

North Kildonan United Church

23rd August 2020 – Rev. Don Johnson

Exodus 1:8–2:10

"A New King in Egypt"

Matthew 16: 13–20

*Eternal God,
in the reading of the Scripture, may your Word be heard;
in the meditations of our hearts, may your Word be known;
and in the faithfulness of our lives, may your Word be shown. Amen.*

"Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph."

Last week we heard of the reconciliation that occurred between Joseph and his brothers, as well as the word sent to Jacob that his son Joseph was indeed alive. The concluding chapters of Genesis tell of the new life Jacob and his sons and their families create in Egypt, a life encouraged and supported by the generosity of Pharaoh. All was looking good for the people of Israel and they greatly prospered in Egypt. But then the Pharaoh that Joseph had known and so faithfully served died, and with that death came hard times.

A new Pharaoh was in power, a king frightened by the growing number of Joseph's family, frightened by the success the people of Israel had made of their new life in Egypt. "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."

This new Pharaoh was woefully ignorant of his own people's history, ignorant of the role Joseph played in limiting the years of famine, ignorant in the promises made by his predecessor to Joseph's family. All he could see was danger and the need to control and over work these strangers in his midst.

This new king would not be the only monarch, dictator or president to forget history and profoundly change the lives of countless people. Throughout history we see the effects of the powerful wielding their swords and ordering their armies against innocent, yet different, segments of their own population. How often have communities lived together in peace and harmony, working together for the common good, accepting differences in religion or culture or dress, then someone takes power and declares the neighbours are now the enemy. We saw it happen so terribly in Europe in the 1930s and 40s.

Think about it. The local doctor who delivered most of the babies in the area, who bound up wounds and saved lives through careful surgery, whose children perhaps were studying to be doctors and nurses, suddenly, because their heritage was Jewish, all of

them were now the enemy, deprived of their livelihoods and their possessions, removed from the community they so cared for, then sent off to be deprived of their very existence on this earth. All because a new king, a new dictator, a new Pharaoh wearing a swastika, arrived on the scene, ignored the contributions made to the community by these valued members, divided the nation into either true citizens or the enemy, and set about destroying those who were once friends and colleagues and neighbours.

We can find similar examples in our own day and age. Building walls to divide instead of bridges to unite, setting one religion against another, mistreating minorities, spreading suspicion, rumours and half-truths, all this and more are but a latter day examples of a modern-day king who didn't know Joseph, of a ruler more in love with power than the welfare of the people. Sadly, tragically in these perilous times, there are too many of these self-appointed Pharaohs in the world, presidents and dictators whose agenda is focussed more on their need for power than the prosperity and wholeness of the nation.

Even in the workplace the saga of a new king who did not know Joseph is played out. An office or factory or store has been efficiently and effectively overseen by a general manager. This manager knows the employees, knows what makes for good morale, knows when to cut some slack to an employee because that person is facing family or health challenges. And also knows that the employee doesn't abuse that help and understanding offered.

Then the manager retires and a new, unfamiliar replacement arrives. This new person is going to put their stamp on the job, bring the employees into line, get maximum performance from the crew. No need to consult with the former manager or to find out the stories of the employees. No attempt to learn about the customs and practices that make for a good working environment, nor to discover how a few concessions and flexibility occasionally helps keep excellent workers from being lured away to other companies.

"Nope, I'm in charge now", thinks this new Pharaoh, and it's my way or the highway, and the new regime begins. This new manager, when told about the way things used to be and how harmoniously everything ran, when the history of that particular operation was described, might even dismiss those former ways with a quote by Henry Ford: *"History is bunk."*

If history tells us anything, it is that we ignore history at our peril.

In time, the new Pharaoh we find in Exodus would discover how perilous it was for him to ignore the inheritance he received, to dismiss the history of his nation, to act out in fear instead of trust.

True, the Israelites in Egypt were increasing in number and strength and perhaps the Egyptians had some cause for concern. But the Egyptian solution was to work the Israelites harder, to demand more from them, to treat them more harshly. Even with this terrible treatment, the Israelites were not subdued.

Then Pharaoh instituted a truly horrible practice. All new born Hebrew boys were to be killed at birth, but the new born girls were allowed to live, to become servants and slaves to the Egyptians. A slow but intentional plan of genocide.

The midwives were told their duty, but in an act of compassion, of civil disobedience against a cruel order, the boys were spared. *"The Hebrew women gave birth before we could assist them"* the two midwives declared. Pharaoh may not have believed them but God saw their acts of mercy and courage and in the words of Exodus: *"because the midwives feared God, he gave them families."*

These two women showed tremendous courage in not killing the innocent Hebrew boys. Though later generations would say they were just following orders when similar crimes were committed, the midwives were guided by their conscience instead, and they stand to this day as examples of the power and importance of civil disobedience.

