

August 27, 2017 – Pulled Out of the Water

Exodus 1:8-2:10

“A new Pharaoh – one who did not know Joseph – came to power in Egypt.”

When we left the story of the Israelites last Sunday, Joseph had just invited his eleven brothers to live with him in Egypt. They were to bring their wives and children, their sheep and goats and all of their belongings and Joseph promised that he would provide for them. In fact, the story goes on to say that the reigning Pharaoh, told Joseph, “the land of Egypt is open to you. Settle your family in its best parts, in Goshen.” The Pharaoh had great respect for Joseph and he welcomed Joseph’s family with open arms.

But time has passed. Joseph and his brothers have all died. And their children have multiplied quickly. In fact their numbers have increased so much that their descendants, the Israelites, now fill the land and are a powerful force in Egypt.

So this new Pharaoh is worried. He is worried that these immigrants in Egypt could someday turn against their new country, possibly even joining with their enemies. So the Pharaoh’s solution is to oppress the Israelites by forcing them into hard labour. This doesn’t work – their numbers continue to grow, so their work is increased again. In today’s scripture passage we read, “The Egyptians were merciless in subjugating them with crushing labor.”

But the Pharaoh is still worried, so he goes to the midwives who deliver the Hebrew babies. He goes to Shiprah and Puah and asks them to kill every Hebrew boy as the baby is being born. This plan doesn't work either, so the Pharaoh commands that every boy born to the Israelites be thrown into the Nile.

It's hard to imagine such cruelty, such blatant disregard for human life. It would be easy to call the Pharaoh paranoid, to write him off as a dictator, a despot, a crazy-man. But it's not hard to find similar stories in our own history. In 1910, Duncan Campbell Scott, the Canadian government official in charge of Indian Affairs wrote the following statement about residential schools. He said,

It is readily acknowledged that Indian children lose their natural resistance to illness by habitating so closely in these schools, and that they die at a much higher rate than in their villages. But this alone does not justify a change in the policy of this Department, which is being geared towards the final solution of our Indian Problem. <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/10-quotes-john-a.-macdonald-made-about-first-nations>

And if we're looking for fear and paranoia regarding minority groups in North America we don't have to search historical documents. All we have to do is open a newspaper or read the headlines on our newsfeed. We have a United States President spewing words of hatred and paranoia on a regular basis. His attempt to block Muslim immigrants and his ban of transgender people in the military are

just two examples of how this leader is using his position of power to oppress those who are different, to suppress those who do not fit his view of the norm.

In today's story from Exodus, we have characters who work against the actions of the Pharaoh. First, you have the two midwives: Shiprah and Puah. It's interesting to note that these midwives were most likely Egyptian. It would be very unlikely for the Pharaoh to approach Hebrew women and expect them to follow his command. But these Egyptian women ignored his request and they allowed the Hebrew boys to live. They did this knowing that disobeying the Pharaoh put their lives at great risk. And then they came up with a wonderful excuse for their failure. They said, "These Hebrew women are different from Egyptian women; they are more robust and deliver even before the midwife arrives."

Then you have to consider Moses' mother. She hid her baby for three months and then she did the unthinkable... she placed him in a basket in the Nile. Who knows what the punishment would have been had the Pharaoh's agents discovered her deceit! But it was the only way she could save her baby.

And then there was Moses' sister. She was told to watch her baby brother as he floated in the reeds by the banks of the Nile. She was also at great risk if the wrong person discovered her with the baby in a basket. And when her brother was discovered, she was quick enough to suggest her mother as wet nurse.

And finally let's consider Pharaoh's daughter. I always find it amazing that her father allowed her to keep an Israelite baby. I wonder what he thought of her plans for adoption. What kind of risk was she taking when she had Moses pulled out of the water?

So I have to ask myself. Who is the baby that needs to be pulled out of the water in 2017? What should we be doing to help make that happen?

Let's look at the first question – it's not as hard to answer. Who is the baby? Well let's focus on the issue that has been in the news for last couple of weeks. We have people who identify as alt-right (followers of Nazis and even the KKK) who are marching in the streets of our North American cities. So our baby in the water is someone that the alt-right would target. In general, that means anyone who isn't a Christian white male. The baby that needs to be pulled out of the water is Jewish and Black and Female and Muslim and LGBTQ.

So what should we be doing to help make that happen? The Internet is filled with attempts to answer that question. Churches all over North America, especially in the United States, are asking it. Groups in universities are asking it. People on coffee row are asking the same question. What should we be doing?

The reality is that there are good, better, and unhelpful ways in which we can attempt to pull this baby out of the water. I question whether direct confrontation with the alt-right is helpful – especially when that confrontation leads to violence.

Demonstrations like the one in London yesterday where the alt-right groups were outnumbered 10 to 1 and basically silenced, just give them a legitimate reason to complain that their right to free speech is being taken away.

On Wednesday there was an article on CBC news entitled, “How should Canadians respond to the alt-right?” <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/alt-right-white-supremacist-cheesecake-analysis-wherry-1.4255974> This article included several ideas. One came from a town in Germany where neo-Nazis hold a march every year. The people of this town now turn the march into an “involuntary walkathon” by donating funds to an anti-extremist campaign for every metre that the neo-Nazis walk. Another idea is to have a rally at the same time as an alt-right demonstration but in a different place in the city, a rally that would highlight themes of unity, solidarity, understanding and love.

As we consider possible courses of action, we need to ask ourselves, “Is this action creating positive and supportive space for those who are being oppressed, or is it just creating new or deeper divisions? Are we building relationships or are we just breaking them down?” It would be easy to blame the alt-right or Donald Trump for all the oppression in our world. But in reality we also have to look at ourselves and ask, “How we are complicit in what is happening? What changes we can make in ourselves, in our church and in our community in order to pull the baby out of the water.”