

TOP 10 STORIES & THEMES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Week 3: God's Dream -- Setting Free The Oppressed

Text: Exodus 3:1-12

NOTE ON THE STORY...

Virtually all Christians agree that among all the stories, concepts and details of the 27 books of the New Testament, the Story of Jesus -- his life, his teachings, his ministry, his death and resurrection -- stands at the center of this whole collection of writings. The Story of Jesus is the core, the heart, the engine that drives everything else, and on which everything else hangs. Likewise, the Old Testament story of The Exodus -- God's Deliverance of the Israelites From Slavery in Egypt -- is the central core of the entire Hebrew Bible, and the heartbeat which pulses throughout all the other Hebrew scriptures, from the Creation accounts all the way through the message of the prophets.

GOD & MOSES, IN THIS TOGETHER...

In this particular text, the Call of Moses, (the beginning of the Exodus Story) we hear the writer express what the heart of God is like. God uses a burning bush to grab the attention of Moses (the proverbial 2x4 to the head or hind parts) and then tells Moses why he needs Moses to do "God's Work" with "Moses's Hands." Verses 7-10 portray God speaking with these words: "I have observed the misery of my people; I have heard their cry; I know their suffering; I HAVE COME TO DELIVER THEM; I will send you to Pharaoh to bring them out of Egypt." This is no bystander God who sets life in motion and then observes from a distance. This is a God who gets involved and comes to the rescue. This is an active God whose heart is filled with compassion, who sees, hears, understands, and acts; a God who is passionately engaged both THROUGH and FOR God's creation. Notice that even in this central and pivotal Old Testament story, God could not do anything without a human vessel through whom to work. This is important! God doesn't over-ride God's own creation. God participates in, with and through creation to accomplish God's work and to pursue fulfillment of God's dream. (Remember St. Paul's line in Acts 17:28 that God is "the One in whom we live and move and have our being.") If Moses and Aaron had said "No Thanks, God, we're busy," God would have needed to find other people through whom to work for the liberation of the Israelites.

+ What are the implications of a God who "works" and "acts" in this way, through willing human vessels?

+ What does this say about God? What does this say about us and our role?

EXPLORING WAYS TO PARTICIPATE IN GOD'S DREAM TO SET FREE THE OPPRESSED...

It's easy to look back in time and see God working through people to set free the oppressed. It's easy to see, in hindsight, how God worked to say "NO" to slavery and to treating people like property in the Exodus story, as well as in our own nation's history in the middle of the 19th Century. It's easy, now, in hindsight, to see how God was at work in women's suffrage around the world in the late 1800's and early 1900's, and in ending Apartheid in South Africa not all that long ago. It's easy now, in hindsight, to reflect on the Civil Rights movement and see God working through Martin Luther King, Jr. and so many others, both famous and forgotten, seeing God's eternal dream of equality become a more present reality. And yet, in their day, both Moses and Jesus were often rejected by the very people they were trying to help and set free. Think about it... God's own people (just like us) were hesitant to believe God had sent Moses. God's own people (just like us) couldn't see beyond their own expectations and Jesus' parentage to recognize the presence of God in his actions and teachings. God heard the cries of racial injustice and showed up in Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights movement; God heard the cries of hurricane Katrina victims and showed up through numerous church mission teams like ours -- cleaning, rebuilding and befriending and caring for the despairing; God heard the cry of the homeless and Habitat for Humanity began building houses all over the world; God hears the cry of the hungry, and we walk together in the CROP walk. God hears our cries and sees our situations and shows up to deliver us from suffering and oppression. God comes to the rescue by dwelling within us and calling us into compassionate action!

On mission trips in Costa Rica we learned that even our purchasing power as consumers in the United States can work to set free the oppressed, or serve to further oppress those held in economic bondage. We visited Cocoa, Coffee, Banana and Pineapple plantations and farms. We met and talked with plantation workers and small farmers. We discovered that our choices at the grocery store and in the retail market here can impact lives in Central America in powerful ways. Purchasing Fair Trade products that support small farmers while using sustainable methods won't fix everything overnight, but such actions are helping families far away climb out of poverty, while keeping others from crossing below the poverty line in the first place. Where and how we spend our dollars in the U.S. can actually cause helpful or harmful shifts in remote villages and urban neighborhoods on distant continents.

