

01/16/11

Living Together as the People of God

- this morning I'd like to begin our time with a question...is there a fine line between parents properly protecting their children and nurturing them...without falling into the ditch of smothering them and trying to shield them from the very challenges and hardships that can help them develop into young men and women who can stand on their own two feet and live effectively for God?...
- sure it is...maintaining that balance is difficult for sure...when do you stop your child from failing, and when do you let him fail?...
 - when do you step in front of your child and face the bully as a parent and when do you step back and let your child face the bully himself?
 - when do you give another reminder of that homework assignment that's due tomorrow and when do you let the child face the consequences of failing the assignment because of her lack of discipline and insistence on sending the hundredth text message of the evening?
- the corollaries are – sometimes what looks like protection and love on the part of a parent is actually hindering that child's growth and development in the long run...
- and what looks like a parent being insensitive or uncaring for the child is actually exactly what's needed to build character for the long haul?...

- I think every parent here, or anyone who has observed parents knows about the tension I'm trying to describe here...
- when I was just a little guy...my dad and my grandpa were building a shed out behind our house...
 - this was before shed kits that you throw up quickly...
 - they were building it like a little house...so they started by building a foundation wall out of 12 inch cinder blocks...
 - I watched them carrying the blocks from "point a" to "point b" and decided I wanted to do that too...
 - so I hoisted one of those blocks up with all my might and started to carry it...
 - my grandpa saw what was happening...and he said rather gruffly...Stevie—put that down, it's too heavy for you...and then knowing I probably wouldn't listen...said, if it falls on your foot...don't cry...
 - now you can disagree with that approach to grand-parenting all you want...we don't derive our theology from stories...but that at least illustrates the tension...and in my judgment, my grandpa got it about right – he was a man's man...he and my dad were trying to teach me to be a man...which is why they were letting me be right in the middle of the project to begin with...
 - but men need to know when to pick something up by themselves and when to ask for help...
 - men need to learn how to obey...
 - men need to learn to face consequences when they bad choices, etc...
 - and by the way...it did really hurt when I disobeyed my grandpa and a few seconds later dropped the block on my little toe...but my grandpa was not trying to hurt me---he didn't have a mean bone in his body...but nor was he going to run around and shield me from every last consequence of my poor choices...

- there's been a humorous example of that on the other side of the ledger in one of the commercials playing during the NFL football play-offs---

- of course all the best commercials are by the beer companies...
- but I assume you've been watching some of the playoffs...
- and there's one where the waitress comes up to a group of men at a table and asks one of the guys if he wants just any kid of beer or a the particular kind the advertising company sells...
- and he says – well, what's the difference...and she says – well, if you weren't such a momma's boy...you'd choose this kind...
 - and he gets this offended look on his face and you think – why'd she say that to him in front of all his friends?...
 - and then the camera pans over to another table and there sits his mom – and she says in a voice that only a mom could love – what'd she call you peanut?...and he just hangs his head...
 - and then the commercial ends with the guy having the right kind...and he's proud of himself for ordering the man's kind...and then as the commercial ends...his mom appears next to him and says...here, let me open that for you, peanut...
- now, I'm not glorifying alcohol consumption by my use of that illustration...but I assume most folks have seen that commercial anyway---but it does, in a humorous fashion...illustrate the point I'm making...
 - parents can either be like my grandpa and allow their children to experience pain and hardship because that's part of the maturing process...or can run behind their children and shield them from all discomfort in an way that appears loving but in fact is the exact opposite...
- now, I assume you're on board with the premise...which allows me to ask you this question?...
- which of those two examples is God most like?...and they are imperfect human illustrations—I get that...but of the two extremes...which is God most like...and what does if anything does that have to do with this construction project we're involved in called God building His church?
- with that in mind, I'd like to invite you to open your Bible to the book of Exodus this morning, chapter 1 [page 41 of the front section of the Bible under the chair in front of you]...
- our theme this year is **Living Life Together**...
 - there's many different places in Scripture that speak about God's people as a family, as a community of people God is drawing together and building up...but here's the one we focused on last week as we kicked all of this off...
 - **Ephesians 3:17-18 - so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ,**
 - and of course there are tons of great truth pouring out of that passage...but the phrase we especially emphasized was right in the center...**together with all the saints...**
 - that is clearly what that portion of the book of Ephesians is all about...while Christianity is an individual decision that is made at a point in time...God doesn't have grandchildren...but once that decision is made, the Christian life is to be lived out in community...in relationship to other brothers and sisters in Christ...
- and that's what we're emphasizing this year as a church...
 - we want to be doing everything we can to make this a church where it is easy to men and women to feel connected, and to be connected...

