

Today's readings give us opportunities to see in these ancient readings parallels to what is happening in our country and our world today. Paul urges us to have the mind of Christ. What does that mean? It means in part, the ability to try to understand what Jesus our Christ would do in a particular situation. And it means that we try to understand what God has done in history to bring about justice and freedom over years, centuries and millennia.

In my continuing series on Exodus, today we heard the telling of the story of the last and most devastating plague that God brings upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Yes, even I skipped a few chapters...the ones about the myriad other plagues. When one reads about all those plagues which brought misery and death to the people of Egypt we might naturally think that maybe God is going a bit too far. It's one thing to punish a cruel king who exploits and enslaves people for his personal gain. It's quite another to punish the people of Egypt who are just trying to live their lives in peace and feed their families.

We feel sorry for the Egyptians. And we feel sorry that we too are living at a very difficult time in our own country with our own plague. The staggering death toll from the coronavirus has now reached 200,000 lives lost. It makes some wonder if God is punishing us with this horrible disease. But this is not Egypt thousands of years ago. And we are modern people who know how to solve the problem of a pandemic, right? Well, maybe. One thing is for sure, God is not punishing us.

At the same time however, we are experiencing another pandemic(another plague if you will) brought about by the way in which we police our nation and treat people who have a skin color other than our own. The evils of white supremacy, conscious or unconscious, make us

especially sensitive to treating anyone as “other” or “unimportant” or not worthy of our attention, like the poor Egyptians suffering under Pharaoh.

So, why is God hurting all the people of Egypt with the plagues that affect everyone except the Israelites? We have seen time and time again in human history, both ancient and modern, that the actions of a tyrant are visited upon the people because of the self-interest, and desire for power of the despot.

People living under an autocrat feel exhausted because they are ignored or used as pawns. People just learn to keep their heads down and go along. People who don't matter because they are considered to be troublemakers are injured, killed or swept aside as collateral damage. And we call it “a tragedy.”

God shows us that God is the only one who can truly beat back the power of Pharaoh. Nothing Pharaoh can do will touch God's power to create and to destroy. All of creation is brought to bear on the re-ordering of society. The Israelites on their own were absolutely helpless in the face of the power of the mighty Egyptian machine, but nothing (and no one) is helpless in God's world-view. When God sends gnats, frogs, boils, locusts, the ominous darkness of three days and then finally, this plague we hear today of death of the first born of people and animals alike, God is re-ordering creation. You think Pharaoh is the most dangerous being in the world, he who commands legions of slaves and warriors with immense firepower? He is not.

Pharaoh will get his comeuppance. Because God lifts up the powerless and gives them agency and freedom. God makes lives matter even if some people cannot understand or see it.

God doesn't just talk about power. It is demonstrated to all in no uncertain terms. Pharaoh doesn't stand a chance against the God of the Israelites, the God of salvation, The God of liberation, the God who speaks with a thundering voice and hail that kills all: plants, crops, animals, people who are not under safe shelter, God says, Israelite lives matter.

The forgotten people are remembered. The enslaved people are lifted out of their slavery and told to prepare themselves to leave this terrible place. One step of preparation we are told of today is to go to Egyptian friends and ask for gifts of gold and silver which will fund their upcoming journey through the wilderness. They will need to trade with peoples they encounter on their way.

This last plague is terribly harsh – the killing of all the Egyptian firstborn. It mirrors the terrible edict given by Pharaoh at the beginning of the book of Exodus when Pharaoh declared that all the male Israelite babies were to be killed. We remember that was when Moses was saved by his mother putting him in a basket in the river.

God makes lives matter. Israelite lives matter. And we in God's name declare that Black lives matter. And so today what the Black Lives Matter movement teaches us, those of us who are white and who have enjoyed unconscious privilege all our lives, is that some people who have not mattered in our country's history need to be, for once, lifted up to matter too... as much as white people matter.

Jesus made lives matter too. Jesus had God's authority to lift up the poor, the hungry, the sick, the widowed and the orphans. These people were forgotten and cast aside in Jesus' day and Jesus makes their lives matter. Because they matter to God.

Jesus takes part in a debate, so to speak, with the chief priests and elders. We're going to have a month of debates ourselves now in our run-up to the presidential election. Who will debate better? Who will win? We, of course do not know. But I would caution the debaters on the stage to not use the answer that the elders used, "We do not know." That will probably not be a winning strategy for a modern presidential debate. It wasn't a winning strategy to use with Jesus either.

Let us pray today for wisdom and courage, for patience and understanding in the face of our difficulties in this country today. Let us remember who has the power to change us and change the world.