

Sermons from Park Hill: August 31, 2008

**Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado**

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Exodus 1:8 – 2:10

Romans 12: 1-8

“Small Personal Acts”

Today I am starting a series of sermons from the Book of Exodus. The events surrounding the Exodus from slavery in Egypt are some of the most important stories in all of scripture, and certainly central to any belief in a liberating God and liberation theology.

After the masters of the slaves in our country went to bed, having filled their minds with passages from the Bible about slaves being obedient to their masters – at night, when masters weren't paying attention, slaves listened to the stories of Moses and freedom and escaping the Pharaoh's cruelty. In the night they heard these stories and dreamed about freedom and the Promised Land.

Today in our series, it's the birth of Moses; next Sunday the call from the burning bush;

the following Sunday it's Miriam dancing on the safe side of the sea, having escaped from the riders and their chariots; and then the 40 year saga of "Now what do we do?" Complaining and whining about how much better the food was back in Egypt; making idols out of gold when they got scared and lost their faith in the God who had heard their cries and delivered them in the first place.

But today. The first line of the text reads, "Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph." You might wonder who that is too. It's not Joseph, the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus. This is the "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" Joseph.

When he was a boy he was so annoying to his brothers that they threw him in a pit and then sold him to some travellers going to Egypt. They told their father – who had adored Joseph with gifts and praise a little too much for the brother's liking – they told their father that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. While living in captivity in Egypt, Joseph became known for interpreting dreams so successfully that the King of Egypt took notice of him. And when the King had a disturbing dream about a great famine, Joseph not only interpreted the dream for him but was put in charge of building storehouses for grain from years of good harvest to keep for years of drought.

Joseph saved Egypt from starvation, and he made it a powerhouse among its neighbors who came to it for help. Egypt became the super-power of its time. "Dreamboy Joseph" rose from slave to second in command to Pharaoh, saving Egypt and the whole region from the 7 year famine. Actually, he also saved all those brothers who were shocked

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and frightened to see him when he too came to Egypt for help.

But most people eventually forgot this story of Joseph and came to resent the presence of all those "foreigners" in their midst – all the descendants of Joseph and his 12 brothers. By the time Moses was born, these "outsiders" had lived in Egypt for 500 years. They were no longer, though, the people who saved Egypt from famine. They were immigrants of a different race who didn't belong overwhelmed their health care system and schools and took the jobs of ordinary Egyptians.

Egypt had lost its corporate memory. And when a nation loses its memory, suspicion and prejudice take over. Minorities are made into a threat to our way of life. For instance, we legislate against and try to punish people for speaking Spanish on soil that was once theirs, not so long ago.

Many people balk at federal assistance for American Indian tribes, forgetting that they saved the settlers and taught them how to survive the harsh conditions of a new and unfamiliar land. That debt was repaid with promises and treaties, both empty and broken. We stole the land we wanted, and we always wanted more, with broken treaties because massacres and small-pox infected blankets didn't annihilate them. The Oglala Lakota on the Pine Ridge Reservation remember every detail of their history as though it happened to them yesterday, not to their ancestors more than 100 years ago. But the loss of our corporate, national memory means American Indians are ignored, at best, and at worst, dying from preventable diseases from the deliberate obstruction of justice, the endless government appeals to keep from fulfilling its – our – obligations. Biblical Egypt and

contemporary America have more things in common than we might think.

Those outsiders and undeserving people are a threat to our way of life and our national security. So the Pharaoh of Egypt – and America – elevates the level of threat and manipulates a need for a dramatic response – out of either ignorance or malevolence, neither of which is excusable.

There's a great comedy that most people have never heard of called *Canadian Bacon*. In this movie, an inept, bungling President is convinced he needs to create a war in order to cover up a faltering economy. This movie is from 1995, so it's not a slap at the current administration. But anyway, the President and his advisors didn't want a war where there would be any *real* consequences, so they declared war on Canada. They stoked suspicions and fear of Canadians walking secretly in our midst. We can't tell who they are. Why are they so friendly? What do they really want? At the end of such calculated fear mongering, aided enthusiastically by the TV networks, Americans were suddenly burning Canadian flags, pouring maple syrup out onto the streets, and banning hockey games from TV. The President's approval ratings soared. Any memory of our long friendship with Canada was forgotten, lost for the sake of covering the President's political back side. And the people went along. For what reason?

Similarly, what had the ancestors of Joseph done to receive the hostility of the Pharaoh? Well, he was ignorant of their contributions to society, for one thing. There were simply too many of "them" and, it says, he feared they were too powerful to contain – from what threat to the Pharaoh we don't know. "Taskmasters were set up to oppress them with forced labor," but their numbers only

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increased. This made them an even bigger threat, so their oppression further increased. The Egyptian ruler became even more ruthless to the point they finally became slaves.

