***MOSES AND MIRIAM***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

August 27, 2023

Texts: Exodus 1:8-14, 22 and 2:1-10 and Matthew 2:13-18

 They were immigrants, not natives of the land in which they lived, people who had come out of desperation to find a new home in order to survive. When they first arrived and their numbers were small they were welcomed with open arms. But as the years passed the immigrants had children and their children had children and their numbers began to grow so that the natives of the land began to worry. They worried that life might change, that these immigrants might soon carry enough political clout to change their way of life and threaten the dominant position of the natives in their culture. They worried that the immigrants might not be as loyal to the nation and its political structures as the natives of the land were, and might even become enemies. These immigrants were a problem, not because they had done anything wrong, but simply because they were thriving and thus posed a threat to the status quo. Sound familiar?

 The issues surrounding immigration and ethnic identity have posed challenges to governments around the globe for a long, long time. Sometimes they arise as the result of war or violence as refugees flee one nation to find sanctuary in another. Sometimes they are the result of hunger that drives people from their homeland to places where there is food to feed themselves and their children. Sometimes they are the result of arbitrary political boundaries that have separated ethnic groups who long to be reunited. Sometimes they are the result of hopelessness that leads people to seek a new life in a new place where there are opportunities for a more secure future, especially as climate change induced droughts, heat waves, and floods make farming untenable or life unbearable.

 It has been said that our United States is a nation of immigrants, comprised largely of people from other places and nations who came to these shores and drove indigenous peoples from their homes and lands in order to establish this one nation under God with liberty and justice for all. That *all* apparently did not include the indigenous people from whom the land was taken! Across the years new immigrants have been key to our growth as a nation, bringing much needed talents, resources, and ideas that have helped to shape and reshape our culture, economy and government. Many of those immigrants endured discrimination and persecution upon their arrival as longer tenured immigrants resisted sharing the fruits and opportunities of this land with them. Emma Lazarus’ poem on The Statue of Liberty may read:

***Give me your tired, your poor,***

***Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,***

***The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.***

***Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me…***

**but there continue to be many citizens of our nation who want to send many of the huddled masses back from whence they came or bar them from coming at all.**

**The reality is that not all are welcomed, nor can they be, for there are limits to how many immigrants any one nation can absorb into its national life in any given time. Europe is facing the continuing challenge of coping with immigrants from Ukraine who are escaping the war and from Africa who are coming by the boatload to escape drought and conflict. For years now we have faced the challenge of desperate people trying to cross our southern border – often at risk to their own lives, in hopes of beginning a new life here among us. There are no easy answers in sight, though one might wonder why, given the shortage of workers in our economy, we are not welcoming more immigrants with open arms and inviting them to work at those jobs which remain unfilled.**

**There is, however, one aspect of the problem in which all of us as Christians should be united: those who come, however they come, should be treated with dignity, justice, respect, and love. That command comes to us from the law of the Lord in Exodus: *“You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.”* (Exodus 22:21) and from the words of Jesus, *“Love your neighbor as yourself.”*  We bear responsibility as Christians to treat with compassion all those immigrants who come to our land, however they come; some will become citizens and some may return to the lands from which they came, but all are entitled to just, fair, and loving care. The reason for that command is that our ancestors in faith knew what it was to be immigrant people.**

 **The descendants of Abraham ended up in Egypt because of famine. As we heard last week, it was Joseph who provided a safe haven for them with his astute planning to preserve crops in the productive years in order to survive seven years of famine. When he and his brothers arrived in Egypt, they and their children and their children’s children stayed and thrived and became an existential threat to a new Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Pharaoh’s solution was not to send them back from whence they came, but to enslave them and limit their growth by having all their male infants thrown into the river Nile as crocodile bait.**

 **Across the centuries there have been tyrants who have sought to solve their problems by such ethnic cleansing. In the 20th century we know of horrific acts done in the name of ethnic purity at the hand of Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, in the gas chambers of Germany under Adolph Hitler, in the war in Bosnia after the fall of Tito, and in the 21st century in reeducation camps in China against Uighurs, in corners of Ethiopia and Eritrea, and in many other places that we do not even know of. People put to death or enslave other people simply because they are ethnically different or from a different tribe. Pharaoh belongs in that notorious list of those who commit crimes against humanity with his plan to kill the baby boys of Hebrew slaves in order to solve his immigration problem.**

