

Sermon – The Irony of Power  
Sunday, August 27, 2023  
Scripture: Exodus 1:8-2:10, Romans 12:1-8  
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Our first scripture reading is Exodus 1:8-2:10. The Book of Exodus begins by setting the stage for Moses, whose birth is dated in the 12th century BCE. The Book of Genesis closes with the story of Joseph whose leadership role meant the Hebrew people were treated well for a time in Egypt. Time has passed and we learn the new Pharaoh “does not know Joseph.” This story is rich in irony, setting the stage for a new understanding of power and the call for justice.

*Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore, they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them. The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birth stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." So, God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, God gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live." Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. When she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So, the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages." So, the woman took the child and nursed him. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water." Amen.*

Our second scripture reading is from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 12: 1-8. Paul has brought the theological argument of his letter to an end and now turns to the practical. Paul is neither teaching a lesson nor giving a pep talk in chapter 12 – rather Paul is persuading with all the strength of his being. Hear now God's Holy Word.

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. Amen.*

The title of the sermon: “The Irony of Power”

*The text: But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them... Exodus 1:17*

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, we thank you for the power that is present in each of our lives. Help us to use our power in acts of compassion, justice, and courage. As we reflect together on scripture, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Part of the beauty of the Moses narrative in the Hebrew Scriptures is the wonderful way in which the irony develops in the story. Apart from its historical grounding, the characters in the story have symbolic meaning for the ways in which God’s power is at work in our world. The irony illustrates that things are often not as they appear.

Pharaoh, perhaps the most powerful man in the world at this time, seems paralyzed in his effort to control. In fact, not only is he paralyzed but his efforts lead precisely to the opposite of his intentions. The more he oppresses the Hebrew people, the stronger they become. This misuse of power intended to dehumanize the Hebrews has also dehumanized Pharaoh.

The irony continues with the two midwives. The storyteller, by naming these two seemingly powerless women in their dialogue with the “King of Egypt,” and by not naming Pharaoh, emphasizes the question of power at hand. Remember the importance of a name in this patriarchal culture. This is why so often in genealogies the daughters are not mentioned, and, when one is, we take note because her presence has significance in the outcome of the story. The fact that the King of Egypt lowered himself to have this conversation with two Hebrew slave women, midwives, emphasizes how desperate this powerful one was becoming. That he even thought they would obey him is a sign that he had lost perspective and was not using “sober judgement in thinking of his own importance.”

Nonetheless, by disobeying, these women risked their lives. Rather than seeing themselves as powerless puppets of Pharaoh, their inner strength and reverence for God empowered them to act courageously with civil disobedience and when confronted by the powers that be, to use humor about the Hebrew women’s vigor in giving birth.

Old Testament Scholar, Terence Fretheim, writes: *In the refusal of these women to cooperate with oppression, the liberation of Israel from Egyptian bondage has its beginnings. Women also play a significant role in Chapter 2. It can rightfully be said that women are here given such a crucial role that Israel’s future is dependent upon their wisdom, courage, and vision. They made a difference, not only to Israel, but to God.*

Pharaoh, in his final attempt to control a situation well out of hand, orders the Egyptian people “Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live.” When he did this, how could he know what a crucial and powerful role these daughters would play in preserving life? How could he know that their faith in Yahweh was stronger than their fear of Pharaoh? And so, the daughter of the house of Levi cast her son into the Nile River...well, not exactly, another bit of irony. She strategically placed him floating in a basket where Pharaoh’s daughter bathed.

How could Pharaoh know that even his own daughter would play a role in saving the Hebrew people...that the future savior of Israel would be raised in his own home...or that Pharaoh would give the education and cultural advantages that would assist Moses in delivering God's people from bondage. Moses will do for all of Israel what Pharaoh's daughter did for him. *Draw them out of the water...*

So, the irony in this story reveals a divine irony that we see again and again in scripture: God uses the humble to shame the arrogant and the seemingly powerless to overcome the seemingly powerful. Yahweh chooses unlikely candidates and unconventional means to demonstrate God's power, a power that doesn't seek to control worlds or destinies. God moves in this story even as God moves in our times in unobtrusive, unlikely, and vulnerable ways.

Terence Fretheim concludes: *Hence it may be said that the ironic mode fosters a sense of hope amid any situation in which God seems to be absent. What appears to be a hopeless time is actually filled with positive possibilities, but it takes faith 'The conviction of things not seen' (Hebrews 11:1), to perceive that God is at work.* *Interpretation Commentary*

It takes faith and it takes people of faith with courage and compassion: People like Shiphrah and Puah, who are empowered to be guided from within, to take risks, and to stand up for what they believe to be the will of God or people like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who 60 years ago tomorrow, dreamed like Joseph, stood up in civil disobedience against racist oppression, and prophesied to the world: "I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight."

God's power is never used to oppress or intimidate, to control human beings or their destiny. When we see this kind of power at work, we are witnessing the pinnacle of human power or a human being out of control and we are called by God to intercede on behalf of the oppressed.

A life empowered by God, rather than trying to control others, demonstrates self-control— is able to act from within—not react from without.

A life empowered by God does not think more highly of himself than he ought to—neither does she underestimate the impact her life can have.

A life empowered by God lives with dignity no matter what circumstances arise in this unpredictable world because that dignity does not come from this world. "No," Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is within you."

When we feel overwhelmed by circumstances in our lives or by the circumstances in our world; when we feel hopeless, paralyzed, powerless; remember the irony of power in the Hebrew story, and remember the appeal made by the Apostle Paul for the potential within us. Remember, be strengthened, discern God's will, act from within, and live into hope. Amen.