



## *Year A, Proper 16, 23 August 2020 Myles Alexander*

### ***Isaiah 51:1-6, PS 138, Romans 12:1-8***

It is August 23rd in the year 2020. We do not live in the events of our memories or the memories of our parents' generations. We live with a corona virus pandemic, political divisions so deep they threaten to divide the people of this nation, a recession that makes the rich richer. The racist and genocidal foundations of our country crumble. California burning, Iowa torn and flattened by an inland hurricane and two hurricanes bearing down on Louisiana suggest global warming is more than a future possibility.

Isaiah tells us, "The heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a pair of pants, and those who live on earth will die like gnats." It has for a long time, Isaiah's truth telling, yet it sounds more like news analysis than poetic imagination. "Take a good long look," God says, "things will get worse."

How do we know things will get worse? Church people pay attention both to the world as well as to God. Church people go after the world to set it right. To make the world the way God intended. We remember that hope is often a remnant left in the wake of history.

"Listen!" You must have a shred or more of hope. Would you be here in person or online if you didn't at least hope for hope? From where did that hope come? . . .

How might God have been part of those origins of your hope? . . .

The lectionary for today includes an alternative Hebrew scripture. It is Moses' origin story. The first chapters of Exodus give examples of how God makes things happen, little bits of hope.

It is Egypt, maybe 27½ centuries before Isaiah (and another 29 centuries for us). The new pharaoh, the most powerful ruler on the planet, doesn't know history. He sees a minority group growing in numbers and strength and he feels threatened. First he made them slaves but their numbers increased. Next they were given harder work and their midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, were ordered to kill newborn males. They refused. When called to court they gave what passes as a convincing story, "The Hebrew women are strong and deliver their babies fast. We arrive after the birth." So the pharaoh ordered everyone to drown male Hebrew infants in the Nile river.

Next a Hebrew mother defies the king and hides her newborn boy for three months. When she could no longer hide him, she made a floating bassinet, tucked him inside and set it among the reeds along the river bank, and posted his sister to watch from a safe distance. Pharaoh's daughter and her entourage on her way to take a dip in the river, she sees the object out among the reeds and tells her maid, "Go get it." Either ignorant of her father's genocide or in defiance of it, the woman doomed to virginity, has pity on the crying infant. The clever sister offers to find a wet nurse for the baby and gets mom. Mother gets paid to nurse the baby. When the boy is weaned she takes him to the pharaoh's daughter who adopts him.

An oppressed minority. Midwives who lie to continue their work that they're dedicated to. A mother that will not kill her newborn son. A clever girl. A woman imprisoned by her privileged role realizes a dream. Each part of the story, on its own, is ordinary.

Where and how does God make these things happen? Ask Miep Gies and Bep Voskuijl of Anne Frank fame. We could ask Paul and Tatiana Rusesabagina of "Hotel Rwanda." We could also have asked my great aunt Carolina. My maternal grandmother grew up in a German colony in Crimea. By age 11 she lost her father and then mother. Sister Carolina and husband took her in. When the 1905 revolution came, they fled to the United States. Grandma was an unaccompanied minor. Have you heard that term in recent years? It was as illegal then as it is now. When challenged by immigration, her sister lied and said Grandma was their adopted daughter. "Yes," she acknowledged, "It is unusual for a young couple to adopt such an old child."

People do the small things that are the right things to do. Maybe they are God things. As Luther told the emperor and court, "It is neither safe nor right to go against conscience." You heard the apostle Paul has higher expectations,

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds (keep doing those little things, please Jesus), so that you may discern what is the will of God -- what is good and acceptable and perfect.

This week in history we were reminded of the mother who wrote a letter to her young adult son, who happened to be a Tennessee state representative, who turned on his party leadership to cast the deciding vote in the last state legislature to consider the 19th amendment to the US Constitution and women in the law at least the right to vote. Did he erase sexism? No. Did he create gender equality? No. Did he continue to make history? Not much. He was an ordinary civic leader and failed gubernatorial candidate. Did he turn the world toward justice and right relationships? Yes. Was it the vote of that one young man? Not really. It was 70 years of work by countless women, self-sacrificing leaders, and his mother who wrote him a letter.

But what about right here, now, August 23rd 2020? If the stories that got us here aren't enough, we're in trouble. We lost the pursuit. If we're too timid about the stories of God in our lives, or uncertain about the moments we recognized Jesus doing something messiah-like [MT 16:13-20, today's gospel text], if we don't recognize those moments of salvation happening in the world, in and through us, we're in trouble.

Our stories, however humble, however they surprise us and don't seem to fit the world as it is, or what we think God's salvation should be like, those are the stories that will get us through the days the heavens vanish like smoke. Those are the stories that will remind us of the pattern of life God created when this old world wears out from the ecological collapse we triggered. When humans die like the gnats we swat these hot, humid afternoons, the stories we tell of God happening now will be the stories of God's care for the gnats that survive.

It is not for us to give up or give in to "that's the way it is." It is for us to defy. It is for us to defy. It is up to us to see through status quo expectations and recognize the arm of God flexing through history and the muscles of justice that deliver rest for the weary.

*Listen. Watch. Pay attention. Do you feel it twitch in you? Do a little something defiant. Jesus did. It worked.*