

**Sermon 8-23-20**  
**Paul Purdue preaching**

**They Did Not Obey**

“A new king came to power in Egypt who didn’t know Joseph.” Do you remember Joseph, the dreaming youngest child of Jacob and Rachel? Jacob lavished Joseph with fancy gifts like a multi colored dinner jacket. Every now and again Jacob sent Joseph to check on his brother as they camped out with the free-ranging herds. Joseph wore his fancy smoking jacket instead of muck boots and blue jeans. The Bible does not tell us if Joseph did any farming, but he did bring his dad a bad report about his ten brothers’ work. The next time Joseph visited the fields, his brothers tore up his coat, tossed him into a well, and sold him to a slave caravan. Enslaved in Egypt, Joseph rises through the ranks. At that time, Egyptian slavery was not race based, but a fabricated racially tinged accusation sends Joseph to prison. In Jail, Joseph keeps on singing, reading, and praying. With spiritual wit and grit, Joe gets out of prison and saves the nation! He becomes second only to Pharaoh in power. Genesis ends with Joseph not only forgiving his brothers but perhaps the nation that enslaved him. In the grand finale, Joseph reassures those very brothers who sold him into slavery: “Don’t be afraid. Am I God? You planned something evil for me, but God produced something good from it, in order to save the lives of many people, just as God’s doing today. Now, don’t be afraid. I will take care of you and your children. So he put them at ease and spoke reassuringly to them.”

After a prologue, Exodus opens: “a new **king** came to **power** in Egypt who didn’t **know** Joseph.” I grew up with the notion that politics and preaching did not mix, except with regard to certain moral issues. Why do we pray “God’s kingdom come on earth as in heaven, give us this day our daily bread,” while thinking God is not concerned with politics? Isn’t Matthew 25 a kind of platform? Jesus says we are to work to end hunger, provide clean water, welcome immigrants, clothe people, provide healthcare, and care for prisoners!

Moses and Elijah appear to Jesus on the mount of transfiguration. By the New Testament era, Moses has become shorthand for God’s Commandments: the “law of Moses, Moses’ seat, the prophets and Moses.” The New Testament names Moses 84 times. Exodus is the most important Old Testament book; it tells us how God uses us to liberate people and undo systemic multi-generational racial injustice and oppression. Moses battles Pharaoh with prophecy, protests and plagues. Hear God’s call: “The Lord said, ‘I’ve clearly seen my people oppressed in Egypt. I’ve heard their cry of injustice because of their slave masters. I know about their pain. I’ve come down to rescue them from the Egyptians... So I am sending you.’” In the opening chapter, Shiphrah and Puah battle systemic oppression with silent disobedience.

70 members of Joseph’s family immigrated to Egypt. Time passed. People sowed racist seeds, but any dehumanizing racist system takes root more like invasive weeds than a sudden hurricane. Few people wake up and think “let’s build an unjust system.” And evil, injustice, and oppression are not eradicated with one landmark law or one sweeping political victory. Exodus 1 reveals a multi-generational pattern of growing racism and oppression.

The first choking weed or crushing weight lands almost silently, “Now a new king came to power in Egypt who didn’t know Joseph.” The new king forgot how a foreign born hero once saved the nation from a global famine. We have forgotten our treaties. Many forget that the Confederate Constitution enshrined slavery. I did not learn in middle school how a 27 year old, decorated World War II veteran, Sergeant Isaac Woodward, was pulled by a sheriff from a Greyhound bus, still in uniform, and beaten so brutally that he permanently lost his eyesight. I did not know that in response President Truman created the first Presidential Civil Rights Commission which led to the desegregation of the military in 1948. When we forget or devalue a people’s sacred worth, we open the door for evil and oppression.

Pharaoh drops the second oppressive weight or choking weed by peddling fear and promoting nationalism. The Bible tells us that Pharaoh used the slogan “The Israelite are larger in number and stronger than we are.... They will join our enemies.” A weak ruler needs to divide a nation and create enemies. Words are powerful tools of systemic oppression. Not all hate speech is vulgar, crass, and mocking. Pharaoh says, “Let’s be smart.” God cares about what we say. Jesus warns that we will be judged by our words and mentions hell while decrying hate speech. (Matthew 12:37; 5:22)

The third oppressive weight or choking weed arises as folks embrace Pharaoh’s message and create a kind of Jim Crow culture in Egypt. “As a result, the Egyptians put foremen of forced work gangs over the Israelites to harass them with hard work.” Playing on fear, Pharaoh calls for law and order, “they will join our enemies and fight against us.” Armed gangs and local sheriffs made life hard for Jewish people. The oppressors benefited economically from this cheap oppressed labor. And yet “the more they were oppressed, the more they grew and spread, so much so that the Egyptians started to look at the Israelites with disgust and dread.”