Apparently, not everyone went along with the Pharaoh's fear and manufactured assessment of their threat. When the ruler concluded that the only way to reduce the number of Hebrews was to kill their newborn boys, the midwives helping deliver them refused to cooperate. At great personal risk, they deliberately, secretly, defied the orders of Pharaoh and played into the threat he claimed – of their strength. The midwives claimed that the Hebrew women were so strong – vigorous – that they didn't need midwives. It played perfectly into his warped reality. The midwives dealt shrewdly with Pharaoh, just as he had instructed his taskmasters to deal with the Hebrews. It's a wonderful reversal; because they refused to cooperate with evil. And with that, turned the system on its head, for a while.

He couldn't stop them at birth, so Pharaoh decreed that *all* Egyptians participate in infanticide by throwing the newborn boys into the river to drown – he didn't need to rely on just the midwives now. Who knows how many died, or if there were any other boys saved by Egyptians who refused to cooperate and hid Hebrew babies. Of course, we know that at least one boy was spared by a mother and sister who created a ruse so that none other than the Pharaoh's daughter saved him. She named him Moses which meant "son" in the Egyptian language and which means "to draw out" in Hebrew – a play on being drawn out of the water and to later draw his people out of Egypt. So this is the story of Moses' birth. Great heroes often have stories of miraculous births and surviving under great odds.

But, as the Partners for Urban Transformation point out, that's not really the aim of the story – simply about the birth of Moses. "The point of the story is to demonstrate how the seeds of freedom for the slaves and Egypt's spectacular defeat by Yahweh were sown 80 years before through the sophisticated use of civil disobedience by women – the midwives who defied Pharaoh, and Moses' mother and sister who carefully plotted a way for him to be rescued by the daughter of the very Pharaoh who decreed his death. And this princess knew he was a Hebrew boy; she made a fool of her father – whether she intended to or not. He decreed death out of his fear and she co-opted life out of her compassion.

On trial in India, Ghandi said, "In my humble opinion, non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good." It's the example of the midwives and the princess. When Ghandi made this profound statement at the core of non-violence, he was standing before a judge in India under the charge of breaking an English law. He appealed that by administering that law, the judge was prostituting for the benefit of the exploiter who created such laws to oppress the Indian people. He lamented that the English and their Indian associates didn't even know they were engaged in a subtle but effective system of terrorism. The only choice they had, said Ghandi, was to recognize this and disassociate with evil by resigning or embrace it and find him guilty with the highest penalty. Do not grant me mercy, he asked. That gives the system further power and authority. And I will not cooperate with evil.

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The birth of Moses is a great story for all the intrigue that *surrounds* it. It provides more than prologue for what is to come. It relates in many ways to our contemporary life, including the danger of forgetting our history, losing our corporate memory, and creating scapegoats for our problems. It inspires in me again an appreciation for the power of even a small resistance to evil. Small personal acts of rebellion multiplied into great acts of liberation. In the story, each act of resistance inspired the next. The courageous actions of Moses later in his life cannot be divorced from the rebellious acts of the women in his life or even before it. Small personal acts of rebellion multiply into great acts of liberation. Your small act of compassion for a disparaged, discarded outcast who is blamed for our problems, may be for that one person who will set free a subjugated people.

I recently heard, How do you change the world? Through one act of kindness after another after another.

Laurel Dykstra, author of *Set Them Free: The Other Side of Exodus*, writes: "For those [of us] who live lives of privilege, like Pharaoh's daughter we face two paths. We can congratulate ourselves and be praised for acts of charity, or we can open ourselves to the life-changing consequences of compassion."

I like that line: the consequences of compassion. Real compassion is life-changing. I think of charity as dainty – like a tea party with those crust-less cucumber sandwiches. I imagine compassion like a boisterous backyard barbeque with enough ribs and chicken and corn-on-the-cob to feed a hundred more people than have come to the party.

Charity hands out... but compassion draws them in – welcomes them home. And when we're drawn into relationship with one another, across manufactured, heightened, fear-mongering, blame-pointing, politically-motivated, lines, we are changed. Compassion in a world driven by greed is an act of rebellion. Compassion in a world that's been made fearful of one another is an act of revolution. Compassion takes a risk to heal brokenness and counteracts the imposition of oppression through prejudice. Like the midwives and the princess show us, small personal acts of rebellion multiply into greater acts of freedom.

In the inspired words of Paul, each of us have gifts participate in this larger story of emancipation and deliverance from captivity. Each of us are called. But first, we must not be conformed to this world – characterized by an insistence that I get-mine-first – be not conformed to this world but be ye transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect – and what is a bunch of baloney to prop up a corrupt Pharaoh.

Discern what is good. Reject what is fear.