

Ordinary 5
February 5, 2012
Year B
They Pursued Him

Readings:
Isaiah 40:21-31
Psalm 147:1-12, 21c
1 Corinthians 9:16-23
Mark 1:29-39

Let us pray:

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer.

I am going to get to the Gospel this morning using a different route, so I would like everyone to buckle your seatbelts and sit back while we go to the Book of Exodus for a few moments. Just to keep everything in context, we are going to examine Pharaoh's attitude shortly after the Israelites marched triumphantly out of Egypt. Pharaoh has just received word that the Israelites are gone and the reality of the situation is beginning to dawn on him as he snaps out of the fog of grief over the death of his oldest son. If you want to follow along, we will be starting with verse 5 of chapter 14: ⁵ *When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about them and said, "What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services!"* ⁶ *So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him.* ⁷ *He took six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them.* ⁸ *The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, so that he pursued the Israelites, who were marching out boldly.* ⁹ *The Egyptians—all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, horsemen and troops—pursued the Israelites and overtook them as they camped by the sea.....*

Pharaoh becomes angry because he realizes that the Israelites' God bested both the great kingdom of Egypt as well as their many gods. It also may have dawned on him that his subjects might somehow have to make up for all the work previously done by the newly liberated Egyptian slaves – and that is not something the people of Egypt were going to accept very easily. I would go so far as to speculate that Pharaoh is a bit afraid for his own safety given the fact that he would be perceived as a very weak king for letting those upstart Israelite slaves simply walk out of Egypt – much less walk out with a great deal of Egypt's famed wealth. So in anger at the people he formally controlled and in frustration over his potential loss of prestige, Pharaoh gathers his entire fleet of chariots as well as his best military officers and personnel and goes after the Israelites to bring them back. The Sacred Author of Exodus states that Pharaoh was under the misguided conception that the Israelites were wandering around aimlessly and trapped by the desert (Ex 14:3).

Now, let's look at verse 36 of the first chapter of Mark from the Gospel this morning. The New International Version (NIV) says that "Simeon and his companions went to look for Him" but other translations are a lot more dramatic. The Revised Standard Version (RSV) states that "Simon and those who were with him pursued Him." The words used in the RSV for Mark 1:36 are the same as those used in the Septuagint (LXX) translation of Exodus in describing how Pharaoh's forces tracked down the Israelites. These words imply hostility and anger – the very same hostility and anger we read about a few minutes ago. The RSV and the LXX give the impression that Simeon and the other first Apostles were angry that Jesus snuck away in the early morning. A few weeks ago we read about how Jesus called His first Apostles and how

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they brazenly told others they had instead found Him. I see a picture of the Apostles in these passages which depict them as men wanting to exert their power and influence over Jesus in order to gain power and influence for themselves. They believe they have discovered something wonderful and want to use it to their advantage. We tend to envision the Apostles as the holy men they became after Jesus Ascended into heaven and the Holy Spirit filled them with wisdom and power at Pentecost. We forget that they were not always holy men and that they initially suffered from the same misconceptions concerning Jesus' mission as did everyone else. I believe that they were angry because Jesus slipped away and they tracked Him down with the intention to bring Him back so that He could continue to serve their needs as well as increase their power and influence. In my opinion, they did not yet understand their true relationship to Jesus.

The first reading from the Prophet Isaiah hints that mankind has always misunderstood his relationship with God: Why do you say, Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God"? (Is 40:27). When we forget our relationship with God, we begin to ignore Who and What He really is because we start to see Him through the lenses of our own demands. We forget the teachings that help define our relationship to and with God: that being that we are His creation – albeit His favorite creation. Some of us go so far as to put aside the truth of Who and What God is in order to pronounce that it doesn't matter what we think about Him because, after all, doesn't everyone worship the same God? By choosing to ignore Who God really is we allow ourselves to make excuses for not bothering to try to know Him as He reveals Himself to be or, worse yet, convince ourselves that getting to know Him makes absolutely no difference at all. We reduce Him to something less than ourselves.

