

Sermon – A Different Perspective on Power
Commotion Sunday, August 24, 2014
Scripture: Exodus 1:8-2:10, Romans 12:1-8
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Our first scripture reading is found in Exodus 1:8-2:10. The Book of Exodus begins by setting the stage for the birth of the central human character within its pages, namely, Moses. Genesis closes with the story of Joseph. Apparently the Hebrew people were treated well for a time in Egypt because of Joseph. Time has passed and the Pharaoh in power “does not know Joseph.” This is a story rich in irony, filled with puns using the Hebrew language. The story of Exodus sets the stage for biblical writers to explore different kinds of power with guidelines for evaluating which kinds of power come from God. As Christians we also see parallels between the birth of Moses and the birth of our savior Christ. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

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 birth stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." 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, God 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."

1 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 him for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him. 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." Amen.

Our second scripture reading is found in Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter 12: 1-8. In chapter eleven, Paul has brought the theological argument of his letter to an end and he now turns to

the practical. In Chapter 12, Paul is neither teaching a lesson nor giving a pep talk – rather he is persuading them with all the strength of his being. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

1 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. 2 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. 3 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. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6 We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7 ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8 the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

The title of the sermon: “A Different Perspective on Power”

The text: “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly that you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement.” Romans 12:3a

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 and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds 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 Hebrew 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 and when approached by Pharaoh, to respond cleverly.

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...welllll, not exactly...another bit of irony. She strategically placed him floating in a basket near the place 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. That God uses the weak to shame the strong...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 today 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 the courage and compassion to do God's work. People like Shiphrah and Puah, people like Moses' mother and sister, Marian, even Pharaoh's daughter, whose hearts and minds are transformed so as not to see power from the point of view of the world. It takes people of faith 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...good and acceptable ways of treating human beings. God's power is never used to oppress or intimidate, to try to control human beings or their destiny. When we see this kind of power at work in our world we are witnessing the pinnacle of human power or a human being out of control....

How proud we are of those who came before us at Westminster acting with courage, stealth and kindness, serving as conductors on the Underground Railroad, and drawing our brothers and sisters out of slavery into freedom....

A life empowered by God, rather than trying to control those around him or her, is able to demonstrate 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 is able to live with dignity no matter what circumstances arise in this unpredictable world because that dignity does not come from this world. That dignity does not necessarily even come from religious institutions within this world, although, at times, by the grace of God, a faith community can be a vehicle of empowering God's people. Sadly, at other times, it can be an obstacle. No, Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is within you." The kingdom of God is within each one of us. May we reach deep within ourselves to discover and nourish the mustard seed of faith within our hearts.

When we feel overwhelmed by the circumstances in our lives or by the circumstances in our world ... when we feel hopeless, paralyzed and powerless... remember this Hebrew story and the appeal made by the Apostle Paul. Remember and be strengthened! Strengthened to recognize the power within us and to make choices based on a transformed heart, not the standards of power set by this world.

This week the world was touched by the courage and faith of Dr. Kent Brantly, a medical missionary serving in Liberia, who contracted the deadly Ebola virus. The words of gratitude and appreciation he offered regarding *those who drew him out of his illness* spoke of his perspective on power. His remarks began with gratefulness regarding *his care and recovery ... You cared for me and ministered to me during the most difficult experience of my life, and you did so with the love and mercy of Christ*

However, he concluded with a different perspective and redirected the world's attention to the hundreds of Africans stricken by Ebola and many times more struggling with poverty... *Above all, I am forever thankful to God for sparing my life and am glad for any attention my sickness has attracted for the plight of West Africa in the midst of this epidemic. Please continue to pray for Liberia and the people of West Africa, and encourage those in positions of leadership and influence to do everything possible to bring this Ebola outbreak to an end.*

Not unlike Moses, whose life was miraculously spared to draw the Hebrew people from oppression to freedom, perhaps Dr. Brantly's life was spared to draw the world's attention and the mercy of Christ to our brothers and sisters in West Africa.

By the wisdom and grace of God, may we each evaluate our personal circumstances, the circumstances of the world and how we are able to respond with mercy, courage and kindness.

And then...let us respond with hope and a new perspective on the power within our lives. Let the ripples of water expand around us with every act of kindness. So be it. Amen.