

April 8, 2018

I Have Heard Their Cry

Exodus 2:23 – 3:10

At the end of the Book of Genesis, the descendants of Abraham had found refuge from a famine by moving to the land of Egypt. Centuries later, they were still there, but now they were slaves. We read from Exodus, chapter two, verse 23, to chapter three, verse 10:

2:23 After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. ²⁴God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ²⁵God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

3:1 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' ⁴When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' ⁵Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' ⁶He said further, 'I am the God of your father; the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷Then the Lord said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.'

One could argue that the most influential story in human history is the story of the Exodus. Briefly, that story is as follows: The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were slaves in Egypt, cruelly used by their taskmasters, but God heard their groaning and sent Moses to bring them out. By means of mighty signs and terrible plagues on Egypt, God brought that great empire to its knees and rescued Israel. By still more miracles, they crossed through a sea, survived a generation in an inhospitable desert, and eventually came to the land where their fathers had lived, a broad and good land, where they made themselves a home.

This is the central story of the Jewish faith. It is retold by the central ritual of Judaism, the Passover. And, by extension, it is the story behind Christianity's central ritual, as well. It was, after all, a Passover meal that Jesus ate with his disciples, which we remember in the sacrament of

Holy Communion. True, Jesus expanded the meaning of the Passover, so that it now refers to a deeper salvation, which is not just for a chosen people but for the whole world. Nevertheless, at a deep level, we cannot understand our own faith, and our own sacrament, until we know the Exodus.

So let us begin in Exodus chapter 2, verse 23: *The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God.* The Exodus happened because the Israelites cried out, and God heard. And it matters how it is phrased. It doesn't say that the Israelites cried out *to God*. They just cried out. There is no reason to think that Israel had more than a vague memory of the God that, centuries before, their ancestors had worshiped. They may have been crying out to another god. Or maybe to just any god who might be listening. Or to no god at all. But God heard. The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it this way: "[God] is like a magnet that draws such cries, for it is [God] who receives, is affected by, and responds to the cry of . . . uncredentialed nobodies" (*Old Testament Theology*, 26). In other words, it doesn't matter to whom the cries are addressed; it matters that they are cries from a place of helpless despair. God hears such cries. In this verse – which is reaffirmed thousands of times in the rest of scripture – we come to an essential biblical definition of God. God is the one who hears the groaning of the oppressed.

That's worth thinking about for a moment. If that's so, if it is part of God's essential nature to hear cries of distress, regardless of whether those cries are addressed to God by name, then who is God listening to today? Refugees from Syria, I would guess. And Burma. And those who stayed in Syria and Burma. People in internment islands off the coast of Australia. The people of South Sudan and Eritrea and Ethiopia and Central African Republic and Papua New Guinea and everywhere else an attempted genocide is proceeding that our newspapers don't report on because the victims have darker skins than we do. People living in seemingly inescapable poverty. People in our own nation faced with the choice of buying food or medications this month. People in Emergency Room waiting rooms. People caring for loved ones who don't recognize them anymore. People addicted to opioids. Or depressants. Children without parents. Children who are afraid of their parents. And we could go on all day. These are voices that rise every day, every minute, to the ears of God, because that's who God is. The Bible tells me so.

By the way, this definition isn't normal. This notion that God is defined by attention to the groaning of the oppressed is unique in human civilization. Every human culture that has ever existed has had some notion of a God, but in nearly every case, that god (or pantheon of gods) has been defined in terms of power. To put it simply, humans have sensed that there was a god and so they have created gods that looked just like them, but *bigger, stronger, smarter*. Perhaps you've heard these words applied to God: *omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient*. They mean that God is not just present, but present *everywhere*: omnipresent. God is strong, stronger than *anything*: omnipotent. God is knowing, in fact knows *everything*: omniscient. God has been defined as the ultimate version of us. Fun fact: that's not in the Bible. Yes, God is strong and knowing, but that's not how the Bible defines God. One more time, God is defined, above all, as the one who listens to the cry of the oppressed, and when the Bible does speak of God's power,

what it usually says is, “God is strong enough to deliver you in your need.” When the Bible does speak of God’s knowledge, it will be to say God knows you and can guide you. This is not how anyone else defines the deity. But it is found all through our scripture.

