace in our lives*?

Egypt was not where the clan of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, was meant to be. (Nor are we always where we think we are meant to be.) God's gift to the Israelites was the 'Promised Land'. They went to Egypt to escape a great famine—an escape that was God's gift to them through Joseph. But they stayed there so many generations they forgot who they were. It's not surprising that a new dynasty of Pharaohs (a new line of Egyptian kings) arose 'who did not know Joseph'—who had no respect for the clan of Joseph, the immigrant who had built up the strength of the ancient Pharaohs and saved their land by the wisdom granted to him by the Lord God.

And now the clan of Israelites, descendents of Jacob, known as Israel, had become the 'foreigners' in Egyptian eyes, just part of those called the *hyskos*, the uninvited immigrants who had poured into the Nile delta over the centuries. The Egyptians didn't like them, and had come to fear them. There was far, far too many of them. But a new, powerful set of Pharaohs

had arisen. *Ramses II* was on the throne. It was pay back time.¹ The right political moment had arrived.

Many of us have heard how foreigners were once treated in Canada—not so much by Natives, as by Europeans. Just read the newspapers of the last 150 year or so. Those who were already in the country treated those who had just arrived as the ‘foreigners’. If it wasn’t the Irish causing problems it was the Ukrainians or the Mennonites or the Jews or the Chinese, or others. They were causing unemployment, it was said, they were breeding too fast, they were linked to crime, they had strange food and strange customs and strange religion, and so on.

This is how the story of *Exodus* begins—but with a sinister twist. Because the Pharaohs had the sort of power the *fuehrer* had again in Nazi days, days some of us can remember. The foreigners, whoever they were, would be dealt with by violence—the land would be set in order, the foreigners would become slaves.

And it is right then that we begin to see *God’s secret work of grace* among the Israelites. God is at work long before the stories of the plagues that are sent on the Pharaoh.

First, the Pharaoh sends officials to run the Israelites into the ground, he enslaves them and gives them impossible physical tasks to build up his own power by constructing imperial cities that he would use to crush them.

But the plan of the Pharaoh falters: ‘The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread them.’ They just couldn’t understand it. They couldn’t understand it because they didn’t know the promises the Lord God had made to the Israelites to be with them, and bless them, and make them prosper. God’s grace is at work and cannot be stopped.

So the Pharaoh comes down on them harder. And the Israelites increase in number even more. Then the Pharaoh sends officials to the head mid-wives, whose names are immortalized; Shiphrah and Puah. They’re told to enforce a policy by which all Israelite (Hebrew) boys are to be done away with at birth. It’s a gender-based genocide because of paranoia about these foreigners whose men might take up arms, and rebel, and kill their oppressors.

But God’s grace that has worked secretly in the mystery of conception, now works in the most unlikely way through the mid-wives who become the

¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary; Exodus* (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p.4-6.

first human actors to channel God's grace to his people. And they do it because they believe in God who they can't see over the Pharaoh whose very real threats hang over them.

Shiphrah and Puah make sure that all Hebrew boys do live—they disobey the law of the land. And they do it with the humour of the oppressed. We keep seeing all these Hebrew infants, the officials say. We're so sorry, say the head mid-wives, but... 'Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; for [Hebrew women] are vigorous and give birth before the midwives come to them.' God is not with your weak women, they say under their breath, but God so blesses us with vigorous women that we couldn't slow down our birth rate if we wanted to.

God's grace mocks the oppressors one more time. The mid-wives, drawn from the childless women, are given children of their own.² But the oppressors don't understand it.

In fact, God's grace echoes throughout this grim passage about the terrible days of Israelite enslavement. The Pharaoh and his administration grow yet more paranoid. All Egyptians are now commanded to look out for infant Hebrew boys.

But the conspiracy of grace gets wider. Moses' mother, the Hebrew mother of a healthy boy, a boy who will survive natural infant mortality, hides him from the Egyptians, who are supposed to drown them and then she plots her strategy.

