

The Journey Metaphor

The Earth Group Service Saturday November 1, 2003
Mitcham UCA 7:00pm

Journey is an important and suggestive Biblical metaphor.

What parts of the Bible suggest themselves when we think about “journey”? Perhaps we think of the Exodus of the Jews, and later, their Exile. Or of Jesus, who, in the middle of Mark’s Gospel announces his intent to journey to the Cross. Or we may think of St Paul’s Missionary Journeys.

There is much that may be helpful to take from these stories for us today. And tonight I wish to share some of my thoughts on aspects of the Jewish journey, and in particular, the Exodus and the Exile.

The Exodus

The context of the story is that the descendants of Jacob are living in Egypt. Joseph, one of the sons of Jacob, is sold off by his brothers into slavery in Egypt and eventually, unbeknown to his family in Palestine, becomes Prime Minister. When there is famine in Palestine, the brothers go to Egypt to buy corn. They encounter Joseph. They don’t recognise him but Joseph gets them to bring back his father Jacob and the rest of the family. Joseph reveals himself and he settles them in Egypt. Time goes by. Jacob dies. Joseph dies. And the clan prospers and grows in number.

One of the most beautiful texts from this period is found in the close of this story, Genesis 50: 15-21. Well before the law and the day of atonement, we have a passage about faith, grace and forgiveness. After the death of their father, the brothers ask Joseph to forgive them for the way they tried to get rid of him by selling him as a slave. Joseph cries when they at last seek forgiveness and says: “You plotted evil against me, but God turned it into good, in order to preserve the lives of many people.”

What a great text!

Do we have the kind of faith that believes that God is at work in the world despite the evil doing of governments and corporations? And that it will turn out for good.

In Muslim and Buddhist culture the lotus thrives in the dirty swamp producing the most beautiful flower amid the muck.

But then an Egyptian king comes to power who is threatened by these Palestinians.

Exodus 1: 9 – 14

Here is the dynamic of fear, (compared to the dynamic of love).

He tries to reduce their numbers by having all the newborn baby boys killed.

But two Egyptian midwives resist, tell some fibs, and save the lives of many babies. It reminds me of the many noble attempts to save the lives of Jews from Nazi Germans, as we saw in the film “Schindler’s List”.

Into this context of genocide we have the story of the baby who was hidden in the tall grass on the edge of the river, floating in a basket, discovered and saved by the very king's daughter. She called him Moses, which sounds like the Hebrew "pull out".

God hears the cries of the slaves who are being made to do more with less – yes, the idea of productivity was alive and well even in those days! He raises up a leader, Moses, who is one of them, an Israelite, but has been educated as an Egyptian aristocrat. He is also on the run as a murderer.

Moses pleads for the release of the people and in the end achieves their freedom. The people of Israel leave at short notice, crossing the Red Sea.

The last straw for Pharaoh is the announcement by Moses that if they are not released, all the first born in Egypt will die. But Moses tells the Israelites they could be spared if they first kill a lamb or goat and then smear the blood over the doorposts; and the angel of death would pass over their house. This is the "Passover" - Yom Kippur – celebrated to this day in October.

But once they are free the Israelites become disobedient and are forced to wander in the desert for a whole generation before they reach the land promised to them. In their wanderings they receive the Law of Moses and they get organised. Finally it is Joshua who leads them over the Jordan River and they "possess the land of promise".

What can we say about this story?

It is a story of rescue. It is a powerful story in places like Africa and South America where there is corruption and a sharp divide between rich and poor. For the oppressed it is still a story of hope for a better future.

It is the central story for Jewish identity – they continue to remember how God rescued them. It was taken over by the Christians, first a Jewish sect, so that in John's Gospel we have John the Baptist say "Behold the Lamb of God!" – Jesus, the one whose blood will be shed to provide salvation from death, just like that Egyptian Passover. From the beginning of John's Gospel we have the whole theology of Jesus dying so that we might be spared death.

The story of the Exodus is the powerful narrative that motivates Israel today, why settlements are being built on Palestinian land and Palestinian houses demolished. Jews are taking what they believe has been promised.

And it is also why Christian USA supports Israel because they believe the Bible, which says that the land has been promised by God to the Jews.

But there is another story.

The Exile

The 12 tribes of Israel moved into the land of Canaan –the 12 sons of Jacob each had their own piece of land and they lived as a confederacy of tribes.

Later they copied other peoples in the region and decided they needed a king. This wasn't God's idea. The high point of this period is the time of King David. David wanted a temple to be built for Jahweh and it was Solomon, his son who pulled it off. (And the

Christians have followed suit with their great cathedrals!) It was a magnificent building, fit for their God. Surely this was a *home* for Jahweh, on Mt Zion, in Jerusalem!

So the people came to believe that God lived in the temple – in the holy of holies. Before that, God was worshipped in a number of country centres but now the heavenly city exerted a monopoly on God.

Prophets came along and warned that corruption was growing. They warned the people to remember what it was like when they were the poor and oppressed in Egypt – that they were freed to live in equity and peace – *shalom*, which means ‘right relationships’. There should be no poor among them.

Israel became threatened by foreign nations and the prophets warned that if the inequities weren’t redressed, God would punish them through these other countries. Jeremiah even said that foreigners would come in and destroy the temple. Blasphemy! How could that be if God lived in the temple? “With our God and God’s promise that God would never abandon us, how could this ever happen?”

