

CONVOCATION ADDRESS

CRCDS

Exodus 7: 1-7

Acts 17: 16-28

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As we begin a new academic year, and as some of you begin your journey into formal, theological education, it may be helpful to provide a framework, a context, and environment in which all of us are living. If the first obligation of a pastor or a theologian is to pay attention to what is going on in the world around them so they in turn can assist others in navigating through that world, then what is it that you and I should be paying attention to in the swirling events of the world around us? While flood waters overwhelm large parts of the state of Texas, and while political buffoonery has overwhelmed the White House, we need something we can look to that will help us find our footing so we can move ahead with confidence.

The two texts that have been chosen for today provide us with a context in which you and I can better understand the world in which we live, and the work that God expects us to be doing in the world. On the one hand, there is Moses speaking truth to power as he stands in the palace of pharaoh, the most powerful man on the face of the earth. On the other hand, is Paul standing in Athens on a street lined with statues that are the object of veneration by many of the people of that city. Now consider that in their respective contexts, both Moses and Paul had the same assignment; to remind people that there is a power that is above and beyond the political leaders of the present and the past.

People of faith should not fixate over the temporary powers of any political leaders; only the God we serve is from everlasting to everlasting. I was born into the world in 1948, when Harry Truman was President of the United States. Since that time, I have seen twelve other Presidents come to power. (Eisenhower – Kennedy – Johnson – Nixon – Ford – Carter – Reagan – Bush 41 – Clinton – Bush 43 – Obama – Trump. Some of them gave me great hope; none more than President Obama. Others have filled me with great anxiety; none more than the current occupant of the White House whom I believe to be emotionally, morally, and temperamentally unfit for the job. What I have learned during my thirteen-

president journey is that while occupants of the Oval Office come and go, Jesus Christ is still “the way, the truth, and the life.”

People of faith should also understand, that ours is not the only voice that is speaking about the things of God. Just as Paul saw a street lined with the statues of other gods, including one to an unknown god, there are people to this day who are putting their faith in other gods, other creeds, other statues. How does one do ministry, when the fastest growing segment of religious identity is “nones?” Not “nuns” or Roman Catholic religious women, but “nones” as in none of the above. They are not Protestant or Catholic or Jewish or Muslim. They are none of the above. Atheism is growing faster in the United States than any Christian denomination. People who might once have defined themselves as Presbyterian, or Methodist, or Baptist, or Anglican, or Pentecostal now define themselves as “spiritual.”

At the same time, people who may think they are Christian are, by their words and deeds more accurately defined as white supremacists, neo-Nazis, the Alt-right, KKKers, and outright racists and bigots. It seems that they are worshipping at the feet of the statues of Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Nathan Bedford Forrest who was the founder of the KKK whose statue sits inside the state capitol building in Tennessee. Never mind that Lee and Jackson and Forrest were traitors who broke their oaths to defend the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. Never mind that what they were all fighting for was human slavery and the right of one person to own, sell, beat, or work to death another human being; a system rooted entirely in the assumptions of racism and white supremacy.

Welcome to ministry in 2017. Welcome to an imperial presidency in Washington, DC marked most recently by the issuance of a presidential pardon to a man in Arizona who had already been convicted of contempt of court for the racial profiling, arrest, and brutal incarceration of persons without trial or conviction, suspected of being illegal immigrants. Welcome to Charlottesville, VA where men in their 20s and 30s marched through the streets giving their best impersonation of the Nazi rallies in Nuremburg, Germany in the 1930s. Not only were they carrying flags with swastikas emblazoned on them, but they were chanting the Nazi slogan of “blood and soil” and chanting “Jews will not replace us.”

This is the world into which God has called us to serve God's purposes. This is the world for which those of you who are at the beginning of your ministry are being trained. This is the world in which those of us who have been in the ministry for a long time are being asked to take a deep breath and carry on. Our challenge, according to the two texts for today is, first to speak truth to power and to remind everyone that no matter who is in the White House, God is still on the throne. Our second challenge is to remember that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not the only message people are being invited to hear and to heed.

People today are worshipping at shrines of all kinds. Some are in love with the god of prosperity theology. All that god does is invite us to believe that wealth and health are ours for the asking. There is no duty or discipleship with this god. There is no service, no sacrifice, no suffering when you bow before the god of wealth and health. Others are worshipping at the altar of personal piety and singular salvation. All that matters for such worshippers is that they have been saved, they have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and they are on their way to whatever heaven there is for such people. It does not matter if people are starving, or being shot in the streets, or denied access to affordable medical care. All that matters is that they have been saved. They feel no duty to volunteer in a hunger center, or mentor or tutor a child who needs support, or take to the streets to protest some form of social injustice. It is enough for them to know they have been saved.

Such persons were who William Lamar, IV the pastor of Metropolitan AME Church in Washington, DC had in mind when he was asked to describe the current state of the church in the United States. He said, "The Christian faith in America has become a sentimentalized expression of personal piety. Jesus has become a doorman who opens the portals of eternity." Of course, this view of religion is not entirely new. Over 60 years ago, Harry Emerson Fosdick talked about Christians who view God as "a cosmic bellhop delivering blessings by way of room service." My question today, is whether this view of God and Christianity matches your own views? Is this the god any of you are serving? Is this the faith in which you want to be built-up here at CRCDS?