A quick illustration from a weird psalm – Psalm 82. In this psalm, the poet imagines a scenario in which God has summons all the other gods for a performance review. (Yeah, I know. This is one of those places where it’s best not to be too literal with scripture.) Anyway, God, who clearly is the ultimate God, finds all the others lacking and fires them. Why? By what standard are they judged and found wanting? God says, *‘How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked’* (vv. 2-4). Other gods may be all about power. For Israel’s God, for our God, the very definition of divinity is to hear the cry of the weak.

And to respond to it. That’s the other part of hearing. We continue our story. Moses, a refugee Israelite with an outstanding murder warrant in Egypt, is hiding in the Sinai desert, keeping sheep, when he sees a strange sight: a bush that burns and yet is not consumed. So he goes to look more closely. Verse 4: *When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush.* I’d love to spend more time on this, but I won’t. Let me just point out that God said nothing to Moses until he made the first move. Only when he went out of his way to look did God call him. And I wonder what would have happened if Moses’ had seen the bush, shrugged and said, “That’s weird,” and went on about his business. But Moses did, and God called to him. God repeats what we’ve already said about the nature of God: *‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings. Then God adds this: I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.* God is not just the one who hears the cry of the oppressed but the one who responds to that cry. God is deliverer, the One who Saves. And then we get verse 10. *‘So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.’*

Anyone besides me find that terrifying? God says, “I have heard the people’s cry and have come down to deliver them from their slavery.” That’s great. No problem there. And then God adds, “So I’m sending you. Go do it.” I’m not going to read the whole chapter – though you definitely should – but here’s a quick summary. Moses says, “I can’t do that!” God replies, “It’s all right. I’ll be with you.” Moses, perhaps wishing for more specifics, says, “But who are you, anyway?” God says, “I’m the one who is.” Moses says, I think understandably, “That’s not going to be enough, you know. No one will believe me.” So God shows him some miracles to do that will get people’s attention. Moses says, “You know, I stutter. I can’t talk so good.” God says, “I know you stutter. Is that a problem? Fine, I’m sending your brother Aaron to go with you. Aaron talks *real* good.” Finally Moses says, “I don’t *want* to do this!” And God says, “I know you don’t want to. Do it anyway.”

As I said, I find this one of the most godawful terrifying passages in all of scripture. Is this what comes of turning aside to take a closer look at God? Being given an impossible task and apparently no help and almost zero information about how to go about it? Yeah, pretty much.

That's how it works all the way through scripture, in fact. After the first few chapters of Genesis – where God acts in sweeping, worldwide ways without anyone else's involvement – this is how God *always* seems to work in the Bible. Through human beings – weak, unlikely, flawed, and usually reluctant human beings. Yes, God works miracles, but with the sole exception of raising Jesus Christ from the dead, every divine miracle is done through some human. And no divine healing or deliverance takes place until some human prays and asks for it. That does not mean that God always does what we ask, but it does seem to imply that nothing is going to happen *until* we ask for it. For some reason – and it would be worth wondering why – God chooses to work through us, or not at all.

We're going to spend the next month or two looking at the stories of the Exodus. This is how that story begins. God hears the people's cry of distress. Maybe they were actually praying to the God of Abraham. Or maybe they were crying in bitterness, feeling abandoned by all gods. I'm not sure it matters. No matter how they're addressed, cries of pain make their way to God. That's who God is: the One who Hears. So God set a bush on fire where Moses would see it, then waited to see if he would go to see or just go on about his business. When he went to see, God spoke to him, told him about the misery of the people, then said, "So I've decided to set them free. And chosen you to do it."

At every step, God behaves exactly the way that most people would *not* expect a God to behave. But wait until you see what God does with this unlikely Moses and his outstanding warrant and speech impediment.