The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 16—Year A
Exodus 1:8-2:10
Psalm 124
Romans 12:1-8
Matthew 16:13-20

When the world is swirling, it is so, so helpful to step out of our world *and step into* our sacred texts. We swim around the images and stories given to us, and it gives us perspective, so that we can engage our world from a different place. We are thousands of years removed from that world, and yet, human beings are human beings, and so much stays the same.

Take **Exodus** this morning—**new kings still arise over Egypt who do not know Joseph**, and when you don't know someone, when you lose the bonds of relationship, your brother, your friend, your neighbor becomes an amorphous group *"other."* **New kings still arise** who see **the Israelite people—i.e. non-Egyptian people, i.e. not-like-them people—growing more numerous** which equals a threat to their power. **New kings** who believe the only way those changing demographics can go is **a zero-sum game**—**the kings** who say, **"In the event of war, they will join our enemies, and fight against us, and escape from the land,"** and the unspoken, *"and we will no longer have power <u>over</u> them."*

New kings still arise who think the only way to deal with these shifts is to exert *more power over*. But it doesn't work. **The Israelites just kept right on multiplying and spreading, and this filled the Egyptians with dread**, but it wasn't just your ordinary kind of **dread**, it was a *sickening **dread***, much more akin to *loathing*. And those kinds of feelings are poison to the soul.

And let's be clear here, ***we can all be new kings over Egypt***—any time we ***don't take the time to know Joseph***, any time we try to ***exert power <u>over</u>***, any time we move to a ***zero-sum mentality***.

So, **the Egyptians** doubled-down on **oppressing the Israelites, imposed more tasks, made their lives bitter with hard service; they were downright ruthless**.

But people don't respond well to being pushed down. The human spirit will always find a way to break free. **The king of Egypt asked the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill boy babies, but to let girl babies live. But the midwives feared God; they didn't follow the king's command; they let the boys live. When the king asked the midwives about it, they just told the king that the Hebrew women were just way too vigorous and give birth before the midwife can even get there.**

Then Pharaoh commanded the Hebrews to throw the boy babies into the Nile, but to let the girls live. And this Levite woman, married to a Levite, conceived and bore a son, and she hid him for three months, until she couldn't hide him any longer. Then, *she threw him into the Nile, just like Pharaoh commanded*, in a papyrus basket plastered with bitumen and pitch, among the reeds near where Pharaoh's daughter came to bathe.

Pharaoh's daughter saw the basket, and when she opened it, the baby boy was crying, and her heart was filled with compassion for that crying baby. The boy's sister came out from

where she'd been watching this scene and asked Pharaoh's daughter if she wanted her to find a Hebrew woman to nurse the child. Capital idea!
And Pharaoh's daughter promised to pay the nursing woman's, who was the mother of the baby, Pharaoh's daughter promised to pay the woman's wages, too. So, the boy's mother nursed him until he grew up, and then, in an act that had to be so hard for that mother, she returned him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son, and she named him *"Moses,"* because she said, *"I drew him out of the water."*

The **midwives** and **that determined mother** all committed *acts of civil disobedience*, and did so in the most clever of ways. Without their *willingness to risk*, and be so *creative* as they did so, *there is no Moses, and the liberation of God's people from slavery can't even get off the starting blocks*.

We live and work among systems, **but our obedience is never just to this world**. **Our obedience is always, first and foremost, to God**, and as we dance between the **kingdom of God** *and* **the kingdoms that rule this world**, we've got to be *light on our feet, creative*, and *willing to take some crazy risks*.

In **Romans**, **Paul** really gets at the inner work necessary to do this dance. He says, **"Do not be conformed to this world…"** The greek here is interesting; it's actually a command *not to be conformed to <u>another's</u> pattern*, and *the world* is a way of talking about *this period of time, this age*. Oh, this just got a whole lot more relevant. *How are we being conformed to another's pattern in this time in which we live?* How are we being *shaped into the pattern* of *division*, or *hate*, or *conflict*, or *shame*, or *violence* that has *engulfed this age* in which we live?

