

Upper Tay and Tenandry Churches of Scotland

20th September 2020

Welcome

Let us pray together

Some words from Psalm 27, taken from The Message translation by Eugene Peterson

"Light, space, zest – that's God! So with him on my side I'm fearless, afraid of no one and nothing.

When besieged, I'm calm as a baby. When all hell breaks loose, I'm collected and cool. I'm asking God for only one thing: to live with him in his house my whole life long. I'll contemplate his beauty; I'll study at his feet. That's the only quiet, secure place in a noisy world. The perfect getaway, far from the buzz of traffic."

Heavenly Father, we ask that you speak to each one of us this morning. For this brief time, may we set aside all the noise of the outside world, and hear your voice only, and in that a word of faith, of encouragement, of instruction, of love. Help us to apply all we hear this morning to our hearts. As your church in this area where you have placed us, we are not physically together, but are spiritually bound in your name, as your precious family.

"Oh for a closer walk with God, calm and serene my frame, a lamp that shines upon the road that leads me to the lamb."

AMEN

CH4 81

- 1 I to the hills will lift mine eyes.
From whence doth come mine aid?
My safety cometh from the Lord,
who heaven and earth hath made.
- 2 Thy foot he'll not let slide, nor will
he slumber that thee keeps.
Behold, he that keeps Israel,
he slumbers not, nor sleeps.
- 3 The Lord thee keeps, the Lord thy shade
on thy right hand doth stay:

the moon by night thee shall not smite,
nor yet the sun by day.

- 4 The Lord shall keep thy soul; he shall
preserve thee from all ill.
Henceforth thy going out and in
God keep for ever will.

Psalm 121

The Scottish Psalter, 1929

Opening Prayer

Sermon - On Brothers

Despite the fact that Moses and the Israelites will have at their disposal

- Burning bushes
- staffs turning to snakes, and hands becoming leprous when you put them in your pocket, and water turning to blood.
- All plagues, the hail, the frogs, the Passover
- The Red Sea is going to be parted.

All this power,

And yet for the humans involved in this liberation,

It also demands absolutely everything of them.

And God wants it this way,

One of the strangest features of the story of the Exodus

Is a motif that happens nine times in the story of the liberation

It tells us that the heart of Pharaoh was hardened,

It became inexplicably resistant, foolishly and self destructively stubborn.

I want God to melt Pharaoh's heart,

Make it softer.

But in the story God chooses to harden it.

Because somehow he wants to full horror of this slave owning, monument building empire to be manifest
And it brought out into opposition with the liberating God, with Yhwh,

That somehow God engineers a conflict that is going to be exhausting,
God does not want an easy victory.

God chooses a passage out of slavery that is going to make demands.

The struggle to be liberated
Should not, it appears, be an easy one.

Perhaps because we will treat freedom too lightly
If we do not know how much it cost

But above all, if we do not see the extent of his powerful investment in our liberation
We will underestimate God.

Reading from Exodus 7:1-13.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. ²You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country. ³But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in Egypt, ⁴he will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out my divisions, my people the Israelites. ⁵And the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it."

⁶Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded them. ⁷Moses was eighty years old and Aaron eighty-three when they spoke to Pharaoh.

Aaron's Staff Becomes a Snake

⁸The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, ⁹"When Pharaoh says to you, 'Perform a miracle,' then say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh,' and it will become a snake."

¹⁰So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded. Aaron threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake. ¹¹Pharaoh then summoned wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts: ¹²Each one threw down his staff and it became a snake. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. ¹³Yet Pharaoh's heart became hard and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said. **New International Version (NIV)**

In order to engage in this struggle,

Moses needs something

He needs a brother, and he needs a sister.

He needs Aaron, and he needs Miriam

In particular this morning I want to think about our need

In the great challenges of our lives

To have a sister

To have a brother

I want us to think about the full richness of that relationship we have

For some it will be family relationship

Someone we grew up with

For some it will be someone whose importance has earned them that place in our lives

It is such an intense, beautiful thing

To call someone "brother" or "sister"

It speaks of a deep deep togetherness

In the past from which we both came

And the future which we both face.

This struggle is going to be so difficult Moses, God says

It is going to demand so much of you

It is going to be so complex

And it is going to be so long lasting

That you will not be able to do it without a brother

Without a sister.

