

Narrative Reading - Exodus 1:8-16

⁸ Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹ He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰ 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.” ¹¹ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. ¹² But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. ¹³ The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, ¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶ “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.”

Message – Fear

This week we’ve jumped ahead multiple generations in the story of Abraham and Sarah’s family. Last week we heard about Jacob wrestling with God. Joseph was one of Jacob’s 12 sons.

Joseph was Jacob’s favorite. Joseph is the one who got the coat of many colors – you know, the amazing technicolor dream coat.

Out of jealousy, Joseph’s brothers faked his death and sold him into slavery in Egypt. But Joseph was favored there too. He ended up being in charge of Pharaoh’s possessions and given the job of steering the nation through a famine.

There were lots of crazy twists and turns on the road from the coat of many colors to a position of importance in Pharaoh’s court...crazy dreams and their interpretations...a false accusation of attempted rape...prison. Anyone who says the Bible is boring has never read Genesis, at least not in a translation they can understand.

For today’s reflection, here’s the important thing. Joseph moved up the ladder of success in Egypt. Because of his leadership, when famine hit, Egypt was set. They had plenty of food stored up.

Other places did not. Joseph’s family was hit hard. They heard there was plenty of food in Egypt. Joseph’s family migrated as refugees into the land Joseph himself was serving. The reconciliation between the 12 brothers is another great story, but we’ll set it aside for today.

The Hebrews, the people of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob...Joseph’s family...lived as refugees in Egypt.

At the beginning of Exodus, it's 400 years after Joseph. The onetime refugees have multiplied. They've taken seriously God's command to be fruitful and multiply.

But then Pharaoh gets worried. There's too many of them. They're not like us. They're not trustworthy. They'll ruin us.

This story shows one of the most dangerous combinations in all of human history – power and fear. Pharaoh whips the Egyptian people into a frenzy of fear and suspicion. In response, they become more and more oppressive. They make the Hebrews work as slaves and become ever more cruel as taskmasters.

But no matter how cruel they were and how much they pinned them down, still, the fear is not relieved. Nothing short of having them dead will do. So Pharaoh orders the midwives...women present at all the births...to kill the Hebrew boys the moment they're born.

Power plus fear all too often equals death for someone.

Exodus 1:17-2:10

¹⁷ But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ¹⁸ So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" ¹⁹ 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." ²⁰ So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. ²¹ And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. ²² 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."

2 Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. ² The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. ³ 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. ⁴ His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

⁵ 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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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?" ⁸ Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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."

Message – Resisting Evil

Sometimes resisting evil is pretty straightforward, if not necessarily easy. Virtually every human civilization has had some form of law and people who enforce the law. And some forms of evil are super obvious. Cold-blooded murder, rape, assault...crimes that hurt someone physically are pretty obvious. Perpetrators get arrested, tried and if convicted, receive consequences. The criminal justice system is not always as cut and dried as all that, but often it is.

But what happens when the evil happens at the order of the person who is supposed to be the keeper of the law? In this case that's Pharaoh. What is the obligation of people then?

Shiphrah and Puah were darn sure they knew whose side they were going to be on. And it wasn't Pharaoh's. Pharaoh could have easily had them sent to prison, or had them beaten or even killed.

Resisting evil probably always comes with great risk, no matter what the situation. These Hebrew women risked a lot going against Pharaoh. But they knew what Pharaoh ordered opposed God's will. And they intended to fulfill God's will, not Pharaoh's.

In the next scene, Pharaoh's own daughter is involved in a scheme to resist the evil of her father. To keep him from being killed, Moses' mother puts him in a little basket and sets him afloat. He's retrieved by Pharaoh's daughter, and in an ironic twist hires Moses' own mother to nurse him. He grows up as Pharaoh's grandson.

But as he grows up, he also comes into his real identity as a Hebrew. Enraged over the treatment of his people, he kills a slave driver. Forced to flee, he winds up in Midian, where the story picks up next.

Exodus 3:1-15

3 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³ Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴ When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵ Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷ Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸ and I have come

down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” ¹¹But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” ¹²He said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”

¹³But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” ¹⁴God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” ¹⁵God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’:

This is my name forever,
and this my title for all generations.

I Have Heard My People Cry

I have heard my people cry. Isn't that what we want? When things are at their worst, and we cry out to God we want God to hear us. And not just hear us but do something.

We often get so frustrated by situations that impact people, sometimes including ourselves. We wonder why God doesn't do something about it.

But over and over in scripture, and in life, we learn that God doesn't wave a wand or snap his fingers or use some act of divine power to set things right. Instead, God calls a person, often a reluctant person, to do that work.

Moses tried once at a solution – by killing a slave master. That didn't work out so well.

Now he's got a pretty good life. Married, life with a reasonably well-off family, work to do. I don't think he was really looking to get into the work of freeing the Hebrews.

But you have to wonder if he still thought about them. Most likely their suffering wasn't something he could easily forget...after all, those were his people. His family even. The injustice had to weigh on him at least a bit, even if he tried to push it out of his mind.

Sometimes God comes to people in dramatic ways...burning bushes even. But sometimes God just helps us hear the cries of his people. We hear the cries of the suffering in our world...the poor...the abused...the refugees...those whose very life is at risk.

And we get this little inkling that those cries might be God's call to us. And just like Moses, we say, "Who, me? I can't do that." And we list all the reasons we can't.

But God is persistent. And the cries grow louder. In the end, with God's help, we finally say, Here I am Lord. Send me.