Paul is telling us, **"Don't be conformed to those patterns, but be *transformed* by the *renewing* of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.**

Paul is challenging us, ***"Be changed into another form;"*** literally, ***"Go through a metamorphosis* by *renewing* your mind"**—and it's even stronger than **renewing**, it's ***a full-on "renovation"—"be changed into another form by renovating your mind, by renovating your whole way of perceiving and understanding and feeling and discerning".***

Any of you ever gone through a ***renovation***? Oh, once you start pulling up floorboards or pulling off drywall, you can discover some structural damage that's been hidden for a long time. There's *always* more involved than meets the eye.

We're living in a time when we've got to be doing some *serious renovation work in our minds*. We've got to change into new *forms*, new *patterns* of living, bold *and* steadfast *patterns*, engaged *and* grounded *patterns*, third way *patterns*, radical baptismal vow *patterns*. ***Otherwise**, we won't have the capacity* to discern **God's way and God's vision** *from* the *patterns of power and control and fear and greed* that rule **this age**. ***Without new forms and new patterns, we won't be able to discern what is good and acceptable,*** that which will bring our world that sense of ***completeness and fullness*** for which it longs.

Today, **Paul** calls us to **think with sober judgment**, which literally means, *"to be in one's right mind and to exercise self control."* This **mind** thing keeps coming up. It takes discipline and practice to keep *grounding* our **deep sense of knowing in God**, to keep **conforming *our* mind *to* the *mind of Christ***, because the pull of *the world's pattern is so daggone strong*.

Which then leads **Paul** to the next truth, WE CANNOT DO THIS WORK ALONE. He says, **"For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another."** This isn't talking about *members*, as in *those recorded in our Parish Register*. These **members** are **limbs**, as in *physical parts of the body*. We are **limbs of one body**, and though each limb is *not* the same in function, *each one is vital, important, essential* to the healthy functioning of the body.

We are inextricably bound together in this body in Christ, and we are members of one another; we belong to one another. There is no *me* without my connection to *you*; we live or die *together*.

And it's not just about our little incarnation of the **body of Christ** here at St. Luke's, or in our Diocese, or in the Episcopal Church. The cosmic **body of Christ encompasses all of humanity and creation itself**—see **Colossians chapter 1**.

How are we **limbs** in *the human family*? How are we **members** of *creation* itself, and all therein? It's a crazy, big vision of how tightly *we are woven together in relationship to one another, to God, to this beautiful creation*. It's going to take ***all of us and all of our varied gifts to make it through the metamorphosis being asked of us in <u>this</u> time.***

It's going to take ***all of us*** to help each other *remember* that **the Son of Man** is *more* than **John the Baptist**, he's *more* than **Elijah** or **Jeremiah** or **one of the prophets**. It takes **courage** to step outside the known forms and patterns that we use *to make sense of Jesus*. **"Who do you say I am?"—asks Jesus.** This is THE question; this is always THE question.

And it is **Peter**, oh so fallible **Peter**, who leads the way, **"You are the Christ, the anointed one, the Son of the living God…You are the one who draws their very life from the God who is living, the God who is breathing real life, life that is full and alive in every possible dimension."**

And when **Peter** gives that answer, Jesus answers, **"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not uncovered this for you, but my Father in heaven."** This isn't *knowledge* you can gain from *the patterns of this world*; this is *something that is made known from firsthand <u>experience</u> of God, from <u>experiencing</u> the Great Mystery*. This isn't *knowledge* we gain with our heads from books, or from learning doctrine; this is ***the intimate knowing*** that comes when you are attentive to your naked *experience* of the Divine. As a priest, I wish I had the power to *give you* this knowledge, but I don't—the best I can do is point to the practices that are conducive to being able to hear the Divine whisper **"You are my Beloved"** over the noise of the world.

