

Southern Asia Initiative

Together in Hope



Story of Freedom

A story of Exodus 3:1-12

By Tom Liddle

Exodus 3:1-12

³ Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³ Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴ When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵ Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷ Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸ and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹ The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰ So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." ¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" ¹² He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." (NRSV)

"For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gifts to strengthen you or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine." (NRSV)

Prayer

God of freedom, you are one who hears, sees and knows the suffering of the oppressed. We give you thanks that you did not despise the cry of the Timorese people but heard them when they called. You joined them and sustained them through 25 years of struggle. Be with them as they continue this process

of liberation, freeing them from the oppression of poverty and all that threatens the life you bestow. Open their eyes to discern how you are present in their midst. In the name of your crucified and risen Son, Amen.

Introduction

Social Context: Timor-Leste

The nation of Timor-Leste comprises the eastern half of the island of Timor on the eastern end of the Indonesian archipelago. The western half of the island is part of Indonesia. That's due to the colonial history of both countries. For centuries, the western part of the island, along with the rest of Indonesia, was a Dutch colony. The eastern part of Timor was a Portuguese colony. That arbitrary boundary was due to a 15th century dispute between the Dutch and Portuguese over who would exploit the sandalwood resources on the island of Timor. In the end, the two colonial powers split the island, the Dutch taking control of the west, the Portuguese the east. Such are the assumptions of colonialism: the world is here to be exploited; it's simply a matter of who's going to do it.

The Portuguese ruled Timor-Leste for over 400 years. During its rule, Timorese were often enslaved for hard labor. My colleague, I'll call him Joao, recently told me a story. As a young man his parents recounted to him how they were forced to participate in road building. The women had to gather rocks while the men were forced to build the road. Joao's father was willing to work but he refused to allow his wife to be enslaved. That was simply too much for him. But the Portuguese didn't accept this. An officer came to their house and confronted him. Joao's father was forced to hold his hands out while the Portuguese officer whacked his hands with a stick until they were swollen and black and blue.

In 1975 the Portuguese left Timor-Leste. A week later the Indonesians, who'd gained independence from the Dutch in 1945, invaded with the full support of the United States and other Western powers. The Indonesian period was marked by brutality, fear and war. Another colleague, I'll call him Miguel, shared a story about his experience during this period.

One day he and his friend were working on Imanuel Church, where we both now serve as pastors. They were carrying rocks for the foundation and an Indonesian soldier was supervising them. Indonesia, anxious to prove that it was not affiliated with Communism, required every Timorese to have a religious affiliation. The Indonesians thus enthusiastically supported church construction. Miguel and his friend were speaking their local language, Fataluku. Suspecting the two might be part of the Timorese clandestine resistance, the Indonesian soldier held a gun to Miguel's head and told him if he spoke another word of Fataluku, he'd be shot. Timor was now part of Indonesia, he said, and Indonesian was the only legitimate language. And that is why, Miguel told me, no matter what, he would never be able to forget the Indonesian language.

Stories like these are common. Over the years I've heard many of them. But the main story in Timor is a story of freedom and hope. Over the 25 years of Indonesian occupation, the Timorese fought a David and Goliath struggle for freedom. And against all odds and expectations, against all the calculations of the rich and the aspirations of the powerful, today they are free.

Biblical Reflection

When we open the Bible, we encounter reports, stories and testimonies of the ways ancient people perceived the Word of God to be *alive and active in the world*. But the Bible is a hard read. It is complex and often contradictory in its testimony about God. Scripture therefore resists easy formulations, doctrinal certitudes or direct links to contemporary events. But perhaps that is partly the point. The Bible testifies to the *vitality and versatility* of the Word in the world. It suggests that the Word is always on the move, inviting us to become awake and aware yet evading our best attempts to domesticate it.

The story of the Exodus is a story that testifies to the presence of the Word of God in and through a particular struggle for freedom. The story therefore invites us to ponder how that same Word may be alive and active through other struggles for freedom from oppression. In this study we will consider the well-known story of the call of Moses through the lens of the history of Timor-Leste.

A Revelation of God

The story of Moses begins at the beginning of the book of Exodus, when we are told, “...a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph” (1:8). This subtle line anticipates the upcoming conflict between an oppressive king and the God of freedom. In fact, Moses’ own life begins in the shadow of this king’s edict to kill the male Hebrew children because he fears they pose a threat to his exploitative regime which values power and profit above all else (1:16, 22).

Good theological questions are often the simplest ones. One we might ask of this story is simply: “How do we come to know God?” With that question in mind, let us dive into this familiar story.

At the beginning of chapter 3, Moses is at his daily task of keeping sheep. It’s there, in the uninhabited wilderness, that God is revealed to Moses in the form of a burning bush. The burning bush is ordinary in that nothing could be more common than a bush. But it’s extraordinary in that it’s on fire, but not burning up! This familiar tale thus points to the fact that God’s Word dwells in the world and is available for those who, like Moses, “...turn aside and look” (3:3). This act of discernment allows Moses to hear God addressing him directly and personally. In the encounter, God’s identity is revealed:

“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them” (Ex. 3:6-9).

