

Sermon preached at Church of the Servant
August 24, 2008
The Rev. Catherine Powell

Texts: Exodus 1:8-2:10; Matthew 16:13-20; Romans 12:1-8
“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds...” (Romans 12:2)

My twenty year old daughter took me, under duress, to the Batman movie recently. It reminded me of common set-up’s in action movies. Often the movie begins with a scene of disaster or chaos. A building is blowing up; cars lose control and crash into other buildings. Sirens wail. Crowds gather, looking shocked. You’re nearly overwhelmed. But then the camera pans the crowd and—just for a moment—pauses on some particular face. And you, the watcher, know right away that face belongs to someone who will be very important in the story. You know, that in the chaos, in the crowd, is someone who will step forward and, most likely, be the hero.

The scene that is presented in today’s Old Testament story is like that. We have been following Abraham’s descendents in our Old Testament readings and we know how Joseph went to Egypt, and how his family went there to escape famine. And today we see how the Egyptians begin to look on them with suspicion and then hatred. We see how their status sinks until finally they are slaves. If this was put up on the big screen, we would see the Hebrews being forced to do hard labor, dragging huge stones, falling down under the whips of their slave drivers. We would hear wails and shouts, moans and sobs. Pharaoh might be portrayed looking over it all with an evil sneer and ordering even more ruthless treatment. Looking at the big picture, we would be overwhelmed at the cruelty of the Hebrews’ position, at their helplessness. But--*but*—if we looked beyond the foreground of bitter suffering, off into the distance where we could see just an edge of the Nile glittering--if we did that we would see the small figure of a woman bending over the rushes and picking up a baby. Moses. And we would know—there is the one who will change all this. The hero.

Of course, it took Moses time to grow up and struggle with his identity and become the hero. And he had help—his mother who nursed him and told him stories of his people (probably), his father-in-law Jethro. As an aside, let’s give a cheer for those courageous and clever midwives who have finally made it into the lectionary. But the small baby whom we see in today’s scene does indeed become the hero who liberates his people and transforms their destiny.

This tells us something about how God works, how things that look little or unimportant grow under God’s influence to become big and powerful—how a seed grows mighty roots and branches, moving even huge stones. The Gospel story has a similar message. It also presents a situation which would seem trivial to the ruling powers of its time. The Roman Empire would have seen Jesus and his little group as nothings, nobodies. There they are in a tiny, occupied country, pausing beside a dusty road. Jesus, the poor traveling teacher, asks his disciples, “Who are people saying I am? What are they saying about

me?” His disciples reply that people think he’s like one of the prophets from the old times, or that maybe his spirit is that of John the Baptist who has recently been such a passionate preacher. “Well,” says Jesus, asking the question asked of all his followers in all times, “who do *you* say that I am?” The disciples, who are not known for their quick minds, pause, thinking about their answers. But Simon speaks.

Now let’s remind ourselves about Simon. Simon was the type who jumped into things without thinking. Today we might say he had a problem with impulse control. His teachers would tell his parents he had ADHD. I can see those teachers now, talking in the hall after school. (This is going to be an inside Bible joke.) Those teachers are saying, “Well, what about that kid Simon. He cannot keep his mind on one thing. He jumps all over the place. I mean, if he were in a boat in the middle of a storm, he’d jump right out if he saw something moving over on the horizon.”

When Jesus asks his question, it is Simon who blurts out an answer. “You are the Messiah.” You are the One. You can just see Jesus smiling at this impulsive young man. “Simon, you are a rock. In fact, from now on I’m going to call you Rocky!” (That is what Peter means. Petros-Rock.) “You are rock-solid and I’m going to build my church on you. I’m giving you the keys to the kingdom.” (Some of us might be glad that someone distractible is standing as guard at the gates of heaven—might be more of a chance of our sneaking in.) But here’s the thing. Peter goes through a lot and he *becomes* rock solid. After Jesus is gone, he cares for the church. He preaches to thousands. Without his work, and Paul’s, the church wouldn’t have been launched. Jesus takes the last person you might expect and uses him to build the kingdom.

Moses’ birth: a minor event in a huge chaotic scene. Simon Peter: an unexpected leader. God has plans and ways of working that we don’t know about. God flies under the radar. I like to imagine that God’s power is like a huge, forceful river, gleaming with light, which flows under the surface of what we can see. It’s there but hidden. We cannot even imagine how it may break through.

This understanding can transform our way of living. It can help us avoid some of the major sins of our time. I know “sin” isn’t the word we use every day, but that’s what I’m talking about. We might use the terms “wrong understanding,” or “bad attitude” instead. There are a some intertwined attitudes—sin—that these stories would challenge.

The first is our exclusive focus on the present. We don’t seem to grasp God’s perspective, God’s *long-term* plans. You could say that we are hopeless, without hope. People with strong hope and faith look expectantly to the future. They expect God’s work to emerge more and more as time goes on. Their vision is aimed far off. And so they live as if there will be a meaningful future. They don’t get caught up in greed and consumerism, needing to have everything now. They think of resources as do the Native Americans—as needing to last for the next seven generations, not to be used up. Those of us caught in sin want fulfillment now and tend to discount the future. It isn’t real to us. We develop a throw-away culture of products that don’t last, of huge trash dumps, of great debt. We forget

that God is even now planting seeds that will sprout next year, or in the next decade, or century.

The second sin seems to be the opposite. Rather than looking like people who are greedy and thoughtless, this sin overwhelms people who look helpful and compassionate. This is the sin of thinking the world is on our shoulders, that if anything is to get done we must be the ones to do it. This is the sin of living burdened and anxious. Now we are a parish that includes a lot of people in helping professions. I am one of them. And those of us in helping professions see problems—other people’s problems—and want to fix them. We can end up running around expending huge amounts of worry and energy trying to make everything right for everybody. We stand over that little seed and we stare at it. We water it. We fertilize it. We talk to it. We encourage it. We lecture it. We water it some more. We exhort it. But we can’t force it to grow. Only God can make it grow. I’m not saying we shouldn’t care for it. I’m just saying that it’s the bad kind of pride to think that this seed needs me to make it grow. Look at the stories we heard today. Look at what God can work with. God is like that huge forceful river. What we can do is line ourselves up with that force of life and love, and trust that it—not us—will do the work.

The epistle says “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” We don’t have to think like the world. We can be freed from the need to have it all now, the belief that “now” is all there is. And we can be freed from carrying the world’s burdens ourselves, the belief—expressed in our behavior-- that no force exists except that which we apply.

When we are overwhelmed by that big chaotic picture on the screen—so much happening, so much to worry about, so little meaning—let us look instead at the tiny details, the baby being cared for, the loyal—if limited—friend. And may we remind ourselves that there is a lot happening that we cannot see at all. Our vision of God at work in small, powerful ways—our sense of God as a powerful force, ever-present, can indeed transform our minds and renew a right spirit within us.

