

A Time to Repent

Year A, Proper 16

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Word: Repent

Quote: We must repent of white privilege to end racism. Racism in America will not end by the efforts of black or brown people alone.

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It is just so easy to be cynical. Every day the news is full of tragedy and injustice. We watch white supremacists march through the streets of Charlottesville and we despair that racism is never going to end. Instead of fading away, racism seems to be rearing its ugly head, making itself known across our country as white supremacists march, chant their hateful ideologies, and even drive a car into a crowd of counter-protestors, killing a young woman.

In the face of all this, cynicism is the rational choice. And yet, as people of faith, we choose another way. We know that with the resurrection of Jesus, heaven has broken into our world. With the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are called, inspired, and empowered to work for the breaking forth of heaven on earth. We proclaim our vision, that on earth as in heaven, all are welcome, all are fed, and all are loved. But how are we to have faith rather than surrendering to cynicism?

You, as children of God, can change the world. What you do today and tomorrow can bring forth a new creation. If you doubt me, just look at the five amazing women in our Exodus reading this morning.

Pharaoh decided that he would consolidate his power in that age old, evil way, by declaring a common enemy. Pharaoh made a scapegoat of the Hebrew people and began a systematic program of oppression. When the Hebrews continued to thrive even under his oppression, he went further and ordered the mid-wives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill any boy children born to the Hebrews.

This is the first critical moment in the story. Shiphrah and Puah defied the great and mighty Pharaoh. When he confronted them, they told a strange and wonderful story, "The Hebrew women are so vigorous that they give birth before we can even get there!"

Moses' mother is the third amazing woman in our story. Her beautiful boy is born under the threat of death. Pharaoh, thwarted by Shiphrah and Puah, has

commanded everyone to throw Hebrew baby boys into the Nile River. When Moses grows too large to hide, his mother devises a plan to save him. She puts him in the Nile, as commanded, but she first makes a boat of his basket, and then she waits for the Pharaoh's daughter to come to the river to bath. She gently floats Moses in his little boat to the shore where the Pharaoh's daughter will find him.

Pharaoh's daughter is the fourth amazing woman in our story. She defies her father's command and takes the beautiful baby boy as her own son. Watching all of this is the fifth amazing woman, Miriam, Moses' sister. She sidles up to Pharaoh's daughter and says, "I could find you a wet nurse from among the Hebrew women for our new baby." And so, Moses is saved and his mother is paid to nurse and raise her own son in the Pharaoh's own household.

This is more than a great story. These women changed the world. No Moses, no Exodus. No Israel, no King David, no Chosen People, and no Jesus. That's right. These women were instruments of God's covenant promise. Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant promise. Through Jesus, the promise of a new creation is given to us all.

There is a popular theory called the butterfly effect. The idea comes originally from a meteorologist named Edward Lorenz who, in 1972, applying chaos theory to meteorology, suggested that a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil could lead to a hurricane in the Caribbean. This idea has made its way into popular thought because we know that small actions can lead to profound outcomes. That is certainly true for the women in our story today. Small acts of defiance in the face of oppression changed the world.

What you do today can change the world. Racism is one of the most intractable evils of our world today. When we see white supremacists march and chant, when a white supremacist terrorist drives his car into a crowd of counter protestors, when our President seems to condone the actions, how are we to believe that change is possible?

Our country was founded on the oppression of African slaves. Our country was built on white supremacy, and the legacy of that sin is called white privilege. Every white person alive today enjoys the privilege of systems and laws and institutions and a culture that oppresses people of color. You may think, "I am not a racist." You may have progressive ideas about racism. You may even have marched for civil rights. Perhaps you have friends who are African American or Native peoples, but if you are white, you enjoy white privilege.

We must repent of white privilege to end racism. Racism in America will not end by the efforts of black or brown people alone. We have to name the truth and repent if we ever hope to make change.

The first time I heard this, I struggled. I did not consider myself a racist and I did not believe that I enjoyed white privilege. Let me explain the concept in a way that helped me understand.

In 1981, my parents divorced. I remember when my mother went to the bank to open an account in her name and get new credit cards without my father's name on them. She was not allowed to do so. In 1981, in California, my mother could not open an account in her name or secure a credit card in her name alone because she is a woman. She could have waited until the divorce was finalized, but my mother chose instead to live without credit cards.

Earlier this year, in 2017, my mother tried to buy a car and she could not get a loan. She has an income but no credit history because of a sexist law back in 1981. Credit is just one example. There are women in this congregation who have been denied entry to colleges and careers because of their gender. There are women who have been denied ordination in the Episcopal Church because of their gender.

I have never had these problems. When I asked to be considered for ordination, I was welcomed enthusiastically. A straight, white, young man? You bet! I could go to the college of my choice and follow the career of my desire. I can live anywhere I can afford. That is my privilege as a man. Now take these issues and magnify them.

Imagine having to warn your children to avoid the police, but if the police cannot be avoided, be as polite as possible. Always say, "sir", and keep your hands open and in front of you where they can be seen, all so that they will not be killed. African American parents call this, "the talk".

When I walk into a store, I am greeted enthusiastically and offered service. When my African American friends go into the same stores, security follows them around.

That has never happened to me. I enjoy white privilege, the flip side of racism. This is not about personal sin. I don't choose my privilege. Our whole country gives the privileges to me. We must repent of this, change our hearts and our country to end racism. But how? I didn't do it. You didn't set up the systems of privilege and oppression? So how? I have one small suggestion.

Every college application I ever filled out, and almost every job application, and every drivers' license or passport I have ever applied for has asked me to state my race. At the top of the list is, "white," and that is what I have checked every time. I have two questions for us to consider. Why are we asking, and what is, "white"?

The entire concept of a white race was invented to privilege Northern Europeans as superior and more deserving. Am I really ethnically white? My mother's family is Dutch-German. My father's family is English. A thousand years ago

these people would never have believed that they were the same race. They were Saxons and Angles and they made war on each other.

Shiphrah and Puah defied the Pharaoh when he ordered them to kill the Hebrew boys. Maybe one small act of defiance I can make is to refuse to identify myself as white. If my black skinned friends are African American, maybe I should be European American.

I don't know if this will make a difference, but as people of faith, we must act. We must repent of our country's sin of white privilege and racism. I don't know if anything I might do will be enough, but I do know that God has blessed us with the Holy Spirit, and we are called to work for a new creation. We cannot be silent. We must repent and we must work for justice.