- regardless of your past...regardless of how long you've lived in our community...regardless of anything you could put on the table...
- another way of saying this (although it could be misunderstood in a thousand ways is)...we want to be a plug and play church...sometimes you hear apartments complexes advertise themselves in that way...
 - if you move in here...there will be very few steps you'll have to take before you're living...
 - the internet access is already wired in...the appliances are in place...the utilities are on and easy to switch into your name...
 - within one week, you can be moved into this place and living life well...we're plug and play...
 - that's what we want to be like---having done everything we can think of to make it easy for men and women to come here and feel connected to real people and ministries that can make a difference in their lives right away...
- now the other two pieces of that would be – we're also encouraging you to think about what the steps would be for you to be more connected...
 - our church can do everything possible but that doesn't mean it's going to have the desired impact in your life unless you do your part...
 - so what would be involved in building stronger friendships for you this year?...
 - to get to the place where you felt like you were living life together---if you really believe that is a biblical value and the way God designed His people to best grow...what steps would you have to take to move in that direction?...what would that look like for you?
- thirdly, what would have to do to help our church be easier for others to connect to?...are you helping us in this endeavor?...so living life together...
- that brings us to the book of Exodus...which we're going to be studying between now and March 6th...after that, by the way, we're going to switch our focus to a special outreach series the 6 weeks before Easter entitled Friend Request – we'll have a lot more to say about that in coming weeks...
- but for now we're going to focus in on the book of Exodus because as we'll see even beginning this morning, this book is all about God building a group of people to magnify and exemplify His character...
- read Exodus 1:1-2:10, 23-25
- we're talking this am about **Living Together as the People of God.**
 - and from these verses, let's find **three principles to help us understand the way our God frequently works.**

I. God Wants to Build and Multiply a Group of People who will be His Visible Representation on His Earth.

- whenever we read the Bible, it is important for us to think about it as a unit...as a story...
- it's less like a cook-book, and more like a novel...
- now that doesn't mean that individual verses are unimportant...but those verses always need to be understood as part of a much larger story of God's redemption of His creation through the finished work of His Son...
- that's the point, by the way, of a very important book published last year called Cross Talk. I would strongly encourage you to read this book...it gets us away from proof-texting, or taking passages out of their context...

- that also helps us recognize passages that would have jumped out at the original hearers because they would have been much more familiar with the overall storyline...that brings us to...

A. Two key verses in the book of Exodus.

Exodus 1:7 - But the sons of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly, and multiplied, and became exceedingly mighty, so that the land was filled with them.

Exodus 19:5-6 - Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.

- see, what was God doing at this period of time?...He was calling out and building a group of people...who would clearly be His own possession...they would be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation...
 - now, automatically that tells us certain things about God...He chooses to use people...not just as individuals, but in community...because it's the context of relationship that some of God's greatest power and wisdom can be put on display...
 - and what we see at the very beginning of the book (v. 7) is that the Lord seems to like to bless His people...to make a statement in part by size...by numbers...you cannot get around that emphasis in the passage...how many different times is that said in one verse? (re-read)...
- now, in order to get the full benefit of this...we really need to think back to the book of Genesis for a moment...these are some statements from a study Pastor Aucoin put together several years ago that provide a helpful overview of this portion of the OT...

B. Setting Exodus in its overall OT context.

- **God's plan has always been to create a people for Himself to His visible representative on His earth. They are to fill (multiply in) the earth and represent Him to the entire created order and also to rule over the works of His hands i.e. His creation (Genesis 1:26-27).**
 - you can't miss the connection between Genesis 1:28 and Exodus 1:7...
 - **Genesis 1:28 - God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth."**
 - that's exactly the words we read in Exodus 1:7 – somehow, some way, this aspect of the plan of God was being fulfilled...but not immediately, for sure...
- **God started with Adam and Eve. They and their descendents became corrupt and God wiped out the entire population (except righteous Noah and his family) through the flood (Gen 6-9).**
 - instead of submitting to Him, filling the earth with righteousness---they chose to do the polar opposite...and had to be judged...but after that judgment...
- **God again wanted Noah and His family after the flood to "be blessed and be multiplying" (Gen 9:7) fulfilling His original plan.**
 - this theme of God magnifying Himself through a called out group of people runs all through the Scripture...people who saw the value of community, of living life under God together...
- **Noah's descendents gathered and rebelled to make a name for themselves instead of God (Gen 11). God judged them again (not with a flood because He promised never to do that again). He split them into various people groups**

(nations, Gen 10) according to their confused languages to curtail the spread of sin.

