

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost-Proper 18-Year A- The Rev. Jennifer B.
Cleveland 9.10.23

When we arrive on the scene in Exodus today, the situation is dire. Not only are the Hebrew people still stuck and enslaved in Egypt, but the many meetings between Moses, his brother Aaron, and Pharaoh have only intensified the situation. To date, Moses and Aaron have gone to Pharaoh multiple times, first to convince Pharaoh through diplomacy to let God's people go. When that doesn't work, the plagues begin. Every once in awhile, there are signs that the situation seems to be shifting: at one point, Pharaoh says, "Pray to the Lord to take away this plague (frogs) and I will let the people go." Moses agrees to do that, God takes the frogs away, but in the end, Pharaoh reneges on his promise. Gnats, flies, festering boils, hail, thunder and fire, locusts, eerie darkness over the land: none of these horrors convince Pharaoh to relent. By the time we get to this point in the narrative today, every possible measure has been taken to no avail.

It is a time not just of great discouragement, but of deepest despair. All efforts have led absolutely nowhere and no one can see an end to the pain. And it isn't just the Israelites who are having a hard time. Pharaoh's people, too, are suffering. The geopolitical standoff between God, Moses, Aaron and Pharaoh started out as insurmountable-but-not-impossible, then it became more entrenched. By this point in the narrative, the situation is intractable, full of pain and suffering, hard-headed and hard-heartedness, injustice and oppression for all the people, despair and hopelessness. Intractable problems are defined as problems for which, *from a computational complexity stance, there exist no efficient algorithms to solve them*. And that is where we pick up the narrative today.

God speaks and, even though there are a lot of instructions given about what the Israelites are to do—put the blood of an unblemished lamb on the doorposts and lintel—what God says does not seem solution-oriented at all. And the rationale given is even more confounding: *This month shall mark for you the beginning of months... This day shall be a day of remembrance for you*. It isn't just our social and cultural distance from Exodus that makes these words stand out, given the situation. Even for Moses and Aaron and the others, in the context of what's been happening, God's words make no sense. Everything is coming to an end and God is talking about a beginning. Imagine being in the midst of intractable problems, with an uncertain future, with suffering in so many places, and God saying, *This marks the beginning. Remember this moment*. These words of God's, in this moment, are completely ridiculous. In the moment when no one can see their way out, God says, *You will want to remember this moment?!*

God does not offer a solution, but in this moment of deepest uncertainty, these are the words that are spoken: *Remember relationship. You are not in this alone. I, God, have made a commitment to you. When you are in that place of deepest despair, when there really does not seem to be a way out, remember that I AM with you. That is the beginning*. As impractical or improbable or illogical as that seems, being in relationship

with *I AM*—that is the name God gave to Moses when Moses asked, *Who are you?* back at the burning bush—pries at the impenetrable, immovable logjam.

While intractable problems might not have straightforward solutions, God could have come up with a dazzling solution in this moment. The Ancient Greek legend about the Gordian Knot is one that provides a dazzling solution to an intractable problem. The Gordian Knot was a complicated mess of a knot in Gordium in Phrygia. The legend said that whoever could untie the Gordian Knot was destined to rule all of Asia. No one could figure it out. Then, in 333 BCE, Alexander the Great stood before this great knot. Instead of tackling it the way everyone else had—by trying to untangle it strand by strand, like a giant ball of yarn—he raised his sword and cut right through it. Problem solved, decisively and effectively. And on top of that, Alexander’s approach to resolving the problem immediately and effectively confirmed his, well, greatness: his right to power, along with the perhaps not so subtle message that wielding a sword is a quick way to cut through knotty problems.

These days, intractable, Gordian Knot-sized problems—problems so complex where *we* don’t know the way out—seem to be front and center. Many of them are connected to the future of *this fragile Earth, our island home* as Eucharistic Prayer C so poetically puts it. The climate situation has intensified so dramatically. Along with unprecedented heat, winds and rain, desperation and hopelessness is in the air.

I have mentioned before a podcast called *Prophetic Voices* put out by the Episcopal Church. Right now, during this ecumenical Season of Creation that churches around the world are engaged in until the Feast of St. Francis on October 4, the podcast is featuring guests who are deeply involved in creation care and environmental justice. Recently, the moderator of the podcast, the Rev. Isaiah Shaneequa Brokenleg asked this question of her guests at the end of the podcast: How do you keep going? The problem is so vast and complex, so dependent on so much change that needs to happen now. Where do you find hope? One guest, the executive director of Pennsylvania Interfaith Power and Light (here on Whidbey, we are connected with Earth Ministry and Washington Interfaith Power and Light) said she is surprised, each and every week, at how LOVE shows up, often in seemingly small or brief moments and interactions.

Not only are God’s ways completely unorthodox and unexpected, rooted in relationship, power doesn’t come through the sword, a proclamation of greatness or, in the end, snapping fingers to change Pharaoh’s (or anyone’s) mind. It comes through remembering that *I AM* has made a vow to be in relationship. And continuing to reach out to other people and groups, one at a time, to build unlikely connections and find common ground, because when two or three are gathered, LOVE (aka *I AM*) shows up. That seems so ridiculous. The intractable problems are so huge. For the Israelites, for the early Christians, and maybe even for us, that is the only way through.

When pondering these lessons, at first I thought about asking each of us to think about our top three intractable problems. But the more provocative and compelling questions

might be: How did LOVE show up this past week and reach into the deepest part of our despair? And here will LOVE show up, perhaps completely unexpectedly, this week?