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Scripture: Exodus 5:1-18
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Exodus 5:1-18

Afterwards Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, "Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness."' But Pharaoh said, 'Who is the LORD, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and I will not let Israel go.' Then they said, 'The God of the Hebrews has revealed himself to us; let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to the LORD our God, or he will fall upon us with pestilence or sword.' But the king of Egypt said to them, 'Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labors!' Pharaoh continued, 'Now they are more numerous than the people of the land and yet you want them to stop working!' That same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people, as well as their supervisors, 'You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously; do not diminish it, for they are lazy; that is why they cry, "Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God." Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will labor at it and pay no attention to deceptive words.'

So the taskmasters and the supervisors of the people went out and said to the people, 'Thus says Pharaoh, "I will not give you straw. Go and get straw yourselves, wherever you can find it; but your work will not be lessened in the least."' So the people scattered throughout the land of Egypt, to gather stubble for straw. The taskmasters were urgent, saying, 'Complete your work, the same daily assignment as when you were given straw.' And the supervisors of the Israelites, whom Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them, were beaten, and were asked, 'Why did you not finish the required quantity of bricks yesterday and today, as you did before?'

Then the Israelite supervisors came to Pharaoh and cried, 'Why do you treat your servants like this? No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, "Make bricks!" Look how your servants are beaten! You are unjust to

your own people.' He said, 'You are lazy, lazy; that is why you say, "Let us go and sacrifice to the LORD." Go now, and work; for no straw shall be given you, but you shall still deliver the same number of bricks.'

Egypt. Holy cow! It's hard to know where to begin. It has always been my custom to make use of headlines of culture or politics whenever they cross into the world of our faith and our Bible. It's a way of increasing Biblical literacy. When something in the public arena has your attention, it is a great teaching moment. Presidential politics, Broadway shows, Hollywood films, best-selling books, and newspaper headlines are very easily linked to our world of religion.

Well, for the last three weeks, Egypt has been front and center in the world's consciousness. If massive nonviolent protests had upset the balance of power in, say, Luxembourg or overthrown the Prince of Monaco, I might be hard-pressed to make a Bible connection. But Egypt is easy. And, truth is, part of the reason Egypt is easy is because of pop culture. Charlton Heston will be forever Moses, leading the Israelites out of Egypt, and Cecil B. DeMille's classic movie "The Ten Commandments" and Broadway's "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" are simply 10 chapters of the Bible, the Book of Genesis, set to music and dance.

And even outside of the Bible, Egypt is prominent in our consciousness. Verdi's opera, "Aida," Elizabeth Taylor's "Cleopatra," mummies and museums, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Temple of Dendur, the lure of King Tut's treasures, the pyramids, Omar Sharif, the Nile River. In fact, if you want a terrific movie – brutal but useful – check out "Agora," a 2009 Spanish film that looks at ancient Alexandria in about the 3rd century – especially the religious conflicts, good and bad, among the Jews, pagans and Christians – as Christianity grew in power.

So Egypt is everywhere, and it's in the Bible. When Jesus was born, the local king was afraid Jesus would grow up and challenge him, so he tried to have the baby Jesus killed. Jesus and his parents escaped ... to Egypt. The Holy Family was homeless – refugees – and Egypt took them in. (Matthew 2:13-15) King Solomon married the Pharaoh's daughter. Of course, King Solomon married a lot of people, but that was a marriage of strategic alliance, linking Israel and Egypt in peace, for a while. As the world continues to muddle through Middle Eastern politics, maybe it's time to try out that old formula, some strategic marriages!

But for today, let's link Donny Osmond's "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" with Charlton Heston's "The Ten Commandments." In other words, much of the Books of Genesis and Exodus.

It happened like this: once upon a time, long, long ago, far, far away, there was a tribe called Israelites, the children of a man named Israel. They weren't a nation or a place, not then, long, long ago; they were just a tribe, a wandering tribe of nomads, really one big extended family. As in all families, there were squabbles and jealousies, and one of the boys, Joseph, got sold into slavery by his brothers and ended up in a jail in Egypt.

