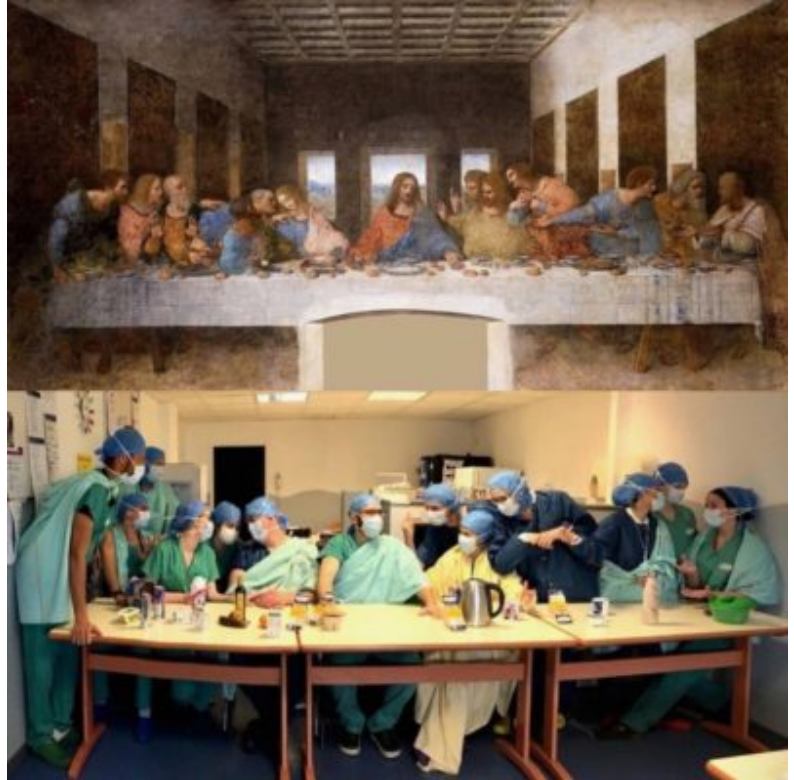


“The Scariest Line in the Bible” by Deborah Sokolove



Top, Leonardo da Vinci's The Last Supper, 1495-98. Bottom, doctors at a hospital in Paris performing a tableau vivant of the painting.

August 23, 2020

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Last week, our Hebrew Scripture reading ended with the dramatic reunion between Joseph and the older brothers who had sold him to some passing traders when he was 17. By that time, Joseph had become an important official in the court of the Pharaoh, as the king of Egypt was called. The Pharaoh wisely decided to listen to Joseph's advice about how to prepare for the coming natural disaster, and put this 30-year-old foreign expert in charge of storing up a lot of grain during the years

of plenty so that the people would not starve during the years of drought.

As you may recall, the brothers were there because the famine had spread to the place they were living in Canaan, and the only place to buy grain for themselves and their livestock was in Egypt. Joseph sends his brothers back to Canaan to fetch their father, Jacob, plus nearly 70 members of his family, and all of their livestock and other possessions. Grateful for Joseph's help, Pharaoh tells this small tribe to settle in a part of Egypt called Goshen, where the family grows and becomes wealthy. Genesis ends with the death of Joseph at the age of 110, after a life filled with riches, honor, and the gratitude of the Pharaoh.

But time passed, and the next book, which we call Exodus, begins with what one of my seminary professors called the scariest line in the entire Bible: "A new Pharaoh—one who did not know Joseph—came to power in Egypt."

Like many of the other stories the lectionary has given us this summer, this one has a new resonance for me in this time, as Pharaoh says,

Look at how powerful the Israelites have become, and how they outnumber us! We need to deal shrewdly with their increase, against a time of war when they might turn against us and join our enemy...[Exodus 1:8-10]

The events recounted in the last chapters of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus are set in a time that is roughly 3500 years ago. Although they were not written down in their current form until about 1000 years later, the stories and genealogies at their core were familiar as oral history, passed from parent to child, and storyteller to storyteller, over the centuries, as happens in any tribal culture. They are not history in the modern sense of the word, and not much can be proven to have happened exactly as it is recorded, but the

deeper truths of human behavior continue to have echoes even today.

