

THE PHARAOH AND THE MIDWIVES

TEXT: Exodus 1:8-22

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on March 6, 2022

For the rest of Lent, we will be looking at biblical stories from Exodus and Numbers, the stories before, during, and after the Israelites, led by Moses, make their famous break from being enslaved in Egypt and journey to the Promised Land. So, let's start with the CliffsNotes version of how the Israelites found themselves enslaved in Egypt in the first place.

You might remember from Genesis that Abraham's grandson is Jacob, and that, after a wrestling match with an angel, God changed Jacob's name to Israel. Jacob then has 12 sons who eventually become the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel. One of those 12 sons was Joseph, and Jacob liked him best. That angered Joseph's brothers, who sold him to slave traders and told their father he had been killed by wild animals.

The slave traders, in turn, sold Joseph to an Egyptian nobleman. After a false accusation, Joseph ends up in prison, passing the time interpreting dreams for his cell mates. When Pharaoh is troubled by his own dream and hears about Joseph's gift, Pharaoh calls for Joseph to interpret his dream.

Joseph tells Pharaoh that his dream portends seven years of plenty in Egypt followed by seven years of famine and suggests that Pharaoh would be wise to store the excess food during the years of plenty so that Egypt will have enough when the famine comes. All of that comes to pass, making Pharaoh look like a genius, so Joseph gets a ticket out of prison and into the court of Pharaoh, second in power only to the king himself.

Meanwhile, the famine hasn't only hit Egypt. The whole region is starving, which includes Canaan, where Jacob and his brothers still live. They don't know how Joseph's life has turned out. But they do know that Egypt has food and they don't, so Jacob sends some of Joseph's brothers to Egypt to ask for food. Turns out, it's Joseph they have to ask. The story that ensues can be found in Genesis, chapters 42-48, and it's honestly one of the best stories in the whole Bible. Just brilliant. So go read it. But the end result is that the whole family moves to Egypt, is given some of the best land in the country to settle, and they live happily ever after. Until the opening chapter of Exodus.

Here in chapter one, enough generations have passed that Joseph's family—those twelve sons of Israel—have flourished and multiplied. But there's a new Pharaoh in town who rises to power saying, "Joseph, who?" For reasons that become clear through his actions, this new king feels threatened by the Israelites. To deal with the perceived threat, he begins with a story that has been told by nationalists and despots since the beginning of time. He divides Egypt into "us" and "them," with a twist designed to make **them** appear as a threat to **us**.

"Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we," says Pharaoh. Although they've been in Egypt for enough generations that Joseph is forgotten, Pharaoh wants to make sure no one is starting to think of them as Egyptians. He singles out the Israelites by their ethnic identity and then implies that just the fact that there are lots of them makes them a threat. He describes them as not just more *numerous*, but more *powerful*.

Now that Pharaoh has made the ethnic Egyptians feel divided from ethnic Israelites and vulnerable about being in the minority, he throws in his solution to his invented problem. "Come, let us deal shrewdly with them," says Pharaoh, "or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land."

Where did he get the idea that the people living happily and freely in Egypt for generations would suddenly side with an enemy in a war? It's manipulation; he made it up. Those "other people" may seem fine now, he implies, but they're not true Egyptians. Their allegiance isn't really here. If war comes, they'll take the side of the enemy. Pharaoh's ancient lie is an anti-Semitic trope that has been in use right up to the present day. It's the claim that Jews somehow have dual allegiance and will turn traitor. If you hear it, recognize it for what it is and shut it down.

But Pharaoh's story is not only that. The broader tactic of dividing any country into us and them is a hallmark of despots around the globe. It paves the way for genocide, ethnic cleansing, slavery, and any number of atrocities. Pharaoh tips his hand in the very next line. If all that comes to pass, he warns, the Israelites will "escape from the land."

What? You just complained that there are too many Israelites. Now you're afraid they'll leave? Pharaoh isn't really afraid they'll fight with the enemy and take over Egypt. He's afraid they'll leave. The Israelites had settled Egypt's farmland in the Eastern Nile Delta, making it likely that the economy of Egypt had become dependent on Israelite labor. That economic leverage could pose a threat to Pharaoh's power. The fist of Pharaoh comes down, and thus begins somewhere between two to four centuries of the descendants of Abraham toiling as slaves in Egypt.

As a final hedge against the development of an Israelite resistance, Pharaoh calls in the Hebrew midwives, Shiprah and Puah, and tells them to make sure that male babies born to Hebrew women end up dead. The midwives don't refuse to Pharaoh's face, but neither do they kill the babies. Frustrated, Pharaoh just gives the directive. Every baby boy born to a Hebrew woman shall be thrown into the Nile River.

With that act of terror, the die is cast; both for Egypt and for Israel. Without Pharaoh's murderous directive, Moses would have been born a Hebrew slave like any other, without the opportunity for education and without an easy way to flee to the wilderness for his training. And without the resistance of both Egyptian and Hebrew women, the baby Moses would never have been placed in a basket in the Nile, discovered by Pharaoh's daughter, and nursed by his own mother, thanks to the cleverness and quick thinking of Moses' sister, all of which happens in chapter two. The cruelty of Pharaoh created the resistance of the women; and both of those things together made Moses, the eventual liberation of the Israelites, and the decimation of Egypt possible.