But God never gives up on anybody; no matter how down, how low you get, God needs you. God needed Joseph. God used Joseph to save Israel and Egypt from a horrible famine. Joseph's foresight, Joseph's wisdom, Joseph's organizational skills helped Egypt to prepare for a long famine. Thanks to Joseph, the people were ready, the storehouses were full. After some time, the famine reached the Israelites, and through a wonderful series of miracles and chance and even revenge, all the Israelites ended up in Egypt, saved from famine, reconciled with Joseph.

Big family reunion, all is forgiven. And the children of Israel and the children's children of Israel prospered and multiplied. And eventually, the Egyptian people took notice, turned against the Israelites, the foreigners, the aliens in their land. And enslaved them.

The Bible says, Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them. (Exodus 1:11-14)

Enter Moses, and the Burning Bush! God chose Moses to save the Jews. The Bible says, *Then the Lord said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. (Exodus 3:7-8)*

And the rest is history, or Hollywood, or both. Charlton Heston marches into Egypt, walks up to Yul Brynner, the Pharaoh, and tells the Pharaoh, "Let my

people go." The Pharaoh hems and haws like Mubarak, hoping to squeeze his oppressed people a little longer, to benefit himself a little longer, to act as though he's God a little longer, until God takes out the big stick and starts killing off Egyptian favorite sons. But the miracle of Passover is that the children of Israel are saved and set free – they escape, they cross the parted Red Sea, they get the 10 Commandments, they eat the manna from heaven, they head toward the Promised Land.

Now, I skipped over the Burning Bush, the Ten Plagues of locusts and frogs and boils, the Golden Calf, the Pillar of Fire, and the chariot chases. But you get the idea. A lot of important Bible stuff happened in Egypt, a lot of the foundation of Israel, of Judaism, of Christianity, of Israel and Palestine and the Middle East, a lot of the foundation is linked with Egypt.

There are a lot of lessons in there, even for today. And Number 1, especially relevant this week, Number 1, there "ain't nothing good" about tyranny, ever. Once the first Israelite entered Egypt (Joseph), he was stuck in a puzzling maze of tyranny. Egypt was Pharaoh, period. If you follow Joseph's life, you see that people are executed at a whim. People are set free at a whim. People are elevated at a whim. And imprisoned at a whim, people are co-opted at a whim, people are fed at a whim, people are enslaved at a whim.

That's what tyrants do, they rule by fear and uncertainty. You never know from day to day who's up, who's down, what's right, what's wrong, what's in, what's out. Newspapers are open, then shut; the Internet is on, then off; free speech is permitted, then prohibited. Religion is O.K. or not O.K. Freedoms are extended, then denied. Opposition is welcome, then arrested. Of course, it's all done for the public good! For safety, for good order, for your own benefit. If you are the Pharaoh.

As I was reading the "Joseph in Egypt" story this week, I came across a little-known part of the story (at least I didn't know it). When the famine hit Egypt, Joseph was put in charge of famine preparation and famine relief. Next to Pharaoh he was "the power" in Egypt. That I knew. But the part I didn't know is that as the famine got worse, Joseph came up with a plan. "Joseph bought all the land in Egypt and gave it to the Pharaoh." (Genesis 47:20)

So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh. All the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe upon them; and the land became Pharaoh's. As for the people, he made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other. (Genesis 47:20-21) And everybody was happy (verse 25, almost).