As many people have observed recently, history rarely repeats itself, but its echoes never go away. The ancient Egyptian ruling class enslaved and oppressed people who came to them for help because of the famine in their own land, setting the poorer Egyptian against the migrants with fear and hatred. In more recent times, the White ruling class in Europe and the Americas enslaved, oppressed, and often persecuted or killed anyone who didn't fit their definition of what it meant to be fully human, setting poorer Whites against the Black and Brown peoples with fear and hatred. Today's reading continues with words that might as well be from the newspapers, just by changing a few names.

So they oppressed the Israelites with overseers who put them to forced labor; and with them they built the storage cities of Pitom and Ra'amses. Yet the more the Israelites were oppressed, the more they multiplied and burst forth, until the Egyptians dreaded the Israelites. So they made the Israelites utterly subservient with hard labor, brick-and-mortar work, and every kind of field work. The Egyptians were merciless in subjugating them with crushing labor. [Exodus 1:;11-14]

However relevant that story of Israelites and Egyptians is to today, I grew up believing that it is my story, that the Israelites are my own, literal ancestors. Earlier this summer, when the Black Lives Matter demonstrations were in the news all the time, it seemed to me that I kept hearing a refrain around Seekers that sounded like, "I grew up in the South (or maybe the Mid-Atlantic, or maybe just somewhere rural) surrounded by racism... As a teenager (or at some other time in the distant past), I came to see that racism was wrong... I worked against both individual and systemic racism in a number of ways over the years.... And today I continue to wrestle with

what it means to be a White person, a person of privilege in a country that blatantly oppresses all people of color, especially those who are Black.”

Every time I heard a version of this story, and the affirming choruses of those who recognize in it a variant of their own, I felt a cold chill, as if I didn't belong here. It's not that there is anything wrong with this story. Everyone has a story, as my father used to say, and everyone's story is as valid and important as anyone else's. Stories, after all, are how we make sense of our lives. And stories like these help me to honor the struggle of you who were expected to be blatant racists, and still grew up to work for a decent, inclusive world.

The problem with this kind of story for me is that hearing the stories of White people being amplified and affirmed by other White people remind me that my story doesn't fit the easy classification in which one is either White or Black, or maybe an indigenous Native American or a person of color. I felt that chill of not belonging because no matter how many years I worship in this community, no matter how many years I do my best to follow Jesus, no matter what my academic credentials and honors in the Christian academy, if the White supremacists have their way, they will be coming after me and my Jewish family, right along with all the others who aren't White. But because I, like most Jews in this country look White, because we have largely been economically successful, because many Jews are in visible places of power, my story and the story of my people is too often erased from the conversation in which one can only be a privileged White person or an oppressed Person of Color.

I was taught to blend in, to keep quiet, to not call attention to my differentness, to only discuss certain things within the community in which I grew up, to “pass.” The result is that an important part of my identity has become an invisible burden that I often do not feel the right to mention. The reality is

that even though I have light skin and blue eyes, even though I have what Cornell West and others term “white skin privilege,” I carry the invisible burden of being not quite White.

In a March 2020 article in the Atlantic called “Is It Still Safe to be a Jew in America”, Gary Rosenblatt writes,

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) began tracking anti-Semitic hate crimes four decades ago. This past year brought the third-highest spike on record. Jews make up less than 3 percent of the American population, but the majority of reported religiously based hate crimes target Jewish people or institutions. In a new study by the American Jewish Committee, 35 percent of American Jews said they had experienced anti-Semitism in the past five years, and one-third reported concealing outward indications of their being Jewish.

[<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/anti-semitism-new-normal-america/608017/>]

When the Unite the Right rally stormed through Charlottesville in 2017, chanting “Blood and soil,” “White lives matter” and “Jews will not replace us,” I heard it as an existential threat to me and my family.