But once you know this *experience* for yourself, oh my goodness, you are on **rock** solid ground. That's what Jesus told Peter—**"…On this rock I will build my church."** Peter's *not* the rock; I just saw that this week! I always thought Peter was the rock, but Peter's not the rock—***Peter's experience of Jesus****; Peter witnessing what it looks like when you see someone who knows they are* ***God's Beloved*** *and who* ***draws their life from the Living God—this intimate knowing is the rock upon which the church is built****.* Anything else is *not* a foundation that will stand up over time. **Jesus goes on to tell Peter that the gates of Hades will not prevail against the church built on *this rock***. The forces of division and death *are not superior* to ***this rock***; *they will not overcome it*.

Then Jesus does a terrifying thing, **he hands the keys of the kingdom of heaven over to Peter,** and to you, and to me, **and he tells us, "Whatever you bind*, whatever you throw into chains* on earth will be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth, whatever you *unbind,* will be loosed in heaven.** We are *keepers of the keys*, and if **heaven** is about **communion**, in every sense of that word, ***we have the power to open the doors to that heaven and invite people in and we have the power to shut people out.***

And we see this played out all the time. We can absolutely **bind** people up **on this earth**—we do it anytime we *reduce them to a one-dimensional version of a human being*, which isn't human at all; we do it any time *we deny someone else the basic things they need* to thrive in this world, and we do it anytime *we exert power over another*—physically, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, relationally, economically, or any of the other bijillion ways that *we have at our disposal to hold power over another*. We **bind** another anytime *we don't invest the time and energy to know another*. Just remember all that came about because **a new king arose in Egypt that did not *know* Joseph.**

And Jesus is clear—**heaven and earth are *connected***. It's not that **heaven** is a *place*; it's that ***heaven is a state of relationship, a state of at-one-ment, an experience of union.*** It's hard to experience **heaven**, that **fullest sense of communion**, if you're all **bound up**.

And **unbinding** is *a hands-on endeavor*—**to loose** something means *you have to be close enough to untie those things that are binding another*. This takes time, and energy, and tremendous *vulnerability*. This involves seeing that *"other"* as *a human being who is all bound up*. This means risking getting *close enough* to *untangle* those **ties that bind**. And when we **loose those bonds**, when we help **unwrap these ties that bind another**, **the doors of heaven fly open** because that's when **true communion** is possible—**true communion** *isn't* relationship that's *never* known conflict; **true communion *is getting close enough to wade through the mess of unbinding one another and setting one another free.***

Right now, what are you **binding up on this earth**, and **what binds are you helping to loose**? You **hold more power** than you can imagine; **you hold the keys of the kingdom of heaven**. Are you **opening that door wide**, or are you **barring it shut**? *Or, are you doing both at the same time,* ***opening that door*** *wide to some, and* ***slamming the door*** *on others?*

Frankly, I might have wished that Jesus had held all that power for himself, but no, he had to *involve us in the act of redeeming this world.*

No, even if you and I don't want *this much power*, **we've been given it**. How will you steward **holding these keys** in your hands? How will you **let God renovate your mind and your heart,** so that you understand that **each limb** of the body is **precious**, **vital**, **essential** *and* know that the **loss of any limb causes suffering to the whole body**?

What will you risk to **midwife that life** that **those who don't know Joseph** want to destroy? How will you use your **imagination** to make sure that **Moses has a chance to survive** so that *all of us can find our way out of slavery*? How will these *stories of our faith*, and *your own naked experience of the Divine*, **strengthen you** to **resist being conformed to this world**, while at the same time, **help you put on the mind of Christ and shape *your* life to the pattern of *his* life**?

The gates of Hades are strong, but ***the body of Christ is stronger***. T**he forces of division are wreaking their havoc, *but we have the power to unbind and set free*. The kings who don't know Joseph still reign**, ***but we have imagination and are bent always toward life*.**

Take **a tincture of courage**—equal parts, **Shiphrah** and **Puah** and **the mother who saw a third way**—then set about your work of **loosing the binds** that are in your reach. Amen.

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