The above narrative is given to us as the direct speech of God. It presents us with a very particular picture of God. Who is this God? In this speech we learn that God is one who is intimately involved in the suffering of this people. God has *heard* the cries and *seen* the misery. But it’s more passionate than that. This God *knows* the sufferings. The God who speaks in this text isn’t a God removed from earthly realities. God is one who is affected by what’s happening to these people. God sees, hears, and knows about it.

The popular conception of God as one above suffering, unaffected by the world and uninvolved in earthly struggle is foreign to the rhetoric of the Bible and is useless for people who are suffering. The God revealed in this story is a God who’s passionately involved in history, one who suffers with people and one who takes sides with those who suffer. The biblical story expresses this in many of its testimonies about the character of God, but most radically in its witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Let's go back to our earlier question, "How do we come to know God?" With the Exodus story, we can say that *God is revealed in the historical process of liberation from oppression*. That's to say, the Israelites come to know God through God's commitment to freeing them from slavery in Egypt and bringing them to freedom in a new land. Here, we may say that the Word of God is revealed as a *word of grace*. If we read further though, (Ex. 7-15) we learn that God's Word is also revealed in this story as a *word of judgment*; a word of judgment against Pharaoh and what he represents: exploitative, oppressive regimes, ideologies, and practices.

A Call to Action

We learned in verse 8 that God is truly affected by the Israelites plight under Egyptian oppression. Due to that suffering, God is firmly on the Israelites side. God says, "I will come down to deliver them from the Egyptians." That language sounds as if we can expect unilateral action on God's part. But when we get to verse 10, surprise! God says to Moses, "So come, I will *send you to Pharaoh!*" God has been revealed in the process of liberation and now we learn that God's call is a call to *involvement in liberation*. The combination of "I will deliver...you will go," is one we need to ponder. God has taken the side of the oppressed Israelites. But Moses must go to Pharaoh and demand their freedom.

Moses is a complex character. Although he's an Israelite, he grows up in the house of Pharaoh. When he comes of age, he realizes how oppressed his people are. Outraged, his first action on their behalf comes out of his passion rather than the call of God. He kills an Egyptian, buries him in the sand and flees to a foreign land.

When our story begins, Moses is thus a shepherd-murderer in exile. That doesn't stop God from calling him, however. But when he learns that obedience to God will mean going to Pharaoh and demanding the Israelites' freedom, he resists the call (vs. 11). Thus, we learn that Moses isn't a puppet and God isn't a puppet master. Moses is free to resist, and he does. This is a real relationship with consequences for both Moses and God. God has committed to freeing the Israelites but will do it through Moses, a fragile, flawed, human agent. This is a risk for God, yet this is what God does and will do throughout the story. This means that relationships matter to God and that God is willing to risk failure for the sake of relationship. "I will be with you" is God's promise to Moses (vs. 12). God doesn't say, "I will do it for you," or "you will succeed." God doesn't even say, "Do not fear." God says simply, "I will be with you." But for Moses, that is enough.

Back to Timor-Leste

We learn from the Exodus narrative that God is revealed in the historical process of liberation from oppression. That is, God is not revealed through an idea or a doctrine but through an action. In fact, the very name of God in Hebrew, “YHWH,” is a verb. Nevertheless, God is a personal, relational agent as we learn from the interaction with Moses. But God’s very name implies action, and that action is liberation from oppression. To be sure, the story of the Exodus is a uniquely Israelite and Jewish story. Theologians differ on whether the Exodus can be a script for modern liberation struggles. But the Bible itself suggests that such Exoduses are a characteristic expression of God’s activity in the world so we shouldn’t be too hesitant to perceive God’s active presence in struggles for freedom. For example:

“Are you not like the Ethiopians to me O people of Israel? Says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, *and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?*” (Amos 9:7).

As Christians, we connect the story of the Exodus with the celebration of Holy Communion. Jesus’ words at the last supper, “This cup is my blood of the covenant,” has the Passover story as its backdrop (Ex. 12). Passover is the liturgical celebration of the Exodus from Egypt. And that means that Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection performs its own kind of “Exodus,” one that frees us from the menacing forces that are behind oppression of any kind: the forces of sin, death, and evil.

With that in mind, when viewed through the eyes of faith, we can say that the same Word of God revealed in the Exodus story shows up again in liberation of the Timorese people. From the Exodus story, we learn that God takes the side of the oppressed. For the Timorese, liberation is a process that began with uprisings against Portuguese colonial rule and one that continued through resistance to the Indonesian military occupation. And despite financial and military support of the United States and other Western powers, despite the sophistication of Indonesian propaganda and military force, despite the financial calculations and imperial aspirations, and against all expectations, the people of Timor-Leste won independence. And today they are free from oppressive foreign rule. Thanks be to God!

Questions for Reflection

1. Do you think that God suffers? Why would this matter to oppressed people?
2. People often identify with the Israelites in this story. What happens when we read this story as “Egyptians?”
3. In the Exodus story, God sides with the oppressed. Do you find this comforting or disturbing?
4. What would it mean to be involved in the process of liberation in your context?

About the Author

Rev. Tom Liddle works with the Protestant Church of East Timor. He is pastor of Immanuel Church in Lospalos and a resource person for continuing education of pastors.