



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, TN
Aug. 27, 2023
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "Fear and Forgetting"

Exodus 1:8-2:10

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 birthstool, 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, he 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 it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. 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."

“Fear and Forgetting”

A new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.

If you were here last week, you will remember what Pharaoh forgot: Joseph, the Hebrew, the non-Egyptian, the foreigner who saved Egypt from 7 years of famine. Pharaoh forgot the foreigner who saved his Empire.

A new king arose over Egypt, and he became obsessed with who was inside, and who was outside. The king began to fear the outsiders.

Pharaoh draws lines. 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 escape from the land." There's an us; there's a them.

The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter. Insiders. Outsiders. Have you ever been divided by fear?

It was the church's annual meeting at my last call – not the most exciting of meetings. Teams reported about their year. Report followed report. 2-minute reports turned into 5-minute reports; 5-minute reports became 10-minute reports. Some people love a good report. If you've been Presbyterian for long, you may know what I'm talking about.

It was the deacon's turn, and as their board was a fairly new entity at the church, this year the deacon report consisted of telling the congregation about the role of the deacons. The chair of the deacon board told the following story. It was fiction, but he told it to describe the deacon board's work.

This was the story he told:

On a Christmas Eve night, when the wind outside was blowing and cold, a man walked into a full sanctuary for the candlelight service. He has been living rough outside, sleeping outside. His clothes were worn and tattered. There was a smell. He stood out. It was clear he was cold.

The people in the pews were polite. Some lowered their eyes or looked away, not wanting to stare. Others nodded hello as he walked in.

The man stood in the aisle for a long time, looking uncertain. The room was mostly full, no obvious empty seats. But then a deacon came to him, welcomed him, said, 'There's a seat up front.' And he led him to the seat and sat beside him.

The deacon chair ended the story by saying, simply, that is what a deacon does.

I was in the back of the congregation during the annual meeting when he told this story. I hadn't heard it ahead of time, but I thought it was nice; it was fine. I nodded appreciatively. By that point, we were well into the second hour of the annual meeting. I was ready to get on with things. Honestly, I didn't think much about it.

But an email came a few days afterward, from someone in the congregation who had been a part of the local homeless coalition in town.

"Is the deacon board only about maintaining the status quo?" the email asked. "Because that story about the deacon board made sure to point out that the man

without a home was an outsider who didn't belong in the church. Is the deacon board about reducing vulnerable people into objects of pity, objects of charity?"

Now, I don't know if that email was being fair. The story was about welcome after all. But it gnawed on me for days – for years in fact. Because I remembered several years later, this week, when I read about Pharaoh and his divisions.

Because there can be something about churches, gatherings of the faithful, that makes it so a man without a home doesn't feel welcome in the first place.

Buried even in that story of welcome was an assumption about who was inside. And who was outside, us and them.

And that seems at odds with a community gathered by a savior was a homeless itinerant, an outsider. *Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.*

Like Pharaoh, churches can draw lines, sometimes overtly, sometimes without even knowing it. Lines finely drawn. Those who belong, those who do not.

Has a faith community ever made you feel like you didn't belong? Like you were on the outside? Because of who you were? Because of who you loved? Or have you ever been so disillusioned by the ways those lines are drawn by people of faith, that you walked away, or wanted to walk away?

The sexism,
the homophobia,
the classism, racism, ableism, of people of faith, done in Christ's name – it is well known; it is well documented. All done in the name of the savior who himself was on the outside his whole life long.

A new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.

Pharaoh likes to draw lines. But the good news, is those lines break down almost immediately.

Shiphrah and Puah, for example, the Hebrew midwives. The original language of the text leaves it ambiguous. Were they midwives whose nationality was Hebrew, or were they midwives to the Hebrews, meaning they were Egyptians. The Septuagint and the Vulgate, the original Greek and Latin translations of the

Hebrew scriptures translate it as “midwives to the Hebrews,” meaning Egyptians who cared for Hebrews. Other translations and commentaries read that they were Hebrews themselves.

Insiders or outsiders. It’s not clear.

What we know, is that they were saviors to the Hebrew people. They put themselves on the outside of the Empire by refusing Pharaoh’s order to murder the male children. They did not fear Pharaoh; they did not share his fear of the foreigners of their land. V. 17 says they feared God. When Pharaoh asks what’s the problem, they report, “the Hebrew women...are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.”

Righteous gentiles, or subversive Hebrews. It is unclear. The lines begin to blur.

And they continue to do so.

A baby boy is born to a Levite woman. When his mother “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.”

And lest we think this passage is all about the evils of the Egyptians, the savior of the child Moses and thus the savior of the people is Pharaoh’s own daughter. Who immediately recognizes the child as a Hebrew and in that moment defies her father’s order to drown the children. Rather, she picks him up out of the Nile, names him, and brings him into her house.

- Joseph, the forgotten foreigner who saved an empire
- Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives who defied the empire
- Pharaoh’s own daughter, the savior of Moses

Pharaoh draws lines with his fear. And over and over, the faithful erase them.

Fast forward two years after that annual meeting. We are in the middle of the pandemic. Everything is on zoom, including a new member meeting with the Session. The new members are asked by Session to tell briefly why they are joining the church.

A woman who is well known already to the church is joining. She is the founder of YTL, Youth Transformed for Life – an afterschool program geared specifically for children of disenfranchised communities, particularly Black and Brown children, who face some of the worst opportunity gaps in the nation in our town, in Asheville. YTL was housed in the church building. Every day after school, the church building became the center for Youth Transformed for Life. The founder of YTL is joining our church.

She says, the reason she is joining, is because, when she had the initial conversation with our senior pastor about bringing YTL to our church, our pastor told her that *the church* has much to learn from these children, from these communities.

The church has much to learn, much to gain.

Not the other way around.

It wasn't out of pity that the church opened its space.

It was because the church needed YTL, needed to learn from YTL, needed to break down the walls it had set up between our community and theirs. Those walls needed to come down for the church to be the church.

I was an associate pastor in that church; I didn't have much direct interaction with YTL, but I can testify to the truth of our senior pastor's words. Throughout the pandemic, when most of our groups met over zoom, the building was anything but silent or empty.

It was filled with life:

- by children who came to study so they could have a place where there was internet and tutors,
- by children who came so their parents could still make it to work,
- by children who came to fellowship so they would not be lonely or listless in a time of separation.

Every day, even after the pandemic, the place was filled with the sounds of life. Youth Transformed for Life transformed that church.

Siblings in faith, our God is a God who tears down dividing lines; who breaks stratified patterns of those inside, those outside.

If you have ever felt on the outside of communities of faith, know that that too is a place where God is at work.

If you ever find yourself on the inside, look for ways to join God in tearing down any walls that make for insiders and outsiders in the first place.

In the few weeks that I've been here at Westminster, and in the months of preparation before, I've learned about the ways this community is bridging these gaps, the beautiful partnerships between this community and the communities outside this place: Justice Knox, Habitat for Humanity, the FISH pantry, Family Promise. There's almost too many to name and certainly more that I will learn about.

As we continue these partnerships, and as we look for new ones, let us always keep an eye out, for the God who liberates, the God who draws people in, the God who opens closed places.

That God is here. And outside of here. And constantly at work, drawing the two together. And for that, we say, thanks be to God.