The prophet Micah perceives that relationships of brothers and sister

Were vital to liberation.

I brought you up from the house of Egypt,
And redeemed you from the house of slavery,
And I sent before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam.

And Moses and Aaron when they go to see Pharaoh have such power, together
They are shepherds in their 80s, with no discernable wealth
Or no track record of success
But to Pharaoh, powerful powerful Pharaoh,
Moses is as a God
Aaron is as a prophet.

The most creative, liberative acts require a partnership.

Orville and Wilbur Wright and the quest to fly

Music of Lennon and McCartney

Or Francis Crick and James Watson and an oft forgotten sister Rosalind Franklin in the discovery of DNA

The great challenges and highest calling of our life, demand partnership

Brothers and sisters

This is Moses and Aaron – before Pharaoh

Paul and Silas in the Philippian Jail

This is the power that Peter and John discover in the face of sickness

The faith that Martha and Mary have as they wait for Jesus to come to rescue their brother Lazarus.

This is the power that David and Jonathan discover so strongly that they are a threat to King Saul.

Where in our life is a brother or a sister in whose company we walk and struggle towards the great calling of our lives?

The struggle is too difficult, too complex for us to manage this alone.

I recently heard an interview with John Lewis, the last surviving member of the Big Six, the civil rights leaders who organised the march to Washington in 1963, the struggle which I have alluded to so many times in this Exodus story.

In this interview he talked though about the intensity of relationships that were formed in this struggle. That every Tuesday night, a group of friends would meet in a Methodist Church in Nashville, and a young man called Jim Lawson would teach them about Gandhi or thinkers like Henry David Thoreau. There would be role plays, there was a strict dress code, they would march with suits on, and ties. And they would practice for what would happen if they were beaten or if they were arrested.

And Lewis said, in this group we ourselves became the community we dreamed our whole country could be:

Because in the final analysis, we did become a circle of trust, a band of brothers and sisters. So it didn't matter whether we're Black or white. It didn't matter whether you came from the North, to the South, or whether you're a Northerner or Southerner. We were one.

So cherish and pay attention to those people in your life,

Who are brother and sister to you

Honour the memory of those who have gone

They are your partners in liberation

Pulling Apart

But there is a darker, more difficult side,

To the brother and sister relationship.

When Art Garfunkel used to sing "Bridge over Troubled Water" and showered with the applause of the crowd, Paul Simon used to stand behind him, enraged, with a voice inside him saying "But I wrote the song, I wrote the song."

They had known each other since they were eleven, they had created classic classic songs, but they were riven with jealousy.

How must it have been for Aaron

To watch his brother lead a liberation movement when his brother had not even been in Egypt for the past 40 years, whilst he had suffered all the privations of slavery.

How must it have been that Aaron was three years older

But it was Moses who was the leader.

How must have been for Moses that thing he could not do – speak well, was the thing that his brother Aaron was good at.

Or even petty little things, and so often it's the little things.

Years later, Aaron is the one who is marked down as priest

But it is Moses who goes up the mountain to receive the ten commandments.

When God calls Moses he teaches Moses that Moses staff can be thrown onto the floor and turn into a snake

But when they come to Pharaoh, whose staff gets used,

It Aaron's.

And there are points where this tension comes out.

When Moses goes up the mountain to receive the commandments and he is gone too long, in Exodus 32, the people come to Aaron and say, "Come make gods for us, who will go for us, as for this man Moses – this man Moses, this stranger – what has become of him."

And you get the sense that this is music to Aaron's ears as he makes the golden calf;

Or in Numbers 12, where Miriam and Aaron complain that Moses' wife is a Cushite, a foreigner – the marriage choices of one sibling causing disquiet amongst the others.

And you sense the resentment of their brother,

The fact that they gang up on him,

Simmering up.

To hold together a relationship of brother and sister

Is going to lead to tension.

It is the closeness which produces the distance.

You get the feeling that for forty years apart, Moses and Aaron probably didn't bother about each other too much,

But the moment that their spheres overlap, then there is tension.

There is the story told of a extremely virtuous monk in the Egyptian desert being tempted by three demons.

This monk was very virtuous, and no matter how he was tempted – whether with pleasures (alcohol or women), whether with comfort (a nicer home) or cheap acclaim, he wouldn't give in.

