

Time after Pentecost
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September 16, 2007
Trinity Lutheran Church

Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 51:1-10;
1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

Ya' know, there are times when I am just so phenomenally happy that I am not like those people of Israel. I mean, what is up with those folks? They've been living under the thumb of the pharaoh for decades; they've been punished, they've been starved, they've been beaten, they've had genocide practiced upon them. And how do they respond? They call out to the Lord God Almighty, and the Lord responds by sending Moses.

What does Moses do? Moses goes to Pharaoh. He goes toe-to-toe with Pharaoh, and they do this little dance time and again. Moses goes to the Pharaoh and says let my people go; Pharaoh says I'm not gonna let the people go. Moses says if you don't let the people go something bad is gonna happen; Pharaoh says bring it on. And time and time again these awful things happen. They get the plagues, they get the locusts, they get the frogs, they get darkness, water gets turned to blood, they get disease . . . all kinds of really yucky stuff that nobody ever wants to happen to them.

Each time one of these plagues comes along, the Pharaoh tells his magicians to fix it, which of course they cannot, so Pharaoh has to crawl back to Moses and ask him to make it stop, and if you make it stop I'll let the people go. So Moses prays to the Lord God Almighty, the plagues stop, and Moses says, Okay the plague is stopped and we can go, right? And the Pharaoh says, No way, Moshe. And the whole thing starts all over again.

Nine times this happens! Nine times. Finally the tenth time, the Lord God says to Moses okay this is it, all the cards are on the table. Go to the people and tell them to go out to their flocks, get an unblemished lamb or kid (that's a kid as in a young goat; I have two kids of my own and trust me, they're never unblemished!), go get a lamb or a kid, kill it, collect the blood, take the blood and paint it on the doorposts and lintels of your houses. Paint that blood right there because, God says, because I am going to send the Angel of Death, and that Angel of Death is going to take the firstborn of every household . . . except for the ones that have that blood painted on the doorposts and lintels. And on those that have the blood, the Angel of Death will . . . say it with me now . . . pass over those houses. So this happened. Pharaoh loses the firstborn child in his house and is wracked with grief, so he kicks the Israelites out of the country, but then, being a true politician, he changes his mind.

Meanwhile, the Israelites are there at the edge of the sea. Moses prays to God and God sends a mighty wind that blows the seas apart. They cross over to the other side. Just about the time that the Israelites get to the other side, Pharaoh's army shows up at the other shore. When Moses gets over there and as Pharaoh's army is coming through, Moses prays again. The winds stop, the waters come together, all of Pharaoh's army is doing the dead man's float, and the people are

saved! The people are saved from Pharaoh! They have seen the power of God at work in their lives! They've seen these plagues come and they've seen the plagues go.

And now here they are; in our lesson this morning they are gathered together at the foot of Mount Sinai. They can see up at the top all the clouds around the top of Mount Sinai. They can hear the thunder roar as God is speaking to Moses. And so what do the people of Israel do? They go to Aaron, Moses' brother, Aaron who is second in charge, and ask what's up with Moses? We haven't seen him for a while and we're really not believing this Lord God Almighty stuff anymore. So Aaron, how 'bout you make us a new god? You make us a god that we can follow, a god that we can see.

Now Aaron, he's the second in charge, right? He's the brother of Moses, who is up on the mountain top talking to God. So Aaron rises up in righteous indignation to smite down . . . oh no wait a minute. That's the way I *want* him to act, I always forget that. Aaron loses his backbone and says to the people you want a god? Okay, give me all your gold and let's make a god. So the people of Israel gather together their gold, make a golden calf, and say behold the god that has brought us out of Israel.

Do you understand why God calls them a bunch of stiff necked people? They had seen the power, they had felt the awesome power of God active in their very lives and what do they end up doing? They say, ya know what God, you haven't done anything for me in the last five minutes so I'm gonna go find somebody else to follow.

I am just so glad that I am not like those ungrateful Israelites. I am thankful for everything that God has given me. (Well okay, I would really rather be driving a Volvo instead of a Volkswagen.) But I'm thankful for everything that God has given me. (I really liked my Volvo; I had to get rid of it because it was costing me too much in monthly repairs; but I liked that car. I'm driving a Volkswagen now.) But I'm really thankful for all that God has given me. I live in a great house (which is in desperate need of being painted, and it would be really helpful if it was insulated, and you know God, we really would like to renovate the kitchen). But I'm really thankful for everything that God has given me. (But you know I really would like one of those fifty inch flat panel plasma TVs', because I've seen them with the hi-def – have you seen those? – the picture is really sharp.) But really, I'm pretty satisfied, mostly, with everything that God has given me. Kind of.

In our gospel lesson this morning, it almost sounds as though we should be out seeking “stuff”. The guy had 99 sheep. What does he need with one more sheep? What's one sheep more or less? The woman I can understand; she loses one-tenth of her wealth, that makes a little more sense to me. But one-one hundredth of sheep? It almost sounds as if it's okay to go out and strive to try to gain more “stuff”. But that, I don't think, is really what the gospel lessons are about for us this morning. The gospel lessons are not about “things”, they're really about people. The people who have strayed from God. The people who have left the walk. And those are the ones we need to be concerned about. Those are the ones we strive to remind how much they are loved. God says, those 99 people over here, they know the message, they feel and are experiencing my love. It's this one over here who is lost, this is the one I need to go after.

It's not about things. It's about people. The Israelites thought it was about things. They thought it was about having a god in front of them to see and touch and feel. This is the god, they said, not the one we can't see. This is the god.

But that's not the way it works. There is more rejoicing over the one who went away and yet comes back, than over the 99 who stayed. The people of Israel kept not staying. The people of Israel kept walking away.

In the letter to the Thessalonians, Paul even talks about his own walking away. "... even though I was formerly a blasphemer, persecutor and a man of violence. But I received mercy . . . and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."

The sad truth is, I am like the people of Israel. I do turn away. I am not satisfied. But God continues to come after me. God continues to come after each and everyone of us, to remind us that we are loved, we have the things that we need, and God is with us always.

We sang this morning, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." We need to say that. I need to say that. Every day. To be created clean, to be renewed, so that I'm not seeking after the things that I can see and touch and feel, but that I can strive to serve and be a witness of the Lord, the Lord God Almighty. Be it the Lord God up on the mountain, the Lord God causing the plagues, or the Lord God in my heart, that still small voice reminding me that I am loved, I am cared for, that we all belong to God. Amen.