 **That was the world into which baby Moses was born. His story is one that is told from our first years in Sunday School with all manner of constructed baskets that float. This baby, destined to die by order of Pharaoh, is rescued by the hand of God at work through his mother and sister. For three months he was hidden from those who would toss him into the Nile, but how long can you reasonably hide a baby before word leaks out about his presence – and such a disclosure meant for him a watery death! So his mother came up with a plan. She made a basket into a boat, an ark for him to float among the reeds of the river, (in fact the word for the *basket* has the same Hebrew root as the word for *ark*) and she charged his sister with keeping watch over him. Moses’ sister is unnamed in the story, but we come to know that her name was Miriam, and that she was a key part of God’s plan to deliver Israel from the iron fist of Pharaoh.**

 **Had Miriam been like any of those brothers in Genesis, I suspect that baby Moses might well have ended up as crocodile bait. Those brothers – Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers – were in constant conflict, deceiving, enslaving, and even killing one another. But in Miriam we have a sibling who from the very beginning offers tender love to her little brother. She waits and watches out for her little brother amidst the reeds of the river until he is found by Pharaoh’s daughter. Interestingly, Pharaoh’s daughter correctly identifies the ethnicity of the child, “*This must be one of the Hebrews’ children*.” But she defies the order of her father and claims the child as her own rather than tossing him into the river. Pharaoh’s daughter has pity upon this helpless infant, regardless of his ethnic origins, and one suspects that the God who hardened Pharaoh’s heart at the time of the plagues must have softened the heart of Pharaoh’s daughter.**

 **That would have been the end of the story, except that Miriam did something more. Upon seeing Pharaoh’s daughter’s response to finding the baby, Miriam offers to find someone to nurse the child and when Pharaoh’s daughter agrees, Miriam runs to bring her mother who is then hired to be the wet nurse for her own son. So, the child destined for death in the Nile is not just rescued, but is nursed by his own mother. And while the child will eventually be adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter who names him “Moses”, the Egyptian word for “son”, Miriam and her mother get what they wanted all along – the rescue of the child who will grow to lead God’s people out of Egypt.**

 **In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Exodus is the defining moment in the life of the people of Israel. It is that event that affirms for them God’s saving presence with them. Again and again, the people recall God’s deliverance from Egypt as a sign of God’s faithfulness and as a reminder of their responsibilities to God. But it is also that experience in Egypt that reminds them of their responsibilities toward others – responsibilities for compassion and hospitality and tolerance of those who are immigrants in their land. Moses is the dominant figure in that story – the instrument by which God delivered Israel. But Miriam is the instrument by which God delivered Moses, and so brother and sister have vital roles in this story of salvation from bondage in Egypt.**

 **How ironic then that more than a thousand years later, Egypt would be the refuge to which the new instrument of God’s salvation would flee! As you heard in Matthew’s telling, when Herod began his murderous plan to kill all the male babies under two years of age in and around Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt with the baby Jesus, fled to the very place from which God had delivered God’s people from bondage through Moses centuries before. The place of bondage became a place of refuge in God’s plan for salvation. There they were welcomed and allowed to remain until it was safe to return home.**

 **There need to be such refuges in the world, places where those who are persecuted, and those who are oppressed, and those whose lives and livelihoods have been devastated by drought or climate change, and those whose lives are endangered by the tyranny of others can find a safe place to live and thrive. Egypt served that purpose for the baby Jesus. There was no such alternative for baby Moses, so God provided a refuge in the house of Pharaoh. God used Miriam to find a safe place for her little brother. Her story, our story, is an immigrant story. Might we then be the instruments by which God provides refuge for our brothers and sisters from across the globe or from down the street who need a safe place in a violent world? We have done so for one Afghani family here in Staunton. Might we do more? For, the pharaohs are still out there wreaking havoc. Might God use you, use us, as God used Miriam, to save these children, of whatever age, to provide a refuge for them? For, as we welcome them, says Jesus, so we welcome him. What kind of welcome then, might we offer? Amen**