- if you know your Bible, you know that's speaking about the tower of Babel...and the tendency of mankind to ignore God's plan and seek to make a name for themselves...

- **Yet, God's purpose would not be thwarted, He revealed Himself to a pagan, idolater, nomad named Abraham. God promised him land, seed, and blessing in order to make him a great nation of God's people who would fulfill God's purposes (Genesis 12:1-3). Abraham responded in faith to the revelation of God and obeyed. The defining mark of God's people now in a sin cursed world would be that they would be a nation of people of Abrahamic type faith in the creator God of the universe (Genesis 12-22).**
 - if you want to understand your Bible, you have to have a solid knowledge of Genesis chapter 12...the beginning of the Abrahamic covenant...where God comes to a man who has no children, who along with his wife are advanced in age...and says...not only will I give you a son...but that I will make of you a great nation...
 - there's that exact same theme...God working through community...God working in/through a group of people who would be His visible representatives on His earth...
- **The descendents of Abraham, were small in number and were challenged with many threats that had the potential to destroy the small clan on their way to fulfill God's plan. In all of these threats (from Gen 12-50) God shows Himself faithful to His promises.**
- **One threat to Abraham's descendents was being wiped out by the physical challenge of famine (Gen 42:1-2). Even more significant, the small clan that was supposed to be characterized by Abrahamic faith in the one true God was threaten by assimilation into the pagan culture—Notice Judah's intermarrying with the Canaanites in Genesis 38.**
- **God specifically orchestrated all the Joseph story (Gen 37-50) to bring His people down to Egypt to preserve them from 1) famine, and 2) from assimilation. They would not starve because God had sent a forerunner (Joseph) to plan well for the years of famine. Secondly, they would not be assimilated in Egypt through intermarriage because the Egyptians hated shepherds and nomads which was the essential lifestyle of the Abrahamic clan (Gen 43:32; 46:33-34).**
- **Egypt was, in a sense, like a mother's womb where a baby grows. God preserved, protected, and multiplied His people in the "womb of Egypt" until they grew to be a numerous people. God's people could grow strong in Egypt until they could become a numerous people and then go back to the land that God promised them and fulfill His purpose for them.**

- now, let's just push the pause button on this for a moment...there's no question about the overall point...I. God Wants to Build and Multiply a Group of People who will be His Visible Representation on His Earth.

- now please think about that from the perspective of the NT...

- that's what the church of Jesus Christ is...in that pivotal chapter in Matthew 16 after the religious leaders reject Christ as their Messiah, Jesus tells His followers that He is going to begin building His church – ek-lasia / ek-out of / kalew-to call...a group of people who would repent of their sin and place their faith and trust in Him as Savior and Lord...
- that group of men and women would later be accused of turning the world upside down...
- because they...as a group...were a visible representation of the person and work of their God...
- that's why certain passages of Scripture just take our breath away...like this one... **1 Peter 2:4-5 - And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.**
- now, here's my question – what evidence is there in your life that you want to be part of such a group?...that you understand the value and power of Living Life Together?...that you really believe that God often manifests Himself to our watching world through the lifestyles and relationships of a group of people?...
 - now, let's push it a little further...Egypt was a wonderful womb...but that's a preparatory place...not a proving place...
 - so how is the Lord going to put His people in the best possible position to grow up?....

II. God Often Uses Trials and Suffering as a Means of Taking His People to the Next Step in Their Journey.

- verse 8 says – a new king arose in Egypt...interestingly, he's never named even though he's a king...in a few verses, a couple of mid-wives who were faithful to God were specifically named...the king never was...there's a huge lesson—we'll talk about that in a moment...but he decides, according to verse 10, to deal shrewdly with God's people...which in his mind first meant...

