

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Exodus 1:8-2:10

^{1:8} Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹ He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰ Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." ¹¹ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. ¹² But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. ¹³ The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, ¹⁴ and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them. ¹⁵ The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶ "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." ¹⁷ But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ¹⁸ So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" ¹⁹ The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." ²⁰ So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. ²¹ And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. ²² Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

^{2:1} Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. ² The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. ³ When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. ⁴ His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. ⁵ The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. ⁶ When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. ⁷ Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" ⁸ Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl

went and called the child's mother. ⁹ Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. ¹⁰ When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

Commentary

God often thwarts human plans, doesn't he? There is an expression, "Tell God your plans, and see if he laughs." This was the case in ancient Egypt: God laughed at the Pharaoh's attempts to create a permanent slave class out of the Hebrews, and at the king's order to the midwives to kill all of the male babies of the Hebrews. How ironic and beautiful that when Pharaoh's daughter takes baby Moses from his basket in the River Nile, it is to Moses' own mother that she turns for a nurse for the child. Moses – whose name means either "draws out" or "begets a child" – goes from certain death in the river (as the king had intended) to being the grandson of the king (God's plans!).

Reflection

Shiphrah and Puah – those are not necessarily two of the best-known characters in all of Scripture, but they may be among the most important. The Bible sees fit to record the names of two midwives – females of low status, who may not even have been Hebrews, themselves. Yet these two saved many babies from death because they "feared God." Who are some of the unsung heroes of faith in your life – little-known men and women who feared God and helped you grow in faith?

Romans 12:1-8

^{12:1} I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect. ³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸ the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Commentary

Using sacrificial language, Paul calls upon his readers to present their bodies – their whole selves – to God. The language of animal sacrifice would have been familiar to ancient readers.

But according to Paul, this is not the sort of sacrifice God wants. God wants not dead but “living sacrifices” – people willing to give their living hearts, minds, and souls to him. God wants us, body mind and spirit, and Paul employs the familiar metaphor of the body, one unit with many members, as an analogy of the way all of us have different gifts but one Lord.

Reflection

The apostle Paul saw that God has given all of us distinctive and different gifts, all in the service of Christ and his kingdom. Look around you at your study group now, or look within yourself: what are the gifts which you believe that God has given to you, and how are you using them for his sake?

Matthew 16:13-20

^{16:13} Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." ²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Commentary

Jesus had been teaching, preaching, and healing for sometime, at this point in Matthew's Gospel. But he must have wondered: does anyone here really understand my mission, really know who I am? Peter – under the influence of the Holy Spirit – testifies to Jesus' true identity: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus affirms Peter's understanding, and then makes a huge leap: he gives Peter the keys of his church, his body on this earth. And more, Jesus tells his friends that whatever happens, even death and Hades (the ancients' realm of the dead) will not prevail against this new thing, the Body of Christ. It is not time, though, for the whole world to know Jesus' real identity; he urges the disciples not to “go public” yet with what they know about him.

Reflection

Does Jesus' question to his disciples, "But who do you say that I am?" resonate with you? If Jesus calls us all to answer that question, as he did the disciples 2,000 years ago, what would your answer be to him, in your life, today? Who is Jesus to you?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 124

- ^{124:1} If it had not been the LORD who was on our side –
let Israel now say –
- ² **if it had not been the LORD who was on our side,
when our enemies attacked us,**
- ³ **then they would have swallowed us up alive,
when their anger was kindled against us;**
- ⁴ then the flood would have swept us away,
the torrent would have gone over us;
- ⁵ **then over us would have gone
the raging waters.**
- ⁶ Blessed be the LORD,
who has not given us
as prey to their teeth.
- ⁷ **We have escaped like a bird
from the snare of the fowlers;**
the snare is broken,
and we have escaped.
- ⁸ **Our help is in the name of the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.**

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.