But it did! In about 584 BCE Jerusalem was flattened – all that was left of the temple was a bit of wall – what we call the *Wailing Wall* today. It’s the *Wailing Wall* because that’s what happened – read the book of Lamentations for an R-rated description. The Babylonians slaughtered most of the people, men women and children. They left alive a few poor and they took the more educated survivors back to Babylon as captives.

This was not a pleasant journey. All that had been believed had been destroyed. The Jews lost their God – the one who said he wouldn’t abandon them, but did – they lost their identity because they lost their family, they lost their land, they lost their inheritance, they lost the god they believed would always save them. They lost everything! Surely it would have been better to have died than this – to be taken to a foreign country with foreign gods to work as slaves. They didn’t expect to return.

But if you want a story about what hope, check out what Jeremiah did as he saw the army descending on Jerusalem. The very person who had tried to warn the leaders and the people, who suffered their abuse because they wouldn’t believe him, (they thought they had a watertight theology), even being left for dead at the bottom of a well and he still went on with what they thought was heresy – Jeremiah goes out and buys a plot of land! Crazy! In a couple of hours the land title deed is going to be worthless!

At the very lowest point, as women and children are being slaughtered in the streets, Jeremiah is declaring that there is a future.

The story of the Exile is a story that warns us against any theology that has God worked out – people who claim to have all the answers – like having God in a box where you can study him.

These Israelites thought they had God in the temple. They had their assurance of salvation in the events of the Exodus. They had God and those others didn’t. “Can’t touch this!”. Do you know Christians like that? They’re heading for a cropper!

So here are the remaining Israelites in Babylon. Their God is dead (they think). They’ve lost the promised land. Surely the gods of Babylon have proven themselves mightier than the God of Israel.

Well some must have thought that and decided that rather than despair they'd become good Babylonians. Babylonians were an amazing people. One of the Seven Wonders of the World proves that. So some assimilated.

But some couldn't help but ask 'why?'. What did all this mean? They asked questions...like "how can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (More recently revived as the pop song "By the Rivers of Babylon"). They wouldn't give up on their tradition. But "where did we go wrong?" they asked.

So they had a kind of Royal Commission. They started gathering up all the stories of their tradition and started to write them down. And as they did this they felt their identity being affirmed. The creation story affirmed God was creator and everything was created in abundance and everything was good – a counter liturgy to what they were getting on Babylonian TV - to work harder for productivity gains. And they reminded each other about the Sabbath – that break in the week that says "enough is enough" – another counter liturgy.

So much of the Hebrew Scriptures was gathered together at this time and written down by scribes. It was in fact the way they stopped themselves being assimilated into Babylonian culture, preventing them from being lost as a nation. So it was important to write into the Scriptures the injunctions not to inter-marry, for example, to maintain strong boundaries around their identity. Clear instructions about what you could and couldn't do. And there were plenty of hero stories when "we win and they lose".

And it worked! They not only survived in captivity, they thrived!

Now let me digress a moment to think about "when bad things happen to good people".

Imagine something really bad happens in your life.

You'll probably get advice like this; "Don't worry, it'll be alright", which means, "forget it!" "Get on with your life!"

When you get this so-called advice you'll probably feel like your experience and your feelings have been trashed. And you'd be right!

Some friend might say, "It could have been worse!"; which means "forget it! - it was nothing compared to what could have happened!" and again your experience is discounted.

Or you could get, "You'll get over it" which means "forget it". Like Job, when his so-called friends give him 'advice' you feel totally not listened to, not understood and discarded.

The Book of Lamentations is written as five acrostic poems – so each of the 22 verses starts with one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. That probably means it was meant to be memorised.

But the central poem is written as triplets – aaa,bbb,ccc...

To this day, every year the Book of Lamentations is recited.

Why?

Because when bad things happen, repression – “don’t worry, she’ll be right” is not the way to deal with it. This is the Greek attitude – stoicism. It’s the English “stiff upper lip”. Lamentations teaches us not to sit on grief and hope it will go away. Lamentations teaches us that one should not attempt to go *around* grief, but go *through* it.

We had a visitor at Flinders last year, Dr Nancy Reeves from Canada. She runs a trauma centre and also being a United Church of Canada minister, she made contact with me. I arranged a seminar with the counselling staff at Flinders. She has pioneered a technique for people with post-traumatic stress called desensitisation.

She asked for a volunteer from the group who was still experiencing flashbacks from a nasty experience. She got the volunteer to remember the occasion and to get in touch with the level of stress they were now feeling. Very high! She got the person to notice all the details of what was happening and to go through the story, noticing all the details. Then she got the person to go through it again. The volunteer reported that she was now feeling completely stress free.

I’m not suggesting that you become an amateur psychologist and you try this out. Nancy is a very skilled and experienced counsellor. But I am saying that the Israelites were able to survive psychologically by being realists about their grief, facing it and working through it. They were able to survive theologically because they were determined to make sense of their situation, to be open to and imagine new explanations that explored new dimensions of their God.

And into this situation came one of the most daring and imaginative prophets – second Isaiah. His writings are found in Isaiah 40 to 55.

He was the one who introduced the phrase “Good News” which was taken up by Jesus in declaring his mission, Luke 4, and is often the name written on the front of our Christian Scriptures.

The message is this: whatever we confront on our journey, as we go through the joy or the grief, we are promised the “Good News” that God loves us and accompanies us on our way.