Through God's grace every bit of cruel oppression and genocide is turned upside down. The people of God, as it is said, have the last laugh. They subvert, they undercut the evil of the Pharaoh.

The secret ways of God's grace multiply. The story in *Exodus* is not the only ancient story about a great man rescued as a child from the water.³ But it is a most unique story.

Moses' mother puts Moses in the river as commanded, but she puts him in a raft, as God requires, not under the water, as the Pharaoh demands. And she puts the infant where she knows the royal ladies come to bathe.

Moses' mother leaves Moses' sister to pose as a stranger passing by. And one of the daughters of the Pharaoh can't help but admire the baby, and think of its miraculous survival and deceive her father and rescue it. And the divine humour increases, in spite of the tragic situation.

² Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary; Exodus* (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 7-8.

³ For the story of the Mesopotamian King Sargon, for instance, see Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1962), p. 26-27.

Moses' mother is paid to nurse her own little boy by the daughter of the Pharaoh who wants to execute all Hebrew boys. And then the Hebrew boy is educated at the expense of the Pharaoh in his own royal household, but will one day use all the advantages he has been given by the household of the Pharaoh to overthrow its power and set his people free.

Even Moses' Egyptian name, given him by the daughter of the Pharaoh, contains the secret of God's grace. It can mean the one who is drawn out of water—

But 'Moses' also means the one who draws something out of the water, as Moses one day will draw his people out of the terrors of the Red Sea during their escape from Egypt.⁴ God's grace may work secretly, but it changes things.

In Moses' day, and in our own day, the problem is not that we lack God's grace. The problem is that we don't see it. And when we don't see it, we can't join in its working out.

The five women in this story see divine grace at work, even though they had little power in the ancient world—and they join in to its activity. The midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, Moses' mother and Moses' sister, join in, and in spite of her identity so does the daughter of the Pharaoh.

But the *secret ways of God's grace* aren't meant to be hidden from any who look for it. Christians can see it, more so when they are faithful in daily prayer and scripture reading, and on Sundays when they celebrate it together in worship in the Eucharist—in music, and scripture and in bread and wine at the Table. These open up our senses, they alert us, they predispose us to see ways of God's grace in our lives.

For God's grace is at work, even in our own grimmest circumstances, even when things work out contrary to our expectations or are demands. God's grace was at work in the lives of the Hebrew slaves, our spiritual ancestors. God's grace is at work in our lives today. The only question is whether we are looking for it in the daily circumstance of our lives, which is exactly where God plants it for us.

We need to see God's hidden ways of grace, to find them, so we can work with them and share them. That is why we also need to ask about *our own visible works of grace in each other's lives*.

⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary; Exodus* (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 10.

St. Paul puts it in a powerful image: ‘I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.’

Our own traditional rite requires these words after we give thanks for God’s grace in Christ during the Eucharist: ‘And hear we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee.’⁵

St. John Chrysostom gave a sermon on these verses from St. Paul, and said: ‘How is the body to become a sacrifice? The hand must do alms, the mouth must bless those who curse it, and the ears must find time to listen to the reading of Scripture.’⁶ Grace is not just a concept. Grace works. If it could work to build the earliest church on the ministry of St. Peter—indecisive, weak and fickle, Peter—it will work in our own lives.

The Apostle reminds us that this works best when we all remember, that whatever our likes or dislikes, our upbringing our education, our job in life, our wealth or poverty, when we remember that we are all connected like the arms and legs and eyes and ears of one body. ‘We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us,’ he reminds us.

Thanks be to God that there is more than enough grace to be seen at work not only in our own lives, but in each other’s, for the good of all.

Let’s pray that our eyes may be opened to see it, and are hearts be open to share it.

⁵ *Book of Common Prayer* (Toronto: ABC, 1962), p.85.

⁶ From his ‘Homilies on Romans’ in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Romans*, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 306.