

PROPER 16 (YEAR A, RCL), 24 August 2008
Good Shepherd, Berkeley
Jay E. Johnson

Exodus 1:8 – 2:10
Matthew 16:13-20

I cannot read passages like the one we heard from Exodus this morning without hearing the narrator's voice in Cecil B. DeMille's rollicking epic, *The Ten Commandments*. That film made a huge impression on me as a child, so much so that for me, to this day, Moses is Charlton Heston and Pharaoh is Yul Brenner.

In the nineteenth century, by contrast, African Americans couldn't hear stories from Exodus without thinking about their own enslavement in this country. A century later, Martin Luther King, Jr., evoked passages from Exodus for some of his most stirring speeches in the struggle for civil rights and freedom from the oppressor's yoke.

Many centuries before all of that, early Christian commentators couldn't read stories like this one from the Hebrew Bible without finding traces of Christ in them or analogies to the life of Christian faith, or just about anything other than the actual story of Joseph's descendants in Egypt.

Origen, in the second and third centuries for example, understood Egypt to stand, not for Egypt, but for this world of toil more generally, where we are distracted by earthly matters, like bricks made from straw, instead of setting our hearts toward heaven. A couple of centuries later Augustine took the infant Moses in a basket on a river, not as the infant Moses in a basket on a river, but as foreshadowing our own salvation in Christ through the waters of baptism.

That's what classic stories do and what makes them classic at all – they weave themselves into our imaginations and evoke a host of related images and spark analogous connections and send us off on journeys rather far removed from the story itself. What we today would call the “historical facts” behind these ancient texts make virtually no difference in the power of these stories to shape a people, ignite passions, spin off theological visions, or simply provide fodder for wonderfully kitschy, campy movies.

The very same thing can be said, of course, about the story of Jesus, and even more so since we don't have just one gospel account to work from but four, not to mention the dizzying array of theologies, spiritual practices, communities, and institutions springing from those four distinct accounts and stretching over more than 2,000 years. On top of all that, the blending of religion and culture in western society has given us any number of “Jesuses” to choose from, whether as the champion of Spanish conquistadors or the champion of American family values, as well as nearly endless source material for all things kitschy and campy. Speaking of which: [Show action figure doll].

Yes, it's true – this is a Jesus action figure doll, packaged in much the same way as Batman or Superman. The packaging is getting a little worn around the edges since I've been using this toy for the last few years in my theology classes at the GTU. I keep it wrapped up like this because the packaging is one of the best things about it. (Though I have to say, it's been a mighty struggle to resist finding out what “poseable arms with gliding action” actually looks like.)

The very first question I pose to those theology classes is this: So, is this Jesus action figure supposed to be funny and kitschy or is it supposed to be religiously and theologically serious?

The answer of course is both, depending on who's playing with it and how it's used. So, for example, it's rather difficult to take this toy seriously by looking at the front of the package; but on the back is a list of very serious biblical passages from the Sermon on the Mount, and texts about peace, and love, and salvation. To say the least, interpreting contemporary culture can be as difficult as interpreting ancient texts.

So this morning I'm imagining handing this action figure to Jesus himself. I imagine him smiling and chuckling a bit, looking at both the front and the back of his own twenty-first century packaging. And then I imagine him looking at me and saying, "So, who do you say that I am?"

Well, that's the key question, no less for us than it was for the disciples in Matthew's gospel; and in some ways, no less tricky than when we ask the same question about Moses. To some extent, the lectionary is setting us up here. The readings this morning from Exodus and Matthew set the stage by posing the question and the readings we'll hear next week would seem to give us the answer. Moses? He's the great liberator of his people from slavery. Jesus? He's the savior who must die on the cross to save us.

But here's the thing: when it comes to these really big questions, answers are often overrated. Back in my high school days – I guess I should say *way* back – members of my church youth group frequently engaged in long discussions about questions like the one Matthew's Jesus poses this morning. We were an eagerly pious bunch, that youth group, and it mattered a great deal to us to come up with the "right" answer.

Focusing so diligently on getting it right, we often missed the richness of the process itself. Inevitably in those discussions someone would eventually play a trump card – quoting a bible verse or a sentence from a creed – and those youthful deliberations would abruptly end. That's what answers often do, especially definitive answers to questions loaded with ultimate significance – they close down the conversation.

