

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Mighty Acts of God: God Prepares”
The Rev. Joanne Blair
September 10, 2017

Exodus 2:1-10; Matthew 18:15-20

The story of Moses’ birth and childhood is one of the most well-known stories in the Old Testament... and for good reason. It has everything that captures our emotions: suspense and intrigue, compassion and intervention. And we especially like it because it has a happy ending and triumphs over evil.

But this story is also filled with what is often called “divine irony.”

- Pharaoh decreed that all Hebrew boys be thrown into the Nile, and yet this is the very river that saved the life of Moses.
- Pharaoh’s own daughter ignores his decree and saves the life of the one who will lead the Hebrews to freedom, and destroy the Egyptian reign.
- Hebrew daughters were allowed to live, and it is one such daughter that helps to undermine Pharaoh’s plans.
- The baby’s mother actually gets paid to do what she yearned for most of all- to nurture her child.

Did you notice that God is never mentioned in this story of Moses adoption? Does this mean that God wasn’t involved? No, no, and no! God is always at work, and God often uses the weak and the seemingly least important to achieve great things and change the world. And while Moses is most definitely a key player, Moses is not really at the core of the Exodus story. This is actually a story about the amazing works of God. And God is always working toward redemption and reconciliation.

Which is key to our reading from Matthew today. Jesus is preparing the disciples for handling things when he is no longer with them in a physical sense. He is preparing them to be a thriving and healthy community, always striving for reconciliation. Jesus knows there will be disagreements and the wounding of each other, and he is preparing the community to address and resolve these issues. He puts the initiative upon the person offended, calling them to a higher task of “speaking their piece” in truth and love. Each member is valued and appreciated.

Situations where there is alienation are to be taken seriously. We are often taught to shrug it off, to let it go, to “put on our big boy or girl pants” ... and there are times when this is great advice. We are not being told to be whiny and overly sensitive. What we are being told, is to be in community. But too often we seethe in silence, complain later to a friend, hold a “meeting after the meeting” in the parking lot (without the person that upset us) ... and hold a grudge.

Following Jewish tradition, if step one doesn’t work, Jesus tells us to go to step two ... and take 1 or 2 other people with us to ensure clear communication. This obviously doesn’t mean taking your best friends that you have coached ahead of time to take your side. It is meant to get a more clear and impartial understanding (and hopefully, resolution) of the situation.

Finally, if step 2 doesn’t work, you go to step 3 ... and involve the church community. This is not a “three strikes and you’re out” situation. This is when you treat the person as a Gentile and a tax collector. We all know how Jesus dealt with them... he shared drinks and meals and conversations, and treated them with integrity. Step 3 is the church saying, “you’ve left the field and we’d like to invite you back to the game.” It seeks restoration rather than punishment.

It is no accident that this piece of Scripture comes right after Jesus' parable about the lost sheep. The ultimate goal is always peace, and the restoration of right relationship.

I want to share a very simple story with you. And while Jesus is speaking of the church community in today's scripture, you can make the connection. In seminary, I had a classmate who was tall, blond, attractive, well-dressed, gifted with words, spiritual, gentle, and smart. I really liked her and admired her a great deal. On graduation day for whatever reason, she got the wrong size cap and it kind of fell down below her ears like a bowl. Our last names started with the same letter, so we were close to each other in all the proceedings. Since my cap also fit her, once I had my "official portrait" taken, I lent her my cap for her picture. And I said something like, "Here you go... now you look like 'Seminary Graduate Barbie.'" I, of course, thought I was being terribly clever.

After I walked across the stage and got my diploma, I rushed back and gave her my cap to wear, and apparently, I called her "Seminary Barbie" again.

A couple of weeks later, I got a phone call from her and she expressed how hurt and insulted she was when I called her "Seminary Barbie." To be honest, I was shocked ... because to me, it was rather a compliment. After all, Barbie is kind of perfect and can do anything and everything... and that's kind of what I thought about this woman.

She was open and candid with me about how she felt... not at all mean or angry. (which made me feel worse!)... and I am forever grateful to her for her courage and honesty in coming to me directly. Now I know that in the grand scope of things, this wasn't that big a deal, but she could have handled it a different way and spun it into something much bigger. Something that may have given me a reputation throughout the seminary that I wouldn't appreciate. Or at the very least, she could have let it simmer inside until it became a rock of resentment and ruined our relationship. Instead, she allowed the opportunity for reconciliation, and we have gone on to do some good work together. And she gave me a gift... the reminder to try and think about how others might receive the words I speak.

From small misunderstandings to sins of commission, this is what Jesus is talking about. He is preparing us to live in community and reconcile things before they get out of hand... and preparing us for what to do when things aren't reconciled. **And he promises to be there with us.** Just as today's reading from Exodus speaks to an essential character (Moses), our reading from Matthew speaks to essential characters... us.

But God is always there at work in the midst of it. God is at work... preparing the way. God prepared and used Moses, and God is preparing and using us, as agents of reconciliation and restoration.

And so I encourage you this week to ask: How has God prepared and used me for reconciliation in the past? And how is God preparing me now to reconcile with someone?