I grant you that this version of the faith is prominent on TV. I think today about the flood waters in Houston, Texas. Then I think about Houston's most prominent preacher whose only message is one of positive thinking and waiting for your blessings from God. I wonder what his teachings did to equip people to face

the devastation that now confronts them in Houston? Peggy and I were in Houston just two weeks ago. We drove through the very streets that are now impassable. This is the world in which real ministry occurs today; not the illusion of positive thinking, but the fact of flooded streets and homes. Add to that, the horrors of gun violence, racial strife, staggering levels of incarceration, failing schools and crumbling bridges, and broken homes, and a shifting economy that allows prices to go up while jobs are being lost to cheap labor in other countries. This is the context for ministry in the United States in the 21st century. The challenge for the faculty is how well we can prepare you to face and function in this world. The challenge for every student is to develop a sense of ministry that is clear-eyed and mature, not limited to singular salvation, but preaching about a God of love and justice whose son's first sermon was about setting the captives free and bringing good news the poor (Luke 4: 18-19).

I challenge you to stand where Moses stood in this passage in Exodus 7. Imagine this scene, an eighty - year-old man smelling of goats and dust and the desert standing amidst the splendor of the royal palace of Rameses the Great. Imagine the shock on the faces of the people in the royal court when Moses "told" pharaoh to let the Hebrews go free. When do you suppose was the last time anyone had ever "told" pharaoh anything? They may have begged, or petitioned, or appealed, or pleaded for some small boon from the man who was viewed as a living god on earth. But there stood Moses with only a staff in his hand speaking truth to power.

This scene would play out many times in scripture. We see it when Elijah stood before Ahab and Jezebel, when Nathan stood before David, when Jeremiah stood against Zedekiah, when John stood before Herod Antipas, when Jesus stood against Pontius Pilate, when Paul stood against Felix and Festus. This willingness to speak the truth of God to the politically powerful of this world was on full display in Acts when Peter and John were arrested for publicly speaking the name of Jesus. The sole condition for their release from jail was that they would not mention that name again. Then, no sooner than they had been released they were back at it again. What was their excuse for preaching truth to power? They said, "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20).

I have no doubt that the United States of America will outlast the insanity, bigotry, and divisiveness brought on by Donald Trump. He may well do great danger before he is done, but I remind myself that while nobody today says much about Rameses and the gods of Egypt, the name of Moses and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is known and loved and revered in every corner of the earth.

There was an editorial in yesterday's New York Times by Nicholas Kristof entitled, "There Once Was a Great Nation With an Unstable Leader."¹ The editorial was only suggestively about Donald Trump. It was primarily about the Roman emperor Caligula who began ruling in 37 AD, a time between the ministry of Jesus and Paul. Kristof says:

*Caligula focused on denouncing his predecessor and reversing everything he had done. He made grandiose pledges about infrastructure projects. But alas, Caligula had no significant government experience, and he proved utterly incompetent at actually getting things done... Caligula, a narcissist and megalomaniac, became increasingly unhinged... Caligula was as abominable a ruler as a great nation could have, yet Rome proved resilient.*²

Kristof speculates that the reason Rome could outlast Caligula, and later, Nero is because the public stayed true to their values and institutions. That is where we come in; reminding people of enduring values and inserting the institutional leverage of the church into the mix of confusing events to speak a word of truth and justice and the equal worth of all people.

The last thing I spoke about at commencement for the graduating class of 2017 was about a line taken from President Obama's second inaugural address in 2013. He was talking about how this country has faced down all kinds of hatred and bigotry, because people were willing to speak truth to power and reassert the enduring values of our faith. Obama spoke about the struggles at Seneca Falls, Selma, and Stonewall. He asked the nation to keep working for full equality and opportunity for women, for racial minorities, and for the LGBT community.

Today, the first thing I want to say to the incoming class of 2017 is about Seneca Fall, Selma, Stonewall, and then add in Standing Rock and the long

Nicholas Kristof, "There Once Was a Great Nation With an Unstable Leader, NewYorkTimes.com, August 28, 2017.

² Ibid.

ignored and overlooked rights of Native Americans and the lands on which they live. Speak these truths everywhere you go. Do not get detoured into the false gods of statues to failed causes, or the easy promises of prosperity theology, or the toxic brew of white nationalism and the blatant and brazen display of swastikas and confederate flags. Hear Paul's challenge to Timothy:

Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season. Correct, rebuke, and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry (II Timothy 4:2-5).

True enough, many preachers today have abdicated this responsibility, largely because they are more enamored with the company of the powerful who can invite them to the White House than they are with the company of Jesus who would like to lead them into the company of “the least of these.” But then something wonderful happens that reminds us that false prophets abound today as they did in the days of Amos and Amaziah or the days of Jeremiah and Hananiah. I was amazed to see the students of Liberty University returning their diplomas to that school as a sign of their displeasure with the actions of that school's president, Jerry Falwell, Jr. Those students were far more reflective of Moses than their school's president.