A. Harsh labor.

- **Exodus 1:13-14 - The Egyptians compelled the sons of Israel to labor rigorously; and they made their lives bitter with hard labor in mortar and bricks and at all kinds of labor in the field, all their labors which they rigorously imposed on them.**

- from man's perspective, it may appear as if God had forgotten them, or abandoned them...when the fact of the matter is that He's preparing them for the next stage of their journey...

- that's why the writer of Hebrews said... **Hebrews 12:5-6 - and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES."**

- **Hebrews 12:11-14 - All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that *the limb* which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.**

- now – please notice this – “strengthen the hands that are weak”...how is that done?...and who does it?...
 - the answer is that's done in community...that's done through relationship...

- and you may have someone in your life right now who is harassing the fire out of you...and you can't see God anywhere in the equation right now because the pain is so great...
 - do you know what you need?...you need some solid Christian friends...who can pray with you...and hold up your arms when they're heavy...and help you get through this trial that a sovereign God has allowed...
 - but if you are trying to do it alone...living life by yourself instead of living life together...you may miss the very purpose God has for that trial in your life...
 - the peaceful fruit of righteousness that follows handling trials well is experienced in the crucible of powerful friendships...
- and how did the harsh labor plan work?... **Exodus 1:12 - But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread out, so that they were in dread of the sons of Israel.**
- it's like Paul would later say to the church...**Romans 8:31 - ...if God is for us, who can be against us?....**
 - and did you notice again – it's not...if God be for "me"...it's, if God be for us...
- so what did the so-called king do next?...

B. Murder.

- **Exodus 1:16 - and he said, "When you are helping the Hebrew women to give birth and see *them* upon the birthstool, if it is a son, then you shall put him to death; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live."**
- and it's one thing for us to hear those words in the comfort of this auditorium, but think about the terror that would have struck in both the lives of the Jewish expectant moms, but also of the Egyptian midwives who were commanded to carry out this atrocity...
- and if you're in the middle of this, you might want to cry out – where is God?...
- and the answer is – He's on the throne...molding His people...
- and the fact that His people being a visible representative of Him can have a powerful impact on others comes screaming out of the next verse...
- **But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live.**
- that is such a fascinating statement...of course the specific identity of this God is going to be proclaimed in a dramatic way in chapter 3...but there's no question that this is speaking about the God of Israel, the God of heaven and earth...
- and it demonstrates that these Hebrew midwives had not been assimilated into the pagan culture around them...
 - we'll talk about this in greater detail in upcoming weeks when we get to the ten plagues, but the Egyptians had this incredible cluster of deities they were supposed to worship for all sorts of reasons...
 - but these Hebrew women would have nothing to do with that...
 - which by the way, suggests that they also had adopted the Jewish view of the afterlife because obviously going against the command of the king would bring sudden and immediate death...but these mid-wives didn't seem to be too afraid of that if there really was a God who had a plan for their eternity after they died...
- all of this shows the incredible power of God's plan to manifest Himself and His character through the unique lifestyle of a redeemed group of people...

- and we read... **Exodus 1:20-21 - So God was good to the midwives, and the people multiplied, and became very mighty. Because the midwives feared God, He established households for them.**

- see, what was it that God said to Abraham [and to be sure we have the time frame clear – God called Abraham around 2100BC, these events are occurring around 1500 BC]...

- God told Abraham that He would make a great nation out of them, and that in believing His promises they would be blessed...that promise is coming through in living Technicolor...

- you may be going through a great difficulty right now...that makes the pain of me dropping that block on my little foot seem insignificant...and you can either believe God has forgotten you and that you have to go it alone...

- or you can allow that pain to drive you closer to your church family...and in community handle the trial together in a way that expresses great faith in God...

- and one of the many blessings may be that others who are watching will be drawn to the God you are trusting together...

III. God Uses Individuals at Every Level in the Accomplishment of His Plan.

- time doesn't allow us to deal with all the individuals involved in this story...

- but it is instructive who's named, and who isn't...

- and even beyond the specific names, the place that God has for individual people to be used by Him...

- so yes, it's a group....a large group by this time, estimated to be made up of 2 million people...

- but it's still a group of individuals...each with an important role to play...

Exodus 1:15 - Then the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other was named Puah;

- that is a snub, big-time...

- the king is never named, but these faithful mid-wives are...

- and you might be thinking about this whole theme – who cares if I'm living life together because my gifts are more private in nature and they'll have much of an impact on the family...

- please bite your tongue...