These are the types of attitudes that lead us into the trap of thinking that we can somehow control God. They allow us build up a ridiculous bravado and think that we have the right and the obligation to go track Him down and put Him in His place when we think we know better than He does or we don't get what we want. I've often heard people say that it is OK to get angry with God because He has big shoulders and can take it. In fact, I've gotten very angry at God more than once in my past life and I used that as an excuse for not coming to Church for a number of years. I went so far as to throw out all the Christian education I received in Catholic grammar school and high school in order to live a very worldly life. Looking back, I can clearly see that I was acting like a spoiled child who was not getting his way. I was trying to hurt God; when in fact all I was doing was putting myself in danger of eternal damnation. As I've begun to grow spiritually, I am starting to see that doing that can lead us to take advantage of His intense love for us by implying that He is somehow responsible for the very things that make us so angry – that He somehow wills us to suffer. We forget that we are to "be still and know that He is God." (Psalm 46:10)

One of the ways I struggle with thinking that I am more important than I really am is when I pray over people who are seriously sick. I sometimes get a deep nagging feeling that the person over whom I am praying will lose faith if they are not healed and that I am somehow responsible for making sure that does not happen. Worse yet, I sometimes wonder if I am wasting my time by praying because God will do what God will do. Those thoughts are signs that I am not completely convinced of the idea that I am merely an instrument of God's grace and not the source of it. I have a brother-in-law who is very sick with cancer. There is a priest in Northern Virginia who celebrates a healing Mass once a month during which documented healings have occurred. Lora and I knew him a number of years ago and have a strong sense that he has the gift of healing. Additionally, I had a prompting that I should invite my brother-in-law

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to come to our house to attend one of those Masses. He and his family came and I started to wonder what would happen if he was not healed. I began doubting whether God was going to follow through on what I thought was His end of the deal He made when He prompted me to act. We went to the healing Mass and no physical healing occurred. I was a little put out and almost felt like I had been duped. However, a week later my wife received a call from her sister saying that my brother-in-law had been anxious for weeks before attending the Mass and that he now had a strong sense of peace concerning what was going on in his life. In fact, he was sleeping better than he had been in weeks. God provided the healing my brother-in-law needed, which was not the healing that I expected.

These attitudes creep into all of our lives from time to time. For me, I think that is partly the result of my scientific and engineering training, but mostly it is due to my pride and consummate drive to achieve measurable results. These things tend to keep my mind focused on the world vice on the Kingdom. Jesus came to reintroduce the Kingdom to a world that had lost it as a result of original sin. A Greek Orthodox priest named Alexander Schmemmann illustrates this by explaining his view of blessings. The traditional western view is that blessing an object sets it apart for sacred use. Hence, we don't pour Holy Water down a common sewer drain or throw our Bibles in the garbage. Fr. Schmemmann suggests that a blessing calls an item to be what God intended it to be all along. It calls forth that object to its rightful place in the Kingdom. To put it another way, the water in the font by the entrance to the Church is what water is really supposed to be. From the Book of Revelation, it becomes water from the "river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb." (Rev 22:1-2) Everything else is a cheap knock-off.

We need to remember that we became sons and daughters of God at our Baptism. That means that we are princes and princesses in His Kingdom. Don't settle for less by regressing to become some cheap knock-off by pretending to have more authority than God. The Holy Spirit fills us with power and wisdom that are to be used to further God's ultimate plan for creation which is to be in union with Him for eternity. We can accomplish nothing acting under our own authority. What we need to do is to be alert for indications that we are regressing and take action to remember that we are to act as God's Hands and not as His Brain. We do this by spending time in prayer, by reading the Bible and by paying attention to those fellow prince and princesses whom God had put into our lives to help and guide us as we strive for a more intimate relationship with or Heavenly Father. By doing these things we grow in spiritual maturity and won't find ourselves pursuing Jesus because He is not cooperating with our plans.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we come before you this day acknowledging Your greatness and asking You to use us as You see fit. Bless us and our families that we may grow in intimacy with You while dedicating our lives to Your Kingdom. Keep us from taking things into our own hands by giving us the grace to become Your Hands to others. We ask this through Jesus Christ. Amen.