

Trinity 17 (2020)

Some stories in the Bible are sheer drama. The one found in this morning's Old Testament lesson – Moses going before Pharaoh -- is one of these.

What courage it must have taken for Moses to stand up before the most powerful man in the world and say: **“Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Let my people go . . .”** Yet, that is what we find him doing in this morning's reading.

We have here more than a contest between two men – Moses and Pharaoh: we have a contest between two kingdoms: **the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world in opposition to God's rule.**

Two rival deities, as it were, are facing off: the Living God, Yahweh, and Pharaoh, King of Egypt.

The Pharaohs of Egypt (as with many ancient rulers who would come after), you see, saw themselves as gods. An inscription found on the wall of a temple makes the point:

“I am that which was, and is, and shall be, and no man has lifted my veil.”

Notice the similarity between these words and those spoke by God to Moses at the burning bush. There God revealed to Moses the inner meaning of His name Yahweh. That meaning was: **I AM THAT I AM.**

Going back to Pharaoh in today's reading, he apparently accepted the claim made in the inscription I have just quoted. He believed he was the great *I am* of earth and sky.

We know this to be so from the response he made to Moses when the latter came before him claiming to represent the LORD God of Israel.

You can almost see him curling his lips and hear the sneer in his voice as he says:

“Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the Lord . . .”

He may not know Him now, but he will know Him and his power in the near future

The contest between these two kingdoms – the kingdom of the Living God and the kingdom of the world in opposition to God as represented by Pharaoh -- is just getting started.

But, before things get better, they are going to get worse. Before the rainbow comes the storm.

So enraged is Pharaoh at Moses' meddling that he orders his men not to give any more straw to the Hebrews making bricks – straw apparently was a necessary ingredient in this process.

From here on out, the Hebrew slaves had to get their own straw. Yet the number of bricks they were required to produce did not change.

So bad is the situation, that representatives of the oppressed Hebrew come before Pharaoh pleading for mercy and relief. When they don't get it, they turn on Moses and Aaron.

Even Moses Himself at this point seems to have had a crisis of faith. We hear him crying out to God: **“Wherefore hast thou so evil entreated this people? why is it that thou hast sent me?”**

I imagine that he just wanted to go back to tending his father-in-law's sheep in Midian. He was 80 years old, and he didn't need any drama in his life. But, it wasn't to be. There was no going back.

In the last verse of today's passage, God assures him that His kingdom, and not that of the Pharaoh, will prevail. Israel is going to leave Egypt and go to the Promised Land, and Moses is going to be their leader.

What about Moses' doubts and troubles? Do they have any relevance to us today?

I want to say they do. The conflict between the God of Heaven and the god of this world – the world system – is still going on.

The crisis Moses faced is not unique to him. The battle is still raging, and we find ourselves in the middle of it at this very moment. If you don't believe me, turn on your televisions.

Oh yes, we have the promises of God in the Bible, but all around us is trouble, travail, unrest, man's inhumanity to man, sin and degradation. Living the Christian life is not easy in the 21st century.

Some people think, and some preachers give the impression in their presentation of the Gospel, that if you just tick the box that says you believe in Jesus, all your troubles will go away; all will be sunshine and light.

I am here this morning to tell you that it 'just ain't so'.

The story is told of a man who showed up in church with three small children. After the service, while speaking to the minister, the question came up: What about your wife? The man hung his head and said:

“Well, she has lost her faith. Her mother, you see, got sick, and she can no longer believe.”

That's very said. Someone sold this woman a bill of goods. If being a follower of Jesus, made one exempt from all the hard knocks of life, what of Paul?

He was beaten, shipwrecked, misunderstood, suffered sickness and finally – according to tradition – executed by the sword.

Doesn't sound as if he had an easy go at it. Was he not a faithful follower of the Lord? Of course, he was.

What this woman had missed, what had not been told her as she began her Christian life, was that ticking the right box does not automatically mean no pain in this present age. Jesus tells us as much.

“In the world ye shall have tribulation,” he says. Then, he goes on to add, **“but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”**

The voice out of the burning bush had said the same thing to Moses:

“Pharaoh will not let you go. But in the end my kingdom will prevail. I will bring my people out with a strong arm.”

So, from our perspective, is there any advantage in being a Christian? Of course, there is.

Just as with Moses, we have the promise of God's presence: "I will go with you." And, in the end, we have the assurance that the victory belongs to God.

"The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it!" as one famous Baptist preacher was fond of saying.

I guess all that I have said thus far can be summed up in one line: **Keep your eye on the promises – those made in Scripture – and on the Promiser.**

Go out into the conflict of life with Him.

Oh, I don't want to paint the picture too dark. There will be some wonderful adventures along the way. It's not all gloom and doom. Life can be wonderful. The world in which you and I live, in spite of its fallen state, is a beautiful place. "This is my Father's world," as the hymn writer affirms.

But just don't forget there is a conflict going on, a conflict between two kingdoms.

Plant your feet firmly on the side of the living God. Determine to follow Him come what may. Resolve to do the many little things you can do to make life better for others. Stand tall for truth. Stand against oppression. Defend the weak. Say no to temptation to 'go back to Midian'. 'Quit you like men!' to use a quaint phrase found in the Bible.

One final thought. When you pray the Lord's Prayer and come to the doxology at the end . . . pay special attention to and really bear down on that word "thine".

"For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory." "Thine" is the operative word. The victory belongs to God, the God revealed to Moses in the burning bush and to us in Christ . . . and we belong to Him.

We are on the winning side. So, my brothers and sisters, let me conclude by saying, rejoice and carry on!