Actually, if you think of it, the deeds of Shiphrah and Puah in opposing the supreme power of the king are the first recorded examples anywhere of acts of civil disobedience. To this day, when people rise up to protest unfair practices, laws or abuses of political or police power, the example of the courage and wisdom of these two women is brought to life once again.

As Rabbi Sacks writes: *"In Judaism the moral life is not inescapably tragic, because neither the universe nor fate is blind. "In reward for the righteous women of that generation, our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt." Shiphra and Puah were two of those women, heroines of the spirit, giants in the story of humankind."*

Pharaoh, however, is not deterred from his quest to diminish the Hebrew population in his midst. He orders that all Hebrew boys are to be thrown into the Nile, while allowing the girls to live.

One Hebrew mother was not prepared to go along with Pharaoh's rule. She had given birth to a beautiful baby boy and kept him hidden for three months. Soon he would become too big to hide, so in an act of hope, she placed him in a basket and floated him on the river. The boy's sister carefully watched to see what might happen.

We heard how Pharaoh's daughter had compassion and rescued the boy from the water, how the boy's mother became his caregiver and how Pharaoh's daughter, when the boy had grown up, took him to be her own and named him Moses, *"because, she said, I drew him out of the water."*

We will hear a lot about this Moses as we read through Exodus, but it is Pharaoh's daughter that we should focus on now. Without her compassion, her willingness to defy her father's orders, her ability to see the baby as neither Egyptian nor Hebrew, but just a boy in need, she enabled Moses to live. And in time, what an important biblical figure Moses would become.

She had nothing to gain and a great deal to lose in her courageous act. Who knows how her father would have treated her if he had discovered her seemingly treacherous deed. He wanted the Hebrew boys dead and she willingly saves one. And she colludes with the boy's sister to have him raised by his mother, though Pharaoh's daughter may not have known that connection. In a dark period of history, her generous deed is a bright light of hope. And only in time, as the boy grows into adulthood will the full depth of hope be revealed.

It's important to note that rescuing the baby in the papyrus basket in the river was not just some whim of Pharaoh's daughter, done today and tomorrow forgotten about. When the boy is grown, she returns and welcomes him into her family, and she is the one who names him Moses.

The giving of his name is also significant. In the Hebrew Scriptures, it is the parents who give the child a name, and at highly important points in the story, God gives the name. Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah. God's angel gives Jacob the name Israel. But here, it is an Egyptian who names the boy, but what a boy! Moses is the hero of the exodus, greatest of all the prophets, named by an Egyptian princess. And this right of naming Moses is a way of recognizing the great deed she performed. One commentary puts it this way: *"This is the reward for those who do kindness. Although Moses had many names, the only one by which he is known in the whole Torah is the one given to him by the daughter of Pharaoh. Even the Holy One, blessed be He, did not call him by any other name."*

To put everything into context, to understand the depth of what she did, imagine if you will that she was not Pharaoh's daughter but Hitler's daughter or Stalin's daughter. The times then were not dissimilar to the 20th century. Her father was as bloodthirsty as the other two named, yet he had such a wonderful daughter. We need to remember that the Egyptians were not all evil, remember that even from such a tyrant could such a heroine be born.

The story reminds us that virtue is found where it is found, even amongst our enemies, and that the basic core of human values of courage, compassion, humanity itself, is truly universal. They, like goodness, are not the sole possession of any one people, race or clan. And this story is written to give testimony to that truth.

Today we stand at the very beginning of the book of Exodus. Exodus, with its hero Moses at the centre, is about freedom and new life. It is about a group of slaves being liberated from the strongest empire in the ancient world. It is about resisting evil wherever and whenever evil is encountered, such as in the acts of civil disobedience the two midwives lived out, rescuing so many baby boys. It is about courage and self-sacrifice, evidenced by Pharaoh's daughter, Moses's sister and his mother. It is a message of hope and human dignity, a proclamation that all people should be free, and that freedom doesn't just happen but comes at a price. It is an invitation for all people of goodwill to covenant together and to covenant with God to create a just, fair and honest society.

The story of the Exodus has inspired countless people to bring about change for the better in their society and in the world, and may we too catch that vision. It is about human rights and the quest for those rights for all, and it is about remembering the past so that we may learn from it and strive for the future to be better.

Amen.