I should say that we don't know if the biblical account of the Exodus is historically accurate. Maybe so; maybe not. I don't really care. My concern is whether the story is "true" in the larger sense; and everything about the beginning of this saga is true with a capital T. Despots are using Pharaoh's playbook in countries around the globe this very morning, just as they always have. And oppressed people, past and present, find ways to resist and make their way to freedom.

Whether it actually happened back then is beside the point. It has happened again and again across history and across cultures, which makes it a true guide for us. The story of Pharaoh is always balanced by the story of the midwives, bringing us both warning and hope.

First, the story's warning. It should go without saying; but these days it doesn't hurt to point out that Pharaoh is the bad guy and not the hero in this story. Don't be like Pharaoh. Don't admire his ability to get what he wants in the short term. It leads to ruin. The entire arc of the biblical story, from Genesis to Revelation, can be read as turning human ideas of power and authority on their heads. Jesus, not Pharaoh, is our model for the use of human power and they are nothing alike.

But also, we should be warned against becoming the Egyptians in the story, who swallow Pharaoh's lie whole and let the atrocity proceed. Jesus warned us to be both wise as serpents and innocent as doves. We need to pay enough attention that we can tell when we are hearing the lies of Pharaoh; when we are told

that people who are not doing us any harm are really our enemies. Every atrocity begins with dividing people into us and them—by race, by gender, by ethnicity, by nationality, by politics, by whatever. Watch for it, and resist it when it comes.

Such a division is banging on our doors right this minute with the war in Ukraine. It's harder to see because it has scrambled some of our more recent divisions and seems on the surface like a newfound unity. All of a sudden everyone is united behind Ukraine. Miracle of miracles, there is bipartisan agreement about something in Washington. But war, by its very definition is divisive. Look harder. Who are we being taught to hate now? During World War II we rounded up Japanese Americans and put them in internment camps. People who had been "us" were suddenly labeled "them" and were subjected to cruel and inhumane treatment. After 9/11, we shifted to a religious divide and Muslims who were "us" became "them."

Last week, the target turned toward Russians, as restaurants owned by Russians in New York City were vandalized and their owners received hate mail and threats, even when they posted their support for Ukraine on their front doors. Recognize how very, very easy it is to get trapped in that divide. It doesn't start with hating Russians. It starts with being justifiably horrified at the atrocities in Ukraine while failing to recognize that ordinary Russians are also suffering due to powers beyond their control.

I caught myself in that trap last week. Our Men's Group likely felt whiplash as one week I sent them an email with a story about my concern for a Ukrainian woman I had met while visiting the Soviet Union in 1990 along with an image of a Ukrainian flag. Just a week later, when Ukrainian flags appeared on the bulletin board outside of Gifford Hall, I wrote them again to explain why I had taken those flags down. What changed? My heart. My heart has never stopped breaking for the people of Ukraine. But I also began to recognize the pain of innocent Russians who didn't want war any more than innocent Ukrainians did. No one wins wars.

Do I think the leaders of both countries are equally culpable? Not in the least. But I know the destructive power of Pharaoh's story of us and them. In a church and town with both Ukrainians and Russians in it, we at Crawford need to pour out God's love to all and welcome every person who seeks peace. Putting up the flag of just one side in a war in a church can imply that God's love is contingent on nationality. That is the warning from the story of Pharaoh.

But there is also the story of hope. There was not an army of Hebrew midwives facing down Pharaoh. There were two, Shiphrah and Puah. They couldn't unseat Pharaoh, or change his brutal policy. But they still had a choice. They could refuse to be a part of it, come what may. They couldn't save all the baby boys, but they could save some. And it only took one to turn the tables and liberate the people.

In times like these, that is the hope that the story of the midwives brings us. If we despair because we aren't in a position to change the big things, we blind ourselves to the power every one of us has to choose our response in the small things; and just one of those small things could turn the tide.

That ability to choose is the power we claim right at the start of our baptismal vows. The first questions don't even mention Jesus. They are about our own willingness to repent of our sin and acknowledge the freedom and power God gives us "to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves." That, right there, is the ballgame for people of faith.

If we're not willing to do that, then making professions about Jesus as our Lord and Savior is just so much hot air; because following Jesus *requires* the resistance to evil, injustice, and oppression. Full stop. If you cut out those parts of the Gospels, there wouldn't be anything left. It's the cross—the very center of our faith. The Christian witness is that, when people are willing to resist all forms of evil, injustice, and oppression—even at the cost of their own lives—resurrection will surely follow. Being a Christian means that or it means nothing.

None of that makes it easy or risk-free. None of that promises that suffering will end tomorrow or that every individual act of resistance will be successful. Evil is called evil for a reason. The horrors and scale of the suffering can be difficult to wrap our heads around. But it is not true, even for a minute, that we can do nothing or that all our efforts are hopeless. Shiprah and Puah teach us that. We can refuse the us-and-them division. We can refuse orders to commit atrocity. We can't do everything, but we can all do something. Both stories are there for us. Choose wisely. Amen.