



Can a Leopard Change its Spots? sermon by Harry Dutt (July 12,1987)

I suppose one of the favorite stories is the story of baby Moses in the bull rushes.

Because the Egyptian Pharaoh felt threatened

by the population explosion among the Hebrew slaves within his land, he decided that he had to do something about it. He worked them harder, he made living conditions more difficult. But that didn't seem to stop the Hebrews from having babies. The Pharaoh finally decided to resort to a dramatic method of population control, Every new born Hebrew male child was to be put to death in the Nile river. But there was rebellion in his ranks. The Egyptian midwives who were supposed to do the dirty work, made excuses and the children kept on being delivered.

About this time, Moses was born. His mother, afraid for his life, tried to hide him in an especially prepared basket with tar so it wouldn't leak and then she hid the child among the bull rushes.

And the child's older sister stood guard some distance away. Before long the king's daughter with her maidens came down to the river to bathe and to the great horror of Mose's sister discovered the basket among the reeds and send one of her maidens to fetch it. She opened it and baby Moses began to cry and she held it and had pity on him. She recognized that it was a Hebrew baby.

In the meantime Moses's sister wondered what might happen. She approached the princess and offered to arrange for a Hebrew nurse to care for the child. And so the child's

own mother was secured to care for the baby. The child grew, the princess adopted him and named him Moses. And so, Moses grew up in the king's court. One day, when Moses had grown to be a young man, he became aware how his own people were enslaved, They carried great burdens, hard work, long hours, physical and verbal abuse.

For some people, some of us, things haven't changed much even today, At any rate, Moses saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. Moses was so upset that after looking around to make sure that no-one saw him he killed the Egyptian and buried him in the sand. The next day, he again saw two men fighting, this time two Hebrews and so he tried to separate them. Instead they turned on him: "who made you prince and judge over us? Do you mean to kill us also as you did the Egyptian?"

Then Moses was afraid, his secret was out, so he fled the country and took refuge in Midian,. He was hot and exhausted so he sat down by a well to rest. And while he was resting, 7 young maidens came with their sheep and goats to draw water from the well to fill the troughs so that their fathers sheep and goats might have some water. But some other shepherds came along and took over the troughs to water their own animals. Moses could not sit by idly. He came to the girls' rescue and then helped them finish watering their animals. When the girls arrived home early, due to the good help by Moses, their father Jethro, the local priest, inquired of them the reason for being home so early, The girls told him of Moses help and the father insisted that they go back and bring Moses home.

They hit it off real well. Jethro gave his daughter Zippora in marriage and they had a son. Throughout the summer and into the fall, the lectionary readings from the Hebrew scriptures will be centering around Moses.

His sensitivity to the suffering of his people and how eventually he would lead them from Egypt across the Red Sea, wander in the wilderness and finally enter the promised land.

There are several observations I would like to make about the story of Moses.

1. First, the story of Moses is a reminder that great persons can have humble beginnings. Moses was born of an Egyptian slave family, hidden in the swamp among the reeds, rescued only because of the compassion of a bathing maiden. You might want to argue that God had intervened in a mighty way, and I would agree. God has always acted and still acts and will continue to act in human life in mysterious and unspeakable ways.

2. Furthermore, the story of Moses tells us that no sin is too great for God to forgive. IN his zeal for justice, Moses killed the Egyptian who was beating his countryman, and yet, this same Moses is probably the greatest man of the Hebrews and was the one selected by God to lead the children of Israel from Egyptian captivity to the promised land of Canaan. If we repent, there is nothing one can do that is too bad for God to forgive to be used for God's purposes.

3. Furthermore, the story of Moses shows us that each of us has special gifts for use in the service of God and humankind. Moses had the sensitivity of seeing suffering people, while others had dulled senses, Moses was alerted to the pain around him. He had a heart of compassion that went out to the oppressed. He couldn't stand it that his people suffered abuse at the hands of the Egyptians.

