

4 January 2015

## Echoes: An Oppressed People

Exodus 3:1-14

*Exodus 3:1-14. Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.*

*Then the Lord said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.' But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' He said, 'I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.'*

*But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you."'*

Here is the theological context of this passage in the larger story of the Bible: after the first man and woman sinned in Eden, God had been hidden from humanity, except in glimpses given to a select few. Here, though, God finally steps forward in self-revelation. "I am the God of your Fathers" locates God in history and tradition, and then "I Am who I Am" locates God in our own experience, in the here and now. There's a whole sermon series between those two, but we're not going there today. Instead I want to look at one more crucial piece of the divine identity in this passage. God says: "I have seen the misery of my people . . . I have heard their cry . . . I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them." Part of one's identification is what one does. This is what God does: God is the one who hears and responds to the cry of the oppressed.

This is who God is throughout the Bible. Earlier in the service we read, instead of a psalm, the Song of Mary, where she describes God as the one who exalts the humble and humbles the exalted. She borrows that phrase from the psalms, where it is a key theme. God hears the needy and expects others to hear them as well. That includes kings and rulers: Psalm 72 praises the king of Israel – because he delivers the needy when they call. This even includes the gods: the strange Psalm 82 paints a picture of God giving an angry lecture to the gods of all the other nations and taking away their authority. Why? Because they have not rescued the weak and the needy. The Law of Moses, given on Mt. Sinai, commands the Israelites over and over to care for the helpless: "You will take care of widows and orphans and the foreigners who live among you. Remember that you too were foreigners, in the land of Egypt." In that law, farmers are commanded to leave some of their fields harvested, for the poor to gather food from. As years pass, and the people of Israel forget these commands to care for the poor, the widow, the foreigner, and the orphan – God sends prophets. Hear this from Isaiah chapter 1, "Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." And then there's Jesus, God in the flesh, who came to earth and did what? Called poor laborers to follow him, fed the hungry, spent time with the outcasts of society, and taught in the parable of the sheep and the goats that our final judgment is based on whether we've fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and visited those in prison. The teaching continues into the early church, too. James 1:27: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." So, as I say, God's self-description in Exodus 3 as One who hears the cry of the oppressed is not an isolated instance. It is, perhaps, the most consistent theme in all scripture. All scripture.

Those of you who were here last week for the start of this sermon series know that for these next few weeks I'm talking about how the Church of Jesus Christ is supposed to relate to the larger society. Last week we looked at two extreme options. One is for the church to be assimilated by society, to fit into its culture so well that there is no longer any difference. There are churches who have done that, but I did not recommend that option. A second extreme is to go to war with society, to treat the culture as an enemy to be overcome and brought under the church's control. There are churches who want to do that, too, but I suggested that approach was more about power than about Christ. Somehow, we have to find a way to live within our culture, but to speak out for Christ in a distinctive voice. Then I promised that this week I would begin telling you what the Church has to say to society. Well, this is our first word: God is on the side of the oppressed. God sees their suffering. God hears their cry, and we must hear it as well. We are to speak on behalf of those who have no one else watching out for them. There is no debate to be held about this. This is declared throughout scripture, and there is not one verse that contradicts it. It is the clearest statement of God's priorities in the entire Bible.

It is also, by curious coincidence, perhaps the most commonly ignored of God's priorities. I am not sure I can explain why, but Christianity has always shown an inexorable tendency to become a smug upper- or middle-class religion. It's happened over and over in history, but let me give you a couple of examples. The Church of England in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century was a comfortable, wealthy religion sponsored by the English nobility and wholly indebted to the gentry. Poor people in England were baptized into the church, then had very little to do with it. In that context, John Wesley and his followers started a revolution by turning to care for the poor. They visited the prisons, preached in the fields and outside coal mines – you know, where people actually were. They began orphanages and soup kitchens and schools for those who could not afford schools. They taught the poor of England that God loved them and valued them, then incorporated into small groups for mutual encouragement in mind, body, and spirit. Wesley got it. He never forgot that God was on the side of the poor and oppressed.

But what happened then? Well, what happens when you teach people to work hard and go to school and give up liquor and gambling and generally stay out of trouble? The first Methodists began to grow prosperous. Even before Wesley died, Methodism was becoming a middle-class faith and was gradually cutting back on its ministry to the poor. It drove Wesley crazy. Most of his late sermons were about the sins of wealth, calling on his followers to remember their earlier passion for helping the poor and oppressed of England. That's the pattern. One more example: Most of you know I grew up in Singapore, where my parents were Baptist missionaries. I remember the early days of their work, now some 40 years ago, when my parents worked with the poorest of the poor. Well last November I went back to Singapore to visit my daughter, who was living there. While there, I went to one of the churches that my parents had helped to start. That was one swanky, high-tech church. And everyone there looked like a million dollars. I commented on that to Grace, who had lived among the Singaporeans for months. She looked surprised. "Dad, in Singapore, Christianity is definitely an upper-class religion." In just forty years. As I said, I don't know how or why it happens, but it does.

That's why we need constantly to restate the Bible's clear message. God is on the side of anyone who is oppressed by society; so must we be. We must speak for those whose voices are not heard. That includes poor people. That includes racial minorities. That includes people with mental illness. That includes unborn children. That includes gay and lesbian people. That includes rape victims, abuse victims, victims of predatory lenders, victims of any injustice. That includes Muslims. That includes prisoners. That includes immigrants and migrant workers. That includes people with dementia and people who sit alone in their nursing home rooms without visitors.

Now last week I stressed that God is neither Republican nor Democrat. Let me say that again. The nuts and bolts of *how* we speak up and act for those whose voices are ignored is a messy and complex business – certainly more complicated than just choosing one party's platform. All I'm saying today is this: It is time once again for our voice to be heard in our society. It is time once again for us to say, "We stand for the oppressed. Because God stands for the oppressed. That's all."