Tyranny can do that. Tyranny can reshape words, ideas; black is white, top is down, slavery is freedom. George Orwell's *1984*, George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

Wittingly or unwittingly, Joseph got co-opted by Pharaoh. It didn't seem so at the time. I'm sure he thought he was fighting the famine, saving the people. Heck, even the people thought he was saving the people. "You have saved our lives," the people said in verse 25, "[so] we will be in bondage to Pharaoh." That just paved the way for the bondage of the Israelites. (Exodus chapter 1) *Then a new king came to power in Egypt who did not know about Joseph. He said to his people, 'look at all those Jews, come, we must deal shrewdly with them. Let us put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and make their lives bitter.'* (Exodus 1:8-14)

You see, above all, tyranny plays fair. Sooner or later everybody ends up on the bottom. All that Joseph/Moses stuff is 3,000 years ago, ancient history. A story of injustice, oppression, tyranny, want, fear, Middle Eastern politics, Jews and Arabs, bad leaders, bad choices. Ancient history. Nowadays, not much difference. Modern-day Pharaohs. Modern-day famines. Modern-day oppression. Modern-day bondage. Then BOOM! All of a sudden, there are some miracles in the Mediterranean: Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt.

Thursday night, as things were reaching a boiling point in Egypt, Alida started searching the Internet for Egyptian youth bloggers, young people expressing their hopes. She found this poem to use with our own high school youth group by a blogger/poet. The poem is called "Freedom Flag."

*Today you can't stop me
Today i am rising
These dreams which haunt me
today will be dancing
on my striving tunes ...
I am my own destiny ...
I am this young boy
who once needed a dream to hold on to
a future to look up for ...
Today i am the one who will make it come true
Today you are no more in charge
It is Me
Rising out of Me
To the world of possibility
I am your now and My tomorrow
not all your canyons can stop me*

*I created my own dreams Today
Delivered out of the womb of courage.*

She wasn't stopped. She's still "rising, dancing, striving to the world of possibility ... delivered out of the womb of courage."

Now, what would we do? If you've been consumed by the events, as I have, you've been amazed by responses here in America. Responses, plural. There are folks rooting for success and folks rooting for failure. Big folks, with big voices, mocking the demonstrators, cheering for Pharaoh.

Rush Limbaugh said – and I heard this with my own ears – he said the demonstrators were just a bunch of feminists, environmentalists, and communists. Now, I could be wrong, I often am, but I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that Egypt is not a hotbed of feminism. And if there are any tree-huggers in Egypt, it's probably because there are only three trees in Egypt, and they are all owned by the Pharaoh.

The idea that a 30-year military dictator, with planes and tanks and the largest army in the Middle East got chased into retirement by a coalition of feminists and environmentalists, thanks to communist community organizers – well, I suppose that's one theory. But here's another theory: perhaps America really is built on some good ideas, ideas that are true and universal.

We thought that when we got rid of our Pharaoh, King George, those "Founders" that folks like to quote, they talked about our inalienable rights, they talked about ideas that are just plain true and natural, they talk about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as something that everybody has a right to.

So here is that other theory: maybe 80 million Egyptians woke up 18 days ago and decided they were tired of dirty streets, political oppression, state-controlled media, no jobs, dead-end life; tired of no freedom, no opportunity; tired of rigid life, squelched liberty, shrunken happiness. So maybe 80 million Egyptians woke up 18 days ago and said, "You know, Moses was right. Let's go to Pharaoh and shout, 'Let my people go!'" Maybe they got up and said, "You know, Jesus was right. God wants us to have life, and life abundant."

Who knows? Maybe they looked at us and said, "You know, America is right. Look at them – with Fox News AND CNN, with *The New York Times* AND the *New York Post*, with Nancy Pelosi AND John Boehner, with the Boston Red

Sox AND the New York Yankees, with red states AND blue states. Looks good."

Among all the interviews with protesters, I heard one person say, "Egypt is the place where Abraham came, this is the place where Jesus came, this is the place where Mohammed came. And now this is the place where freedom has come." How can we not root for that?

You want a cautionary note? Here's a cautionary note: of course, we don't know how it's going to turn out. But let's at least be rooting for the right side.

Let's be as Lafayette was for Washington, not as the Hessians were for King George.