He couldn't turn his back toward his own countrymen, taking out their frustration on each other. He was moved to action when the

maidens at the well were used and mistreated. He had to act, he had to get involved. It is said that some years ago, premier Crutchev was speaking in front of the Supreme Sovjet and severely critical of Stalin. While he was speaking, someone from the audience sent a note: "what were you doing when Stalin committed all these atrocities." Crutchev shouted: "who sent that note?" Not a person stirred. I give him one minute to stand up. The seconds ticked off, noone moved. Alright, I tell you what I was doing. I was doing exactly what the writer of this note was doing, exactly nothing, I was afraid to be counted. Someone has said, that your gifts are not so much for your own sake as for the sake of others. You are like an apple tree which produces fruit not for its own consumption, but for the consumption of others.

God has given you gifts so that you can bless others. If you have the gift of teaching, you have it so others can be taught. If you have the gift of hospitality, it is because others need the gracious welcome they receive from you. If even one gifted person fails to function, the body of Christ is deprived of a ministry it needs to function well. Once a wise teacher was speaking to a group of eager young students. He have them the assignment to go out and find a small, unnoticed flower somewhere. He asked them to study the flower for a long time. Get a magnifying glass, he said, and study the delicate veins in the leaves, and notice the nuances and shades of color. Turn the leaves slowly and observe their symmetry and remember that this flower might have gone unnoticed and unappreciated if you had not found it and admired it.

After the class returned, the teacher observed: People are like that, each one is different, carefully crafted, uniquely endowed, but you have to spend time with them to notice. So many people go unnoticed and unappreciated

because no one has ever taken time with them and admired their uniqueness. Thus it is that each of us has special innate gifts for God's use.

A parable is told of a certain man who went through a forest, seeking any bird of interest he might find. He caught a young eagle, brought it home and put it among the fowl, the ducks and the turkeys, and gave it chicken feed to eat even though he as an eagle, king of birds. 5 years later a naturalist came to see him and after passing through his garden said: "that bird is an eagle, not a chicken,"

"Yes," said the owner: "but I have trained it to be a chicken. It is no longer an eagle, it is a chicken even though it measures 5 feet from tip to tip of its wings."

"No" said the naturalist, "it is an eagle still, it has the heart of an eagle and I will make it soar up high to the heavens."

"No, it is a chicken and it will never fly."

They agreed to test it. The naturalist picked up the eagle, held it up and said with great intensity, "Eagle, thou art an eagle, thou dost belong to the sky and not to this earth. Stretch forth thy wings and fly." The eagle turned this way and that and then looking down, saw the chickens eating their food and down he jumped. The owner said, "I told you it was a chicken."

"No" said the naturalist, "it is an eagle. Give it another chance tomorrow."

So, the next day, he took it to the top of the house and said: "Eagle, thou art an eagle. Stretch forth thy wings and fly."

But again the eagle jumped down to eat with the chickens.

Then the owner said: "I told you it was a chicken."

"No," asserted the naturalist: "it is an eagle and it has the heart of an eagle, only give it one more chance and I will make it fly tomorrow."

The next morning he rose early, took the eagle outside of the city away from the houses, to the foot of a high mountain. The sun was just rising, gilding the top of the mountain with gold and every crag was glistening in the joy of the beautiful morning. He picked up the eagle and said to it: "Eagle, thou art an eagle, thou dost belong to the sky and not to this earth. Stretch forth thy wings and fly."

The eagle looked around and trembled as if new life was coming to it, yet it did not fly. The naturalist then made it look straight at the sun. Suddenly it stretched out its wings and with the screech of an eagle it mounted higher and higher and never returned.

It was an eagle though it had been kept and tamed as a chicken.

We have been created in the image of God, but people have made us think that we are chickens and so we think we are. But we are eagles. Stretch forth your wings and fly. Don't be content with the food of chickens. Amen.

from the "Parable of the Eagle" as told by James Aggrey of West Africa (Journal of Religious Speaking)