

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Service for September 6, 2009 in the Old Broad Street Church
Lessons: Exodus 5:1-9 and James 2:1-17

WHO IS THIS GOD, AND WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

For most of us, Labor Day marks the end of summer, the final weekend for the season that flies so quickly. It is not a church holiday, and there is no movement among Christians anxious about our religion's waning influence in Western societies to put Christ back into Labor Day. Beneath summer's last weekend, however, lies a movement of the Spirit that began more than three thousand years ago in the great civilization of Egypt. A new God entered Egyptian politics through the servants' entrance.

Reading our lesson where Moses first tells the pharaoh of this "new" God, I used the proper name Yahweh because piety's reverent substitution of "the LORD" for God's name makes no sense in this context. The pharaoh would not call this new God "the Lord," because the king of Egypt recognizes Yahweh only as the contemptible God of slaves he will not acknowledge as lord of anything. Who cares about a slave's god? Pharaoh is lord of the realm and himself a son of the highest god who has fixed the order of existence by divine decree. Pharaoh sits at the top, and slaves toil at the bottom. So, we hear the lord of Egypt ask contemptuously, "Who is Yahweh, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know Yahweh, and I will not let Israel go."

We miss the point if we fail to recognize the bond between this unknown God and the slaves themselves. The Creator of the universe enters human history as the no-account God who loves people regarded as unworthy of consideration as individuals or even as a group in their society. They are "labor" – the human resource meant to be kept invisible and always individually expendable. We glimpse them in our own society, but most of the time we do not really see them at all. They clean our motel rooms and clear our tables in restaurants. They pick our crops, cut lawns, paint houses, and do much of the hard work of construction. They stand outside mall stores hoping to be hired for the day. They scrub floors and clean restrooms. We catch glimpses of them moving silently through hospital halls with mops or carts of dirty laundry. Many of them work thirty-eight-hour weeks, not forty, so they will not qualify for benefits, but they also work more than one of those not-qualifying jobs, just to get by. And they are the unseen laborers here in this land. The products we buy are kept cheap by the unseen laborers in other nations who truly are economic and sometimes literal slaves, earning a pittance each day as the conditions in which they are forced to toil humiliate and slowly kill them. The cost of our unquestioning consumerism, our insistence upon the lowest

possible price, is horrific human suffering. In much of our world, workers remain a cheap, throw-away commodity, where one replaces another who has been used up and worn out, and the humanity of either is a matter of indifference. Many whose lives are short, painful, and constantly humiliating are women and children, but men are not immune as they continue to be the pack animals of what we call the “modern world.”

Throughout our society, there are movements to downgrade jobs and even professions so that millions more people can be forced into labor without respect, benefits, or reasonable compensation, and teachers are prominently among those targeted. The real factories have been vanishing for quite some time – the places where products are actually made – but factory-style education is on the rise, with the goal of little assembly line products (we call them our children) spouting the scripted “knowledge” they have memorized to pass the multi-billion dollar tests that substitute for education.

Who is this God, and why should we care? American Christianity has long forgotten this God who entered history as the God of slaves. Social conditions that dehumanize people have been declared not a spiritual concern or an evangelical one, either, although young evangelicals are waking up to God’s upset over social conditions. For too long, we have pretended that people are just individual souls and that God has no real concern with earth as such but only with the someday-realm of heaven. Ironically, the more we have focused our faith upon the individual, the less we have allowed for individuality within the faith. We have actually scripted salvation. No wonder we think teaching can be scripted, too. Here in the most individualistic society earth has ever seen, we still too often suppress the questions, curiosity, and diversity that make the individual unique and personally significant.

This unknown God the pharaoh dismisses with such contempt turned the world upside down, an accusation later leveled at *followers of the way*, which is what we Christians were called before the name “Christian” was given to us at Antioch. By loving and adopting slaves, this Yahweh God adopted the scorned people of the world. Jesus spoke to “the crowds,” a category term identifying the nameless, faceless masses of unwashed, uneducated, and unacknowledged people. He brought God and the dignity of being loved by God to people routinely dismissed as worthless. From the tyrant’s point of view, just imagine what would happen if the swarming crowds got the idea they mattered individually, as persons. There would be trouble, for sure. So Pharaoh increases the workload on the slaves by making them gather their own materials; it is the tyrant’s way of crushing hope and desire for change – for respect and even for labor that can be done willingly and with pride.

Have you noticed that even as individual initiative is trumpeted, our individual worth is being denied or penalized? No? Well, think about it. When we let the worth of others be denied, can we keep our own worth? Is there anyone now healthy who will not someday be

sick? Is there anyone now young who will not in time be old or else dead? Is there any chronic illness or disability that does not thereby become a pre-existing condition? We like to say of the suffering, “There but for the grace of God go I.” That’s insufficient. Rather, let us realize, “There goes a daughter or son of God,” and let us realize further, “There I go.” For if the elderly, the young, the sick, the unemployed, and the laborer are discounted, which of us counts for anything that will not prove to be “here today and gone tomorrow”?

Who is this God of slaves and toilers? God of the woman on her knees cleaning hairs out of someone else’s bathtub. God of the man going house to house seeking a bit of yard work. God of the over-qualified and the under-educated. God of the mother who must sell herself to feed her children, of the child who cannot read or do math, of the ex-worker whose job just went to someone far away for a fraction of the cost, of the person whose job has been eliminated (“nothing personal”) to make the company more profitable and who has just been told of the termination by another person who suspects he or she might be next.

What should Pharaoh have seen that he refused to recognize? I suspect the usual answer would be he failed to acknowledge the power, the authority, and the majesty of this God who sent Moses and Aaron, but that answer is wrong. What Pharaoh needed to recognize was the humanity of his slaves so he could finally discover his own humanity. He needed to know that Yahweh was God so he could realize he, the lord of the land, was no god at all.

And the Word became flesh. In Jesus, God again came into our world through the servants’ entrance. The Son of God lived as one of the people of a hot, dusty land under the dominion of a cruel, self-congratulating empire that was pleased to show its contempt for people like him if they ever dared to put themselves forward as persons of worth. Jesus gives us back our humanity – both our individuality as persons and our solidarity in the human community. If this one person does not matter, and that one does not matter either, do you? What makes you think so? Money? Education? Current position? Influence? Youth? Experience? If you do not matter as a person apart from these things time and fortune can take away from you, then you do not matter for any reason that will endure. One moment you have experience, the next you are part of the old guard that needs to be replaced.

We need to find Jesus Christ anew. Where? In the Bible? Yes. In our churches? Yes. But also, we need to find him in each other’s humanity so often denied or just ignored. We really are all in the same boat, and Jesus will always be found among those who labor and are overburdened, those denied coverage, those scorned or just overlooked. When we find our own humanity in his humanity, then we find each other and ourselves in his redemption of humanity. That’s called salvation. Amen.