Last Saturday on ESPN's College Game Day, viewers heard the story of Boston College's star linebacker (He was a star last year during his Junior year) Mark Herzlich. In May of this year, while looking forward to his senior year and the likelihood of receiving many national awards and accolades, doctors discovered a large cancerous tumor in his leg. The past 6 months have been a painful, difficult journey through intense chemotherapy and other treatments for cancer. A week ago, he received the news he was hoping for. The tumor seems to be nearly, if not completely gone. During the interview, he talked about the amazing network of people -- family, friends, teammates, doctors, nurses, technicians, volunteers, and even strangers like the nun, Sister Barbara Ann, who prayed for him daily and wrote letters to him weekly -- all of whom lifted his burdens, encouraged his fight, befriended him, and played a role in setting him free from his illness.

+ How do you see God at work today, in our world, in our time, setting people free and longing to free the oppressed from bondage?

+ In what ways can you help God continue fulfilling this dream in your relationships, and in your spheres of influence?

THE JESUS FILES: TWO POWERFUL STORIES...

The 4th gospel, commonly known as John, belongs to a community of Christians who were struggling to stay faithful to the movement of Jesus decades after Jesus had physically left the scene. Dated around 90 A.D. (Common Era, C.E.), you can sense that the pressures of society are changing the movement of Jesus in some critical ways, not always for the good. But in other ways the movement is standing firm in some of the core values originally held by Jesus. On the one hand, The Gospel According to John is the most antisemitic of the four New Testament stories about Jesus. There is a heavy cultural influence of separation from everything Jewish, even though all the original followers of Jesus, and Jesus himself, were faithful Jews. This gospel has been used by wayward Christians throughout history to justify hatred of Jews and to encourage demeaning behavior toward Jewish people. On the other hand, there are two stories of the community holding women in equality with men, which was contrary to the predominantly Roman culture that surrounded these 1st Century C.E. Christians. They apparently wanted to uphold Jesus's teachings and behaviors that lifted up women as equal to men in God's eyes. These two stories highlight that positive effort:

1) John 4:1-42 (The Samaritan Woman at the Well) Jesus treats a woman with a questionable past like just another man that day in the hot sun by the side of the village well. Women were forbidden from talking with men in public places. This woman, especially, would make a Rabbi like Jesus religiously unclean by conversing with him. And she was a Samaritan, considered anathema and "infidel" to any full-blooded, faithful Jew. Jesus sets her free from all those prejudices and stereotypes, and relates to her as a fellow child of God, as worthy as himself or any other man to pursue friendship with God.

2) John 7:53-8:11 (The Woman Caught in Adultery) Most scholars agree that this story is a later addition to the 4th Gospel. The oldest manuscripts (we don't have any of the originals, of course) don't have this story in the text. It moves right from what our Bible cites as 7:52 to 8:12. (There were no chapter and verse numbers in the originals.) But in this story, Jesus treats a woman caught in adultery much like a man would have been treated in his day, and Jesus treats the men in this story much like they were trying to treat the woman. There was a severe double standard in Jesus's day and culture. Women could be stoned to death for adultery in Jesus's day. Men might have been scolded, or they may not have had to bear any negative consequences at all. Jesus turns the tables to make his point. He holds the men accountable for their sins (probably what he was writing in the sand, along with their names, maybe?), and sets the woman free with a verbal warning to simply, "sin no more." Jesus

didn't just forgive her sin that day, but he set this woman free from the domination system that regarded men as the superior gender and women as property of men.

+ What groups of people in our society are trapped by injustice and oppression? What can we do to help make a difference for them?

+ How many forms of bondage, oppression and injustice can you list that are real for somebody in our modern world?

+ What are the negative effects (consequences) upon those committing acts of injustice, those who hold others in some kind of oppression or bondage?