

Sermon – Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 18A)

Scripture Texts: Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

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

Focus Statement: *We are called to be a people who celebrate and remember God's deliverance. Even more, we are called to join in God's work of deliverance by putting on Jesus, that we might love even our enemies and work for the transformation of all things.*

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. "Dulce et Decorum est Pro Patria Mori" (*It is sweet and proper to die for one's country.*)
 - a. What would you die (or kill) for?
 - i. Phrase goes back to ancient Roman poet Horace, but has also been adopted by many nations and empires throughout the intervening years.
 - ii. If you look the phrase up on Wikipedia, you'll find a page full of examples of it being engraved or emblazoned on significant cultural sites around the world. Even in Sweden, it is inscribed in the outer wall of an old war fort.
 - iii. It was especially prominent in the rhetoric leading up to – and sustaining – World War I. It is inscribed in the chapel of Sandhurst, the British military academy, posted on memorial plaques in numerous churches, and is found at the front entrance to the Arlington Memorial Amphitheater in Arlington National Cemetery.
 - b. The Old Lie – Wilfred Owen's poem
 - i. Published in 1920, reflecting on the author's experience in WWI. It grapples graphically with the horrors of warfare.
 - ii. It ends by calling Dulce et Decorum est Pro Patria Mori "the old lie."
 - iii. Owen recognizes that governments have used this line for generations to lead children into fighting and dying for their country.
 - c. Defining ourselves under the influence of empire
 - i. What will you kill or die for? This is a question that can define a person and a nation. It speaks to our values and our identity.
 - ii. It is a powerful question, but it will sweep us up if we're not careful. Like the old lie, this question so often benefits those in power at the expense of everyone else.
 - iii. There must be a better way of making sense of who we are. And, thankfully, I think our reading from Exodus offers us a better way of forming identity.
2. Defining Israel
 - a. Last week dealt with the identity of God
 - i. God is holy and set apart – there is a fundamental difference between creature and creator, and we should recognize that God will always be beyond our comprehension.
 - ii. Even so, God has bound Godself to creation; Creator has sought out relationship with creature.

- iii. The God of Exodus, and the entire Bible, is a God of relationship, who is willing to suffer alongside and on behalf of creatures – and who transforms suffering.
- b. This week, we turn our focus to the identity of Israel.
 - i. The Exodus is fundamental to the identity of Israel! Scholars can't find much in the way of historical evidence for the Exodus as it is described here (it's nowhere in the extensive records of Egypt). Still, they are unwilling to discount it as fabricated because it is so deeply woven into the identity of this people.
 - ii. The celebration of Passover is one of the key observances of every Jew, and in the celebration of Passover they tell over and over again their story about who they are and how they became.
 - iii. That is the significance of the command in our text today about the calendar. The experience of the Exodus and of Passover is so fundamental that it reshapes the very perception of time. This is the beginning of the Jewish people, at least as much as Abraham and his family. So, what do we learn about this people from the Exodus story?
- c. Deliverance rather than conquest
 - i. Take a moment and think about how military struggle and triumph is central to the founding of so many nations and peoples. The Roman republic came into being with the conquering of the last Roman king, Tarquin the Proud. England began with the victory of the Anglo-Saxons over Northumbria. Even America began with the Declaration of Independence and the Revolutionary War.
 - ii. By contrast, the Israelites cannot claim some great military victory over Egypt. They had no rebellion, no army, no battles. Rather, they trace their independence to God's act of deliverance. Their great hero, Moses, bears a staff rather than a sword.
 - iii. The Israelite people are not called to fight or die for their nation or their God. Rather, they are called to live, and to remember how God delivered them from captivity and slavery.
- d. What do we make of the plagues and the violence and sacrifice of the Passover story?
 - i. Disturbing – how is celebrating God killing all the firstborn children of Egypt any better than us celebrating the killing of redcoats in the revolution? Is not God's victory over Egypt even more disturbing than human victories over their enemies?
 - ii. First, we must understand that this is not meant to be a victory over the nation and people of Egypt, but rather a defeat of their gods. If you look at the various plagues, each is targeted at a particular Egyptian deity – from the Nile god Hapi to the frog god Heqet to the sun god Ra, and so on.
 - iii. More broadly, I think the story of the Exodus challenges the logic of empire and offers an alternative to that logic.
 - The logic of empire is based on a division between us and them. It claims that we can control the world if only we grow big and strong enough to put them in their place. Egypt was one of the great empires of the world, and like all empires, Egypt tried to claim mastery over everything – from the river, to the frogs, to the sun.
 - And, in the time of Moses, it did this particularly through dividing Egyptian from Israelite: the Israelites were enslaved, while the ordinary Egyptians were expected to elevate Pharaoh to god-like status. While Egypt preceded Horace's poem, I don't doubt that those in power would have been happy

to embrace the sentiment, calling their young men to fight and die for the glory of Pharaoh.

- Thus, the plagues are meant to show that Pharaoh and his empire do not actually control the world that they claim dominion over. And, the last plague in particular, shows that the logic of empire always leads to death.
 - Despite warnings, Pharaoh continued to cling to power, to his assumptions of control and mastery, even though it would cost him the life of his son and the lives of all the firstborn sons of his empire. The Egyptian people insisted on being different from Israel – so while the firstborn of Israel live, the firstborn of Egypt die. The logic of empire only leads to death.
- iv. The sacrificial lambs, then, offer Israel an alternative: God is able to transform even death into life. A sacrificial lamb takes the place of the human victims of empire, so that all who are marked by the lamb's blood might live.

3. Our identity today

a. We are deeply shaped by the story of the Exodus

- i. Our Western and Christian identities are built in part on the same stories that shaped the Jewish people.
- ii. Even more, we worship the same God! We also worship the God of relationship, of deliverance, of transformation.
- iii. So, like Israel, we are called to be people who are delivered by God, people who reject the logic of empire, and people who remember God's transformation of death into life.

b. Further revelation in Jesus

- i. But, as much as we should value these stories, as much as they reveal God to us and reveal who we are created to be, for us there is an even more fundamental revelation – in the life and ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus.
- ii. In Jesus we see God continuing to seek out the oppressed and downtrodden, caring especially for those valued least by the logic of empire.
- iii. Moreover, in Jesus, we see deliverance offered not only to the downtrodden, but even to the oppressors. Jesus reveals the heart of God when he offers forgiveness even to those who nailed him to the cross.
- iv. Most of all, in Jesus, we see death transformed, as Jesus becomes the sacrificial lamb. But, rather than simply dying in the place of the victims of empire, Jesus resurrection shows that life is stronger than death and that both victim and perpetrator may be redeemed.

c. Thus, in the words of Paul in our Romans passage, we are called to “put on Jesus” – to love as he loved that we might fully be the people we were created to be.

- i. On occasion, this may be a call to literally give up our lives, as Jesus did, on behalf of others. Church history has no shortage of martyrs who have died for their faith.
- ii. More often, however, it is a figurative embrace of death – a willingness to give up our pride and privilege to serve God. It is a willingness to live and die, not for our country or our family or our status above all others, but to spend our time and energy and resources on behalf of those in need around us. Most daringly, it is a call to love even our enemies: those who annoy or harass or harm us are those we are called to pray for.

- iii. Thankfully, we are not expected to do this of our own power. Rather, we put on Jesus and the power of his resurrection, that we might join in God's work of deliverance, and be part of God's transformation of this world from death to life.

Amen.