

Jubilee in the Midst of Evil?
Based on Exodus 2:1-10, David Jahnke, 1/17/16

So after working with these terrible stories over the last week, I turned to the writer Anne Lamott yesterday morning with my son Dietrich. And here is what I first read...

“There must have been a book--way down there in a slush pile of manuscripts--that somehow slipped out of the final draft of the Bible. That would have been the chapter that dealt with how we're supposed to recover from the criticism session in the Garden, and discover a sense that we're still completely welcome on this planet. There are moments in scripture when we hear that God delights in people, and I am incredulous. But they are few and far between. Perhaps cooler heads determined that too much welcome would make sissies out of us all, and chose instead accounts of the ever popular slaughter, exile, and shame.

The welcome book would have told us that power and signs of status can't save us, that welcome- both offering and receiving- is our source of safety. Various chapters and verses of this book would remind us that we are wanted; even occasionally delighted in, despite the truth that we are greedy-grabby, self-referential, indulgent, overly judgmental, and often hysterical. Somehow that book "went missing." Or when the editorial board of bishops poured over the canonical lists from Jerusalem and Alexandria, they arbitrarily nixed the book that states unequivocally that you are wanted, even rejoiced in. We have to write that book ourselves.” [Anne Lamott, Small Victories, pp. 15-16]

While I think this is a bit exaggerated and that the story of Jesus is essentially this book of welcome that she refers to, she is mainly right...and we do have to write this book ourselves. This is where I will end up today. And this is where the world will end up-- that is with God welcoming all kinds of unlikely folk into the Jubilee of heaven.

Last week, I declared 2016 to be a year of Jubilee for our church. Jubilee in the Old Testament was a once every fifty year forgiving of all debts and the freeing of slaves. But for Christians, God's Jubilee is a five hundred times a year thing, rather than a once every 50 years thing. I don't have to declare anything. The gospel commands it. Jubilee is, in fact, at the heart of our faith.

But as I was driving with my elder child the other day, out flew the question, “Why don’t Jews believe in Jesus?” I was first taken aback...and then thrilled. I explained that Jews believe that when the Messiah comes-- that is those Jews who believe in a Messiah coming-- that evil will be completely driven out of the world. And that the people of God will finally be completely free in the Kingdom of God. This is basically what Christians believe will be the case upon Jesus’ return. But since that did not happen with the coming of Jesus, Jews do not believe he was the Messiah.

I will explain more how Christians address this later. But it points to the problem of celebrating Jubilee in the midst of the profound evil and injustice within and around us. Joy and jubilation in the midst of all the crap? Forgiveness time and again when people near and far persist in evil?

In our Old Testament passage, a baby was found alive in the bulrushes. His mother was trying to save her newborn son from the evil policy of the Pharaoh who was killing the male babies of foreigners in his Kingdom because they were growing too numerous and powerful. (Quick side-note— the growing xenophobia in our nation is the root of an evil policy like Pharaoh’s.)

And who saved the baby? Pharaoh’s daughter.

In Jesus’ day, an evil Israelite King decided to slaughter infants due to a Word from wise men that a new King had been born in Israel. That new King’s family was warned and they fled where? To Egypt of all places.

1. So Moses found refuge in the house of the one responsible for the slaughter. 2. And Jesus found refuge in the land where his people had been enslaved for centuries. In case you have not noticed, God likes to confound us with the absolute breadth of his love. He likes to reveal his salvation in the most unlikely of places and from the most unlikely of people.

Who did God choose to give his Law and covenant to? The little band of tribes called Israel which had so little power to spread God’s ways and means, and time and again, was overrun by the giants around it.

Who did Jesus choose to share His gospel with the world? Paul-- the one who had been persecuting Jesus’ followers!

What did Paul have to say about his Jewish brethren who were rejecting his gospel? That their non-belief led to the salvation of the Gentiles to whom Paul went after they sent him packing. And Paul concluded that just as God's love and mercy were shown to lawless Gentiles, so would it eventually be poured out upon his non-believing Jewish brethren. [See Romans 11]

But what does all of this mean for us today? First, it means we can never place boxes around God or who or how God will save...other than that it will involve an outpouring of love and mercy. Second, the whole story means that God will save us *through* if not always immediately *from* whatever desperate circumstances we find ourselves in.

