

Sermon – Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 16A)

Scripture Texts: Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *In a world that too often dreams of empire, we are called to resist imperialism – especially by choosing love over fear, and valuing diversity over uniformity.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. Dreams of Empire

a. Visiting Pullman National Historic Site

- i. A small NPS site in the Chicago area (indeed, the first NPS unit in Chicago!) that the Micklewright family got to visit on our recent vacation; it tells the story of the Pullman company and the town that it created.
- ii. George Pullman was an engineer and industrialist who started building luxury passenger train cars. As demand soared, he bought 4000 acres of land south of Chicago and built a company town – named for himself and his company. Pullman was a planned town, providing everything the workers needed in an attempt to establish a happy and loyal workforce. Indeed, the town provided indoor plumbing and a number of other luxuries.
- iii. However, from early on, there were also issues. Workers could only rent, not own, and rents were set high as to ensure a return 6% on the investment made in building the town. Pullman exerted paternalistic control over their lives, not allowing access to drink or other vices. And, when economic conditions grew challenging in 1893, wages were cut to preserve the company's bottom line – leaving many workers unable to survive.
- iv. These conditions led to a major strike that had implications across the nation. While Pullman avoided concessions, his reputation was ruined, and problems continued until his death three years later. Ultimately, courts forced the company to sell off all of the non-industrial holdings in the town, and it was only after doing so that the company was able to reclaim business success.

b. Attributes of Empire: Over the past week, I've been thinking about Pullman's story in connection with our OT reading today – and I have been seeing a connection between Pullman and Egypt. Both were chasing dreams of empire (a business empire vs a literal empire). There are lots of attributes of empire, but there are four on which I'd like to focus today:

- i. Seeking control (which usually includes a significant note of hypocrisy)
- ii. Value uniformity
- iii. Fear as a tool – but also a motivating factor
- iv. Power and profits over people, sometimes even counterproductively!

c. Imperial Egypt

- i. Assumption of power and authority – Pharaoh assumes that the midwives will fear and obey him, likely because he is motivated by fear and power. He can't imagine that they would value something greater and so defy him.
- ii. Fear of the Hebrews – leads to seeking control over them and a forgetting of history
- iii. Power and profits over people, first through forced and ruthless labor, and ultimately through murder and the sword. This allows Egypt to build, but it is also counterproductive as they start killing off their new workforce.

2. Resisting Imperial Dreams

- a. Of course, dreams of vampire are not confined to ancient Egypt and late 19th century America. We see many of these forces at work in our world today. So, it is worth asking the question of how he might resist imperial dreams. And, thankfully, our passage in Exodus gives a master class in doing just that.
- b. Shiphrah and Puah – two courageous midwives
 - i. These women are called before Pharaoh, which I imagine to have been a somewhat terrifying experience. Midwives were deeply respected members of society, and Egypt occasionally afforded women positions of power and influence – but I still doubt that it was common for midwives to be summoned before the national ruler.
 - ii. They have the courage to go against the king's orders, letting the boys live. The text tells us that this is because "the midwives feared God." We should be careful to recognize that this isn't just a matter of fearing God more than Pharaoh, because God is more powerful; rather, this was how the Bible spoke of religious affiliation. These women worshiped the God of the Hebrews, rather than the gods of Egypt – or the empire itself!
 - iii. When summoned back, they get truly subversive, using Pharaoh's prejudice against him. He and his people look down on the Hebrews as less refined, perhaps even less human...more like animals. And the midwives play off this, suggesting that the Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women – they give birth more quickly and without the same need for support. (This is a prejudice that we have also seen in American history, weaponized against women of color.)
 - iv. Beautiful detail that these women are honored by God, who gives them families and a legacy even in a male-centric world!
- c. Moses' mother, Jochebed
 - i. She is clearly aware of the slow-moving massacre that is happening in Egypt, and she shelters her son. Having had three baby boys, I can't imagine that it was easy to keep one hidden, even for just three months.
 - ii. She makes a basket – the Hebrew words being the same as for the ark – and seeks God's deliverance for her son. This is an act of great courage and faith, much like that of Noah.
- d. Moses' sister, Miriam
 - i. She is not sent, at least that the text records, but she wants to see what will happen to her baby brother.
 - ii. When the basket comes to Pharaoh's daughter, Miriam also shows great courage and creativity. This slave girl approaches possibly the most powerful woman in Egypt and opens the door for Moses to continue to know his family.
 - iii. She goes on to become a prophet and deeply respected leader of her people.
- e. Pharaoh's Daughter

- i. She recognizes that Moses must be a Hebrew baby, but adopts him anyway.
 - ii. I would guess that it wasn't too hard for her to figure out who Miriam was, or the identity of the Hebrew wet nurse, but she goes along with it – and even pays Jochabed.
 - iii. She raises Moses as her son, giving him access to power, but does not cut him off from his family or his heritage. I love the suggestion that some commentators make that she might even be hoping for him to grow to challenge the dark ways of empire. Every resistance movement needs allies!
 - f. Significance that Exodus begins with women! This is a book of God's deliverance. It is the introduction of Moses, one of the very most important figures in all of the Bible (and, according to tradition, the author of the first five books of the Bible). But it begins with and depends on the courage of women to resist imperialism.
3. God's Alternative to Empire: the Kingdom of Heaven
- a. These examples are incredibly valuable for those who would seek to resist, empire, but ultimately it is always more important to have a positive vision – something we are working toward rather than just something we are working against. And, for those who would follow Jesus, that vision is often expressed as the kingdom of heaven.
 - b. Connect the dots – the kingdom of heaven doesn't seek uniformity, but glories in diversity. We see this in the diverse group of women resisting empire in today's reading. We see it further in our NT reading from Romans 12.
 - c. The kingdom of heaven doesn't view people as resources to be leveraged, but cares especially for the vulnerable.
 - d. The kingdom of heaven is not built on fear and control, but on love; God's love creates us in our diversity, comes among us in our need, and calls us into community in which this love can grow and spread. Thanks be to God!

Amen.