

Oct. 10, 2010

Exodus 1:6-14, 22-2:10

“Deliverance”

I have often found myself in groups where people are asked to share how, when or where they have met God in their lives. I have been surprised by how often the stories people share are stories of deliverance.

I was driving on a foggy night. The pavement was wet; the temperature was low, just above freezing. I could only see a few feet ahead of me. I wasn't traveling fast, creeping along actually, maybe 5 or 10 miles per hour. Suddenly, as I came over the crest of a hill, I saw headlights bearing down on me, in my own lane. I swerved off onto the shoulder. Luckily it wasn't a steep embankment or a deep ditch. As I sat there, my heart pounded wildly, but I felt the strangest sense of calm at the same time. I knew that in that moment God was with me.

I've heard many similar stories- of an airplane not boarded that subsequently had problems; of a bicycle veering into the bushes at the very moment a car went out of control; of a baby caught by a cloth, securely pinned diaper just as a tornado swept through the trailer park----story after story of DELIVERANCE. These stories have deep meaning for us. They remind us that there is a power greater than ourselves, which cares for us and acts to deliver us from harm.

But these stories also trouble me. First, as a pastor I try to remind us all (myself included) that God is ALWAYS around. He doesn't just show up in dramatic moments of rescue. Second, we know there are many people whose cars do not swerve to safety, whose airplanes in trouble are boarded, whose bicycles don't land in bushes out of harm's way, and whose babies are injured and killed by tornados, earthquakes and other disasters.

So, I have been none too thrilled by stories of deliverance. I have preferred stories that tell of meetings with God under the stars, in a rainbow, in a child's laughter or in the warmth of a loving hand.

Well, here we are reading through the entire Bible in a year—and we've come to the book of EXODUS! And we are in the midst of DELIVERANCE. Our faith proclaims deliverance. God enters human lives, acting through people and events to deliver those who are oppressed, suffering, in danger. We take a leap of faith to proclaim this truth, because

we KNOW there is still oppression, suffering and danger all around us. But the Bible tells us God is fighting against them all. That's who God is; what God is like. Would you love God, worship God, if that wasn't true?

Today's text tells the story of "Moses in the bulrushes". I'll bet a lot of us have heard this story many times, beginning when we were young children. But let's try to hear it one more time with new ears. Let's imagine we're sitting in a class in Wiley Hall. The discussion leader has invited people to share a memory, a story of a time they felt very close to God. Imagine there's a woman there named Miriam. She's around 65, tall and thin, with dark eyes and tawny skin. Mysteriously, she seems to be from another time, another place. Her eyes light up as she speaks.

I remember, she says, I remember a time when I KNEW God was right beside me, more powerful than I had ever imagined. I was six years old, living in Egypt with my parents. It was a horrible time for us. The ruler of the land had decided he hated my people. We never knew exactly why, except that it seemed there were too many of us. As the generations passed we had more and more children. Maybe the ruler was afraid we'd take over his realm. He tried to beat down my people- first by making us slaves. We were forced into labor camps, made to build cities, to work in the fields.

That's how things were when I was born. It was a rough life. But then things got worse. The life of slavery wasn't doing much to the population growth of my people. So the ruler came up with a more drastic scheme. Every newborn baby boy was to be seized and thrown in the Nile to drown. The girls were allowed to live. When this rule began, my mother was pregnant. We were terrified, wondering what we would do if the baby was a boy. The baby was born, and he was a boy. He was strong and healthy, not like the others my mother had had between me and him. Those had all died at birth, or from sickness in the first few weeks of their lives. This baby was so cute and lively, we loved him so much.

My mother managed to hide him for three months, but then he was just getting too big and noisy. He was going to be discovered soon, and drowned in the river. My mother sobbed in the night with fear and anguish, trying to hush him when he cried too loudly. She even tried to get us to ARGUE loudly over the sound of his cries.

Then one day she called me. “Go to the river’s edge and gather all the reeds you can carry,” she said. I wondered what on earth she had in mind, but I did what she asked. I made several trips, muddying my clothes and scratching my arms and legs. I sat and watched as my mother wove a little bed for the baby, that looked like a tiny boat. She covered it with tar and pitch.

Early the next morning my mother put my baby brother into the basket and grabbed me by the hand. “Let’s go,” she said. We crept quietly in the hush of dawn to the river. My mother put the little basket into the water and it floated. I’ll never forget the feeling I had as I watched the current carry it away. My brother was so little, so helpless! I was sure I would never see him again. But my mother caught me by the arm and sent me downstream. “Follow him!” she whispered urgently. “Watch to see what happens to him.”

My mother and I both knew the ruler’s daughter came early every day to bathe in the Nile, to the same lovely shaded spot. I couldn’t imagine what my mother could be thinking; the baby was rapidly moving toward that exact spot! He would surely be discovered and drowned!

But that isn’t what happened at all. The ruler’s daughter did find him. She knew immediately what we had done. She knew my brother was one of my people’s children, and that her father had decreed he was to be killed. She knew someone in his family had sent him floating away, hoping against hope that in some way he might be saved and live. I’ll never know why or how, she felt her heart stirred with pity and compassion. She plucked him out of that basket and started oohing and aahing over him. (He WAS just the cutest little thing- trust me!) All her maids gathered around her and they fussed over him like he was a prince himself!

When I saw that, I just couldn’t believe it. And that’s when I felt it—like a strong, sure hand pushing me forward. I didn’t know what was pushing me then--- but now I do. I popped out of the bushes and went right up to the princess. “Do you need a reliable woman to look after him, and nurse him?” I asked her. I just blurted it out, right like that- talking directly to a princess like she was anybody at all. And she looked at him, deep into his eyes, and I knew she knew. She KNEW I was part of his family, and that we were desperately trying to save him. But she smiled and nodded. “Yes, I do. Of course I do,” she said.

So I ran and got my mother. The princess said she could be the baby's nurse and she'd even PAY her to take care of him. It was just unbelievable. My brother lived. And he was adopted by the ruler's daughter. She even named him: "Moses" she called him. That's like the name "Drew" in English. She named him that because she drew him out of the water—kind of like he was born to her in that moment. But he was still part of my family too. It was just the craziest thing how it all worked out.

That early morning lives in my memory. The river of green, the Nile River, should have brought death to my brother- but it brought him life. The ruler should have brought death to my brother, but he gave him a mother instead, the princess. My mother should have lost him when she gave him up, but she got him back in a way, nursing him, raising him on her milk and her songs and stories. I have never felt God so close by my side as on that riverbank: pushing me forward, putting words in my mouth. We thought there was no way out, but God gave us ideas and took hold of us like a couple kitchen spoons, to whip up a concoction we never dreamed of. God has brought us through some tight places and tough times. And the thing about God is, you never can predict how he'll bring you through. But you can trust he will. God WILL bring you through.

As we continue to read the Bible, there will be more of these stories: stories of DELIVERANCE. Watch to see how many different people are used by God to bring about his purposes.

God wants to use US, you know—to bring about his purposes here in St. Charles in 2010. We seek to live our mission: Loving God, Serving Others, and Growing Together. We do that, because we believe God will use US to carry out his saving work in this world. We do that, because we know living our mission will bring our vision: To be a hub of Christ-directed activity radiating out to the world from the heart of St. Charles.

Now I'd like to invite Eric and Jake Werner to come and share a bit about their experiences in the ministries and mission of our church.

(Closing words here)