Even with a king, the fourth weight or weed of official legislated injustice only arises after a culture of disgust and dread is in place. “So the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites. They made their lives miserable with hard labor, making mortar and bricks, doing field work, and by forcing them to do all kinds of other cruel work.” This official weight is added after a culture of division, desensitization, and dehumanization has taken root. Name calling allows people to overlook another person’s humanity. If you think of human beings as ‘illegals’, it’s easier to support separating families or deporting dreamers. If you call police officers “pigs” or curse them, it’s easier to forget their sacred worth or the difficult work they do in a culture filled with guns.

The fifth but not final weed and weight shocks us with its wickedness. Pharaoh literally wants to kill people. And yet, being savvy in his sickness, Pharaoh hides this plan from the people. He tells two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, “When you are helping the Hebrew women give birth and you see the baby being born, if it’s a boy, kill him. But if it’s a girl, you can let her live.” It will get worse; Pharaoh will ultimately mandate genocide.

Martin Niemöller was a prominent Protestant pastor, who unlike most German preachers, came to speak out against Hitler. He was arrested and suffered in a Nazi concentration camp for seven years. First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews,

and I did not speak out— because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

Well, where is the good news in the midst of this sermon? We find the good news with two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who resist evil, injustice, and oppression by refusing to obey an evil king. There is good news when Moses' mother and sister hide him and then hatch a scheme that sends Moses to Pharaoh's palace. There is good news that God is on the side of the oppressed, not the oppressor, and will send that baby to prophecy, pray, protest, and bring plagues until Pharaoh's world class armaments bog down in the Red Sea's mud. And I believe that there is good news that we will all look Jesus in the eye and give an accounting of our words and deeds especially as they affect those who are hungry, immigrating, thirsty, poor, sick, and in prison. In the meantime, Shiphrah and Puah model for us God's silent persistent resistance. Hear the good news, "Now the two midwives respected God so they didn't obey the Egyptian king's order." Exodus models for us the building of God's kingdom by undoing oppression.

Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of (people) willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. .... Martin Luther King, Jr., letter from a Birmingham jail.

Shiphrah and Puah, two midwives whose medical careers help bring life into this world, respect God and disobey an immoral law. The king notices and says, "Why are you doing this? Why are you letting the baby boys live?" Shiphrah and Puah tell a lie. "Because Hebrew women aren't like Egyptian women. They're much stronger and give birth before any midwives can get to them." Did you take delight in the dig within their lie? They manage to prick Pharaoh's sense of superiority while lifting up the oppressed! "The Hebrew women are much stronger." I imagine they sat around laughing and high fiving about that line for years... long enough for it to make into our sacred story!

But what about this lying? Is it okay? Why not tell the truth and become a martyr? There is a kind of morality that only sees actions as right or wrong, black and white, or good or evil. Such clear cut morality usually struggles to understand multi-generational systemic injustice. It can't understand how "Black Lives Matter" and "Boston Strong" are both messages of unity and solidarity. They understand "do not kill", but demand Shiphrah and Puah "not bear false witness." They understand why slavery is wrong, but struggle to see why the Israelites looted their Egyptian oppressors as they headed out of town! They forget Jesus shut down the Temple market while holding an improvised whip. They want a simple faith in a complex world. But Biblical morality is more advanced than a simple set of rules or commandments. The scriptures tell us that God blessed Shiphrah and Puah. "So (for preserving life by disobeying and lying to the king) God treated the midwives well (showed them favor), and the people kept on multiplying and became very strong." Shiphrah and Puah are heroes of the faith, setting the tone for quiet resistance until God uses us to liberate people from bondage. Jesus's greatest commandment is complex: Love (act with redemptive goodwill) your neighbor, the stranger, and even your enemies as you love yourself. Love is not clear cut, black or white, or easy to encase in a set of rules! Love is systemic, multi-generational, and at times works much slower than we care to admit.

So how do we lift these oppressive weights and remove these oppressive weeds from our homes, neighborhoods, schools, churches, business, towns, politics and nations? How do we break every oppressive yoke?

1. Never forget how Joseph, a disposed stranger to Egypt, saved the nation. Remember people's sacred worth. Like Moses' mother and sister, raise up little freedom fighters.
2. Refuse to support leaders who belittle, mock, or dehumanize others.
3. Love your neighbor as yourself. Use Jesus' words and deeds to test your politics.
4. Resist evil, injustice, and oppression in the ways you can.

And know that even when we may feel like the evil weeds are choking out the light, God is on the side of the oppressed, disinherited, hurting, sick, and forgotten. Somewhere Shiphrah and Puah are bringing life into the world. Somewhere a mother is weaving a basket for Moses. Somewhere Moses is protesting. Somewhere Aaron is crafting a new narrative. Somewhere Miriam is dancing. Somewhere Jesus is feeding the hungry, providing water to a village, welcoming an immigrant, providing free healthcare, and caring for prisoners. Hang on, God is using us to remake this that God so loves. Amen.