The job of the preacher, the theologian, the faith-inspired civic leader is not to conform to the values of this present world, nor is it to make excuses and offer cover for political leaders who are behaving badly. Our job is to speak truth to power! The comedian, Dick Gregory died two weeks ago. He was not only a stand-up comedian of enormous talent, but he was also one of the most visible celebrities during the Civil Right Movement of the 1960s. There is one line from Dick Gregory that helps me understand my work as a preacher, a writer, a teacher, and a seminary president. Gregory said, “*If you put a load of dirty clothes in the washing*

*machine but remove the agitator before you start the wash cycle, all you will have at the end of the cycle are wet, dirty clothes. There has to be agitation.”*³

Of course, he was not really talking about clothes and washing machines. He was talking about the need for social agitation if our society is to be cleansed of the sins and suffering that presently exist all around us. Frederick Douglass was asked by a young man what advice he might offer him as he wondered how to spend his life. It is reported that Douglass rose to his feet, looked the young man in the eyes, and said, “*Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!*”⁴ Stand in the legacy of Moses.

I also challenge you to stand in the legacy of Paul who was not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus or the name of Jesus anywhere he went. Notice that Paul did not condemn the idols and statues that lined the streets of Athens; those were simply inanimate objects. What Paul did was point his listeners past those objects made by human hands, and invite them to lay claim to the true God “*in whom we live, move, and have our being...the God who from one blood made all nations of men to dwell on the face of the earth...the God who will judge the world by justice* (Acts 17: 24-310).

I challenge you to adopt the spirit of Paul as found in Romans 1:16 when he said, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.” Do not be like the preacher in Cleveland, Ohio who invited me out to lunch at a fancy rooftop restaurant when I first came to that city in 1987. After we placed our lunch order, we chatted for a while about ministry and the challenges that awaited any preacher who sought to stand up for Jesus during those days. Then the food came out, and this pious preacher picked up his knife and fork and began to eat. I was a bit hesitant to say anything since I was his guest, but I finally asked him if we should offer grace before we started eating. He abruptly said to me, “You say it.” So that is what I did. I thanked God for the food, for my new pastoral assignment, for my new pastoral colleague, and for a few other things. I might have kept praying had he not kicked me from under the table and then whispered that I should stop praying before the people seated around us noticed what we were doing.

Imagine that; stop praying because the people seated around us might notice what we were doing. I told my friend that I thought that was precisely the point;

³ USA Today, August 21, 2017, p. 6B.

⁴ John Stauffer, *Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln*, New York: Twelve, 2008, p. 314.

that the world around us would see what we were doing. They might or might not join us, but we should never sacrifice our public witness of the faith for fear that others might notice us. Our theme song should be, “This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine – everywhere I go.”

Let me end by reminding you of one last thing before you begin this work of social agitation or standing up for Christ amid this multi-faith and multi-cultural world. You and I are not capable of making much of a difference in the world if all we are relying upon is ourselves. We need something more to sustain us when the work we are doing seems to be bigger and harder than we at first imagined. When God called Moses to go to pharaoh and demand freedom for the Hebrew people, Moses did not jump at that job opportunity. He gave God every excuse he could think of; I am slow of tongue, they will not believe me, who am I that I should go.

Then God said something to Moses that made all the difference in the world; God told Moses: “*I will be with you*” (Exodus 3:12). That is the comfort that I offer you alongside the challenges I have set before you; God will be with you. By all means earn your M.Div. or M.A or D. Min., but credentials alone will not be enough. You will need companionship as you make this journey, and that companion has already made one great promise; I will be with you.

I will never forget the first time I was called upon to baptize someone through the method of full, bodily immersion. I had never done this before. I had taken no course on how to do it. There was no time for a practice run such as I now offer students in the Baptist polity course. It was just me and some faithful soul who probably thought that I knew what I was doing. To make matters worse, I was to perform this baptism at Abyssinian Baptist Church of New York City in front of over 2500 worshipers. Needless to say, I was nervous about entering that baptismal pool. I shared my anxiety with the pastor of that church, Dr. Samuel Proctor who had given me that assignment. In response to my anxieties he said, “McMickle, I would never send you in there alone. I am going with you and we will get this done together.”

That is what God told Joshua as he was about to assume leadership after the death of Moses; I will be with you (Joshua 1: 9). That is what Jesus told his disciples when he sent them into the world; I will be with you (Matthew 28: 20). That is the message that God gave to Martin Luther King, Jr. at the lowest point in

his life during the Montgomery Bus Boycott; I will be with you.⁵ That same promise is ours today. Go forth to your classes, your ministry, and your service to God. Go forth knowing that this promise belongs to you; “God is going out there with you, and together you will get the job done.”

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strive Toward Freedom*, New York: Harper & Row, 1958, pp. 114-115.