When I hear of a shooting at a Jewish place of worship, or see news photos of swastikas painted on the fences of Jewish cemeteries, or notice thinly (or not-so-thinly)-veiled anti-Semitic slurs in political advertising, I feel personally threatened.

The Jewish community has a long memory. From childhood, Jews are taught to connect the dots from the Pharaoh who didn't know Joseph, through the Babylonian exile in the 7th century BCE and the Roman emperor who destroyed Jerusalem and dispersed the people into exile again in 70 CE, to the forced

conversions and burnings at the hands of Torquemada and the Spanish Inquisition in the 15th century. And all this connects with my grandmother's stories of hiding in the cellar when the Easter blood-libel stories sent drunken Christians rampaging through Jewish neighborhoods every spring in Lodz, Poland.

Against this background, the Holocaust hovers like a ghost, ever-ready to jump out and terrify me. The situation in the US right now is eerily reminiscent of how things were in Germany in the 1930s, when Jews who had believed themselves safe, respected and accepted members of an open, educated society, suddenly found themselves the object of Nazi hatred and violence. My mother's relatives were unable to leave Poland, which was occupied by the Nazis in 1939. All but two of her cousins, aunts, and uncles died, either of starvation in the Lodz ghetto or were killed in Auschwitz or one of the other death camps. When I was in my thirties, I worked as a designer for one of those two surviving cousins, by then an old man with a successful business in the Los Angeles garment district. One day over lunch he showed me the numbers tattooed on his arm, and told me a little of how he and his brother had managed to survive when so many others did not.

So when my Black friends tell me that they feel it personally when yet another Black man is killed in police custody; when yet another Black child is unfairly disciplined for behavior that doesn't even make anyone blink when a White child does it; or when Black teenagers are followed in stores as if they were criminals, it makes perfect sense. Even though my Christian faith makes it impossible for me to participate in the Jewish community, the Jews are still my people. Being Jewish is not matter of how one worships, but a matter of peoplehood, of cultural identity. And when bad things happen to one of my people for no reason other than their Jewish identity, I feel it as if it were happening to me, personally.

Recently, when one of my adult children asked me where we

could go if White supremacist influence continues to grow, I lightly said that we could all move in with a family member in another country, hoping that would put an end to the conversation. It didn't. It was a serious question, fueled by what is a not unreasonable fear that attacks against Jewish people will increase if right-wing extremists continue to hold onto power. The voice I've been hearing in my head for the past four years is getting louder, keeping me awake at night as it repeats, "This is how it happened in Germany. This is how Hitler took over a civilized, progressive country. It absolutely can happen here. Maybe it is time to leave."

But then I started to think about how long Black and indigenous people have been suffering in this country, about all the people who cannot leave no matter how bad it gets, and how privileged my day-to-day life still is. Maybe it's my responsibility to stay and keep trying to make things better, rather than to use my economic and White-skin privilege to leave. Because that sense of responsibility is part of my Jewish identity, too. Or, as Deuteronomy 10:19 puts it, "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus asks his disciples "Who do people say that I am?" Although he asks the question, I am sure that Jesus knows exactly who he is, and that his sense of identity doesn't rely on the opinions of others. He's already been in the synagogue, reading from Isaiah 61:1, proclaiming to all who would listen, "God has sent me to bring good news to those who are poor; to heal broken hearts; to proclaim release to those held captive and liberation to those in prison." Jesus was absolutely clear that the Spirit of God was upon him, that he was God's anointed one, the Messiah sent to save his people.

Unlike Pharaoh, who wasn't the least bit curious about those people living in Goshen and was afraid of their foreign ways, Jesus wanted to know his disciples at the deepest level. So he

asked them to say out loud what they had been thinking, to try things out, even if they might be wrong. He gave them an opportunity to tell their own stories, to name their own experiences, to become known to one another as he had already become known to them.

When we tell our stories, and know that we are heard as if for the first time, we become more able to make sense of our life together. And when we know who we are together, we can discover that we are the Body of Christ, ready to be broken and poured out for the healing of the world.