I can personally attest to the truth of this. God saved me not *from* my own terrible plight at least not in the way I wanted, but instead saved me through it into the light of his love and power. God will do the same for you and yours. At least this is what we must cling to. Because far too often, our prayers are not answered as we wished. Think of the Hebrew mothers whose children were not saved from Herod or Pharaoh!

This hit me like a hammer last Tuesday night when a church mother who had suddenly lost her son quite a few years ago spoke about Moses' mother getting her son back from Pharaoh's daughter to nurse and care for him. I was affected because despite her fervent prayers, she did not get her son back. He was not saved from death.

This finally is where our faith in Jesus plays such a critical role. Where would we be without the stories of his amazing life which revealed Heaven the earth and, more importantly, his resurrection, which finalized the revelation? I admire those who persist in faith and good works without believing in the gospel but I guess I am not sure how they do it or exactly why...

One reason may be the same as that of Pharaoh's daughter who joined God's salvation, because, according to the Bible she "saw the baby crying and was moved by pity" or compassion.

A few months ago, a different image of a baby in water finally opened the eyes of the world...and filled us with pity for modern-day refugees. The lifeless body of 3-year old A-lan Kurdi was found on the beach after his family fled Syria and tried to make their way to Europe. Many powerful people in Europe and America woke up and joined the salvation of God and this week, A-lan's family made it to Canada.

Now there will be tragic setbacks like the event in Cologne. And I fervently pray that no terror results from providing refuge. And I am certainly not saying let anyone and everyone in. Our religious ideals are in tension with the realities of a broken world. Our Jubilee is partial until Jesus' return. But, in general, Gentile Christians here and in Europe who were once outside of God's fold are called by God to support saving ministries to children and anyone else in need, period. We will win through the converting power of love.

And remember that the slaughter of the innocents is ongoing. By Isis yes...but tens of thousands have died from the barrel-bombs and starvation tactics of the Syrian government.

So here are my charges to you: 1. First, never let fear restrain your love and constrict your mercy! Instead let God's Love and Mercy and resurrection promises drive out all your fear! When you see someone who looks like they may come from another country or religion, smile and show kindness and start a conversation and try to get to know them. I am intentional about this almost every time I am done working out at the Y and I usually make clear that I am a pastor. It is sad to me that I have to do that. But so much of what foreigners and non-Christians see in the media and even personally experience from Christians is suspicion and bigotry and condemnation.

My second charge is that remember how incredibly blessed you are! Here are some more wonderful words from Anne Lamott:

“The worst possible thing you can do when you're down in the dumps, tweaking, vaporous with victimized self-righteousness, or bored, is to take a walk with dying friends. They will pretty much ruin everything for you.

First of all, friends like this may not even think of themselves as dying, although they clearly are, according to recent scans and gentle doctors' reports. But no, they see themselves as fully alive. They are living and doing as much as they can.

They ruin your multitasking high-- the bath of agitation, rumination and judgement you wallow in, without the decency to come out and just say anything. They bust you by being grateful for the day, while you are obsessed with how thin your lashes have become and how wide your bottom.

My friend Barbara had already been living with Lou Gehrig's disease for two years on the spring morning of our Muir Woods hike. She had done everything to stem the tide of deterioration, and you would think, upon seeing her with a fancy four -

wheeler walker, needing an iPad - based computer voice named Kate to speak for her, that the disease was doing business. And this would be true, except that besides having ALS, Barbara had her breathtaking mind, a joyously bottomless thirst for nature, and Susie.” [Anne Lamott, Small Victories, pp.1-2]

This brings us to my last charge. Be present to people going through suffering and hardship. Be a place of refuge and solace to them. And learn from them. Be like Pharoah’s daughter...and be like the Egyptians who welcomed Jesus, Joseph and Mary. Unconditional hospitality and love are our common calling from God. Through the one who can do far more abundantly in us than all we can ask or imagine and to whom belongs all the power and the glory, now and forevermore. And God’s people say...