The devil himself happened to be travelling in the desert, came across the three demons and the monk, and was disappointed at their lack of success. He told the demons to watch from him, a master. He went to the monk, whispered something in his ear, and immediately caused the holy man to sin, the sin of envy.

What did you say to him asked the three demons.

I told him, said the devil, that his brother had just become Archbishop of Alexandria.

When my brother became a Church of Scotland minister I was delighted that he had joined the family business, delighted that his was a vocation that would summon from him the best of his talents and his abilities, and I also thought, "I hope he doesn't become moderator before me."

With whom do we ask the question "Who is the greatest?" and most scare of the answer.

Struggle with jealousy

The most poignant story of Aaron happens towards the end of his life.

The Lord tells Moses and Aaron together on Mount Hor (Numbers 20)

That he should not enter the promised land,

And the time has come,

Moses goes up the mountain with him, and Aaron's son Eliezar,

And Moses strips the priestly garments from Aaron, what a moment, this is the moment that he loses everything,

But Aaron lets him do it.

Because he accepts this,
He accepts the part he plays
And it is not everything
But it is not nothing

And he dies
And when he dies
All Israel mourns him, mourns the second brother,
They mourn him for 30 days.

I think Aaron's story speaks to me of the importance of brothers in the struggle
The constant companion that is envy in that work
And the acceptance that we have our part to play, acceptance of our part.

He is not Moses
He is not called to be Moses
He is Aaron
He is called to be Aaron

There is this remarkable moment in the gospels where Jesus hears that his brothers and sisters are waiting for him,

And he says

"Who are my mother and brothers?"

"Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

He knows that it is the kind of relationship that he gives us to each other

Brother and sister

The struggle is so demanding it needs it

Envy is inevitable

The call is to accept

AMEN

CH4 694

- 1 Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.
- 2 We are pilgrims on a journey,
and companions on the road;
we are here to help each other
walk the mile and bear the load.
- 3 I will hold the Christ-light for you
in the night-time of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
speak the peace you long to hear.
- 4 I will weep when you are weeping;
when you laugh I'll laugh with you;
I will share your joy and sorrow
till we've seen this journey through.
- 5 When we sing to God in heaven
we shall find such harmony,
born of all we've known together
of Christ's love and agony.
- 6 Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.

Richard A. M. Gillard (*b.* 1953)

Closing Prayer

Dear God,

We pray this week for our brothers and sisters

Those we have known since children

Those who have been gifts in our lives

Since we became adults.

Hear our prayer

Bless those we call brothers and sisters

We pray this week for our sister and brothers in Jesus Christ

Whether they be sharing the gospel in Texas

Or developing literacy projects in Tanzania

Whether they live in Favelas in Brazil

Or villages in India

Hear our prayer

Bless those we call brothers and sisters

We pray this week for our own communities

We pray for those who are our neighbours

We pray for those who deliver to our houses

We pray for those we see around but whose names we do not yet know

Hear our prayer

May they be to us, our brothers and sisters

And now hear us in the prayer that Jesus taught us

Our Father in heaven

Hallowed be your name

Your kingdom come

Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven

Give us today our daily bread

And forgive us our debts, as forgive our debtors

Lead us not into temptation

But deliver us from evil

For yours is the kingdom

The power and the glory forever

AMEN

CH4 644

- 1 O Jesus, I have promised
to serve you to the end;
be now and always near me,
my master and my friend:
I shall not fear the battle
if you are by my side,
nor wander from the pathway
if you will be my guide.
- 2 Oh, let me feel you near me:
the world is ever near;
I see the sights that dazzle,
the tempting sounds I hear;
my foes are ever near me,
around me, and within;
but, Jesus, draw still nearer,
and shield my soul from sin.
- 3 Oh, let me hear you speaking
in accents clear and still,
above the storms of passion,
the murmurs of self-will;
Oh, speak to reassure me,
to hasten or control;
O speak, and make me listen,
true guardian of my soul.
- 4 O Jesus, you have promised
to all who follow you,
that where you are in glory
your servant shall be too;
and, Jesus, I have promised
to serve you to the end:
now give me grace to follow,
my master and my friend.

John Ernest Bode (1816–1874) (*alt.*)

We say the words of Aaron's blessing:

May the Lord bless you and keep you
May the Lord make his face to shine upon you
And be gracious unto you
May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you
And give you peace.

AMEN