

ARAB SPRING
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Many disturbing things are going on in the world today. For most of the world, particularly for those that live outside of the United States and Europe, after their struggle for basic necessities, the loudest and perhaps world-unifying complaint is the oppression of a people by their own governments. In many cases for those governments, many of them autocracies, those in power steal resources from their own people for personal, familial, or tribal gain, making the day to day struggle to put food on the table that much harder. There is nothing new in this – this has been going on for thousands of years and has occurred in many different cultures.

In today's reading from Exodus, the Hebrews are being oppressed by the Egyptians: a complaint that is echoed across most of the Middle East today. What is heartening in the story of the Hebrews and Egyptians from over 3000 years ago is that despite the best intentions of those in power to control outcomes in their own country and preserve their power while continuing to oppress their people, good somehow finds a way to prevail. Despite Pharaoh's best intentions in ancient Egypt, Moses is born and even raised in Pharaoh's own household as a member of his own family! How is that even possible? Maybe the Hebrews and the Egyptians are not all that different as a people, perhaps? Those that struggled thousands of years ago are the ancestors of those that struggle in that region today. Could Yul Brenner and Charlton Heston grow up as brothers in the Middle East today?

"We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowler; the snare is broken and we have escaped." Even though Psalm 124 was historically referring to the Israelites escaping oppression – this prayer, this praise has so many other applications for any people, in any place, trying to escape oppression. Both the Exodus reading and today's Psalm make me think that these thoughts, written thousands of years ago are applicable to the events unfolding today in the Middle East, especially in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Iran, and Pakistan to name a few places where the Arab Spring is manifesting itself. In many of these locations, minorities hold power over a majority population that is repressed and even oppressed. These majorities, though, are rising up against their authoritarian governments in an attempt to find a better life for themselves and their families. Every Friday after morning prayers, these folks are, in many cases, risking their lives to try and change the fundamental problem they face: their own governments. They are trying, like a bird, to escape the snare of the fowler – just like the Hebrews did in Egypt all those thousands of years ago.

What, then, is our role in all of this? Do we have a responsibility here? We already had our Revolution to overthrow our oppressors back in the 18th century. We are not “snared,” nor are we the “fowler.” Do we sit idly by and let events unfold without help or hindrance? Do we support a potentially new, anti-American, and potentially hostile democratic government that just overthrew a US-friendly, authoritarian government? Do we continue to provide military aid to those countries? One of the leading complaints about the United States in this part of the world, according to Thomas Friedman (one of the most widely read Western authors in the Middle East), is our above-board support of authoritarian regimes, which in turn grants those regimes legitimacy in the eyes of the world which then results in the ability to repress their own people. In today’s Old Testament story, we (the United States) are neither the Egyptians oppressing the Hebrews, nor are we the oppressed Hebrews looking to flee oppression. Instead, we are the financial backers of the Egyptians – we are Pharaoh’s closest ally. With that unsettled feeling, let’s turn to the New Testament and Gospel readings.

When we consider the reading from Paul to the Romans today, we learn just how important all of us can be, when we give ourselves to the divine. Our many diverse gifts are part of one Body in Christ. The strength of our community is indeed our diversity – all of our gifts pooled together for the greater good. One must remember Paul’s audience when this was written in the first century: there were no Christians or Muslims yet, but instead Jews and Gentiles; Romans and non-Romans. Paul initially took his preaching to the Jews in each small community he visited before expanding his audience to include all peoples, especially the Gentiles. Paul, as a Roman himself, was pretty insensitive to nationality or citizenship in his preaching. He recognized that when all are joined together in harmony, there is real strength. When I look at the United States today, I can tell you that our greatest strength is our diversity, or, our ability to willingly accept new groups into our midst. From my Navy experience I can tell that nothing amazes other countries more than to see one of our Visit Board Search and Seizure teams at sea. These small teams of 8-12 personnel with a 2-3 person boat crew get on tiny 7 meter Rigid Hull Inflatable Boat (called a Rhib) and head off to search freighters, tankers, fishing boats and oil terminals in order to prevent smuggling, human trafficking, piracy and to enforce United Nation sanctions at sea. When one of our teams of men and women of nearly every race, color, and creed under the sun steps aboard a foreign vessel or platform made up of homogenous ethnicity depending on nation of origin, the masters and crews cannot believe that such a mix of people is possible, let alone that men can take orders from women and that blacks can give orders to whites, that Muslims can give orders to Christians; or that the team lead may have come from Ghana originally, or maybe even Korea or Vietnam. When I look at our nation, I see a people with many talents and many beliefs, all with freedom and opportunity. I can see what Paul was telling the church in Rome: “We each have many gifts, we who are many, are one body in Christ.”

I take great strength from my favorite Apostle Peter who constantly embarrasses me in what he says and does, giving me hope that I have a chance with Jesus too. This is the same Peter who manages to even make Jesus angry at times. The rebukes that Jesus sometimes gives Peter are more severe than what Jesus gave to Judas at the betrayal. Why, then, is he the rock on which the church is built? I will tell you: Peter is all heart, all belief, and all trusting. Peter is like us – he makes mistakes but he accomplishes what we aspire to do: put our trust in the lord, even when it is difficult and hurts; even when we do not believe.

So, in the attempt to aspire to be like Peter, do we help oppress today's Hebrews even though the outcome may not be good for us in the short term? Do we help the Fowler with his snares? Do we sit idly by and do nothing? Or do we find a way to help the Birds leave their snares and escape as did the Hebrews? As we were helped by the French to escape our colonial master in the Revolutionary War? Do we try and help all of these oppressed people with their unique gifts find opportunity and freedom like we enjoy?

I think the answer to these questions is found in the Gospel reading today. Let me remind you of one of the key lines from Matthew: "...and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in Heaven." It seems we are being reminded that there are implications to our local, earth-bound decisions today. We will be judged by our actions or inaction today at some point. I find it ironic that this is the same reading that Peter demonstrates his faith and correctly identifies Jesus. It is also one of the few places in the New Testament where Jesus actually praises Peter. It is the reading where he is recognized as the rock on which the church will be built – followed immediately by the passage I just read to you a moment ago.

What are we to glean from these passages today; in our modest St. Aidan's church in a small neighborhood in Virginia Beach today? We are being challenged to leave our comfort zones and our satisfied lives. We are being challenged to care about all humans with their diverse gifts, regardless of race, creed, color, or gender. Paul challenged us in Romans today: "Do not be conformed to this world, 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." The Arab Spring we are seeing across the Middle East today is the manifestation of many different and diverse people this century trying to escape the snares of their fowlers to find a way to share their gifts with their communities, just like the Hebrews did thousands of years ago in Egypt, just like we did 230 years ago with the help of the French. These people who are rising up against their governments aspire to be like the community Paul described to the Romans. They aspire to have the opportunity that we have. The question for us is whether we help them or not. Jesus himself reminds us today that what we do on earth has implications in Heaven too.