That would seem to be the problem we're facing in the worldwide Anglican Communion these days – a war of definitive answers. Lost in those skirmishes is the richness of inquiry, of shared investigation and discovery, of learning from different perspectives and approaches. Historically, that's what Anglicans have done rather well by letting the questions lead us deeper into the mystery of God's own life and recognizing that no single approach will suffice.

That's what theology and liturgy and spirituality and congregational life and even kitschy cultural artifacts and movies can and should do for us – open up the path into mystery with questions. I don't mean that we should just leave big questions unaddressed or that we should never try to articulate a response. I do mean that all of us are vulnerable to the "Peter problem."

This morning Peter gives a big answer to a big question: "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." And Jesus praises Peter for this, and it's high praise indeed. But the problem, which we'll hear more about in next week's passage, is that Peter thinks he knows exactly what that answer means. In fact, he thinks he knows what it means better than even Jesus himself.

That's the "Peter problem" – Peter thought he had arrived when actually the journey had only just begun; he was sure of his answer when he had only just scratched the surface; he felt certain he was reading from the final scene when it was only just the overture.

The problem, in other words, is this: If we think we already know what something means, then there's really nothing left to be said. We can close the book and be done with it, perhaps even take it for granted. This is certainly the case in our relationships with other people, with friends, spouses, and co-workers. If there are no more questions to ask, nothing left to surprise

us, no mystery to ponder, well then, there's really no relationship left to pursue. If that's true in our relationships with each other, then even more so in our relationship with God.

Believe me, I'm as eager for answers as anyone else; but human history is too long and religion is too complex and too rich, and the stakes are far too high to suppose that any one answer will satisfy the yearning for truth or for wisdom or just how to love each other in a world of violence and injustice.

This morning we stand as inheritors of many ways to read and approach the stories about Jesus. Some of those ways are better than others. For me, the best ways urge us to ask more questions, and to confront differences of opinion, and to keep traveling on the road together even though we can't see the destination with much if any clarity.

Just to be clear here, I actually do think it matters how we answer the question posed by Matthew's gospel this morning. What we say about Jesus and how we say it does and will shape our relationship with God and our relationships with each other. It will also form our sense of mission and ministry in this place and our relationship with this West Berkeley neighborhood and with the wider society in which we live.

But just like any other relationship, this one with Jesus is not static or frozen in time. Ask your closest friend "Who do you say that I am?" and the answer will likely not be the same as when you first met. How any of us answered that question about Jesus in the past may not resemble at all how we answer it today. And some of our fellow travelers on the road may not answer that question in the same way we do.

Despite what you may hear from various bishops or politicians, that's *not* a problem. That rich diversity is the gift of a living, thriving, dynamic community, a community that's willing to let all these questions propel us deeper into the adventure called "God."

And that brings me back to my high school youth group. Yes, we were a pious bunch, but that piety frequently emerged from fear – fear of making mistakes, fear of getting our answers "wrong." And I mean Fear with a capital "F," for our very souls were at stake.

What we didn't realize back then is that "getting it right" is not the rock on which Jesus builds his church. If it were, he certainly would not have chosen Peter to represent it. I would say that the "rock" is Peter's courage to make outrageously bold statements, knowing that he might not hit the mark. Knowing, I'd say, that he's more likely than not to miss the mark.

By this point in the story, Peter knows that his many blunders will not bring his relationship with Jesus to an end. He's tasted enough of the generous grace of Jesus by this point to risk looking foolish, to risk speaking his mind, and seeing where it all takes him. And we know exactly where this story takes him. Even Peter's denials toward the end of this story, at the very moment when Jesus needed him most, won't separate him from that gracious generosity.

The rock here is an unswerving confidence in the endless and loving generosity of God, something Peter – whose name means "rock" – knew firsthand. And the church built on *that* rock won't be afraid of asking questions, and it won't be afraid of disagreements, and it won't be afraid of saying, "I don't know, but here's my best guess; what do you think?"

That church won't be threatened by diversity; it will learn from it. It won't be defensive or self-protective but wildly hospitable. That church, like Peter, is willing to act boldly and risk looking foolish for the sake of bearing witness to the generous grace of God-in-Christ.

And against such a church as that, not even the gates of death shall prevail.

Amen.