

POWER OPTIONS

Year A, Pentecost 11 – Exodus 1:8 – 2:10

The account in Exodus of the Egyptians' suppressing their Hebrew residents has, sadly, a contemporary ring to it. Egypt under "the new king who did not know Joseph" could be Iraq or Syria or Ukraine or Nigeria or Congo in our own time. Political change, whenever and wherever it occurs, is often destabilizing because the old lines of power and authority no longer obtain. In fact, those who were friendly with the previous government usually find themselves as *persona non grata* with the new regime. Even in long-established democracies, it's out with the old and in with the new.

What happened with the Hebrew people in Egypt under the new pharaoh, however, was extreme. And in spite of the rather thin narrative, we are given a fair amount of information – both directly and indirectly. Indirectly, we learn that the Hebrew people have not assimilated during their years in Egypt: they are still a distinct people, and it may be that they have stayed in Goshen, the Nile Delta, where they first settled. If so, they were easily accessible when the Egyptians began making their lives hard.

What we learn directly from the text is that Pharaoh interprets them as a threat, and attributes power to them. He does not describe their power, other than there are great numbers of them. Without suggesting their motive for doing so, he suggests that they would join with Egypt's enemies in time of war. Again, sadly, in our own time we know the power of propaganda in changing neighbours into enemies. Distinct ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups can live in harmony for centuries until some form of stress takes over. In this case, the stress seems to be top-down, as Pharaoh uses fear and innuendo to turn the Egyptians against the Hebrews. This accomplished, then begins their systematic oppression, first through slavery, and second through attempting infanticide. It was a horrible turn of events for the Hebrew people. In no time at all, it seems, they have moved from being part of the mainstream of Egyptian society to its underclass.

These extreme conditions form the setting for several brave women to use their power to undermine Pharaoh's campaign of infanticide. The first we encounter in the story are two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. Pharaoh orders them to kill the Hebrew boy babies as soon as they are born. Shiphrah and Puah agree to the directive, but have no intention of carrying it out. When called to account by the Pharaoh, they use their otherness to advantage, suggesting that Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; that childbirth takes place so quickly that by the time the midwife arrives, the baby is already in his mother's care. We smile at Pharaoh's gullibility, but we also recognize the risk Shiphrah and Puah have taken in defying Pharaoh's order. As the Hebrew population continues to grow, so does Pharaoh's fear of their power in numbers.

No longer able to delegate his plan of killing the Hebrew boy babies to the Hebrew people themselves, he then commands the whole population to take responsibility for eliminating Hebrew boy babies by throwing them into the Nile. And it is under this order that Moses' mother, her daughter (probably Miriam, although she is not named in this account), and Pharaoh's daughter use their power for life over death.

Moses is born, and his mother hides him, we are told, for three months. At the end of three months, she makes a waterproof basket for him and places the baby in the basket in the Nile, thus fulfilling, more or less, Pharaoh's order. She floats the basket in a safe place in the reeds, near the riverbank; and she asks Miriam to keep watch over what happens.

What happens could not have been imagined by Moses' mother. Pharaoh's daughter, of all people, comes to the riverbank to bathe, sees the baby, identifies him as a Hebrew baby boy, but does not comply with her father's order. In fact, she goes out of her way to save the baby, hiring a nurse who, through Miriam's quick thinking and sleight of hand, is actually Moses' mother. When the baby is weaned, Pharaoh's daughter adopts Moses as her son. We can only imagine how her defiance infuriated her father.

And so, in this horrific account of the oppression of the Hebrew people, we see five people, all of them women, use their power to preserve life, and thereby maintain a measure of justice in what can only be described otherwise as a reign of terror.

Their actions, however limited, were not trivial. As a man, Moses was called to lead the Hebrew exodus from Egypt, an event that became the central act of salvation in Hebrew theology. Had Moses not survived, we can only assume that things would have ended badly for the people of Israel.

Shiphrah and Puah, Moses' mother, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter did not have much power, but what they had they risked using for good, for the sake of justice, and to preserve life. And God, we learn in this account, blesses those who do so. Might we do the same?

Early this week, I was heartened to read that Pope Francis risked himself not only in using his voice to encourage the reunification of North and South Korea where he had just visited, but also spoke of the need to protect those without power who are being persecuted. He was referring principally to the present conflict in Iraq, but he indicated that his comments also had a general application. He did not condone unilateral action, but called for action through due process at the United Nations.

I am not naïve enough to believe that his call for justice will change anything in Iraq, but by speaking out, the pope has entered public discourse in a meaningful way on the topic of war. He has not advocated for war itself, but he acknowledged that the nations have a moral obligation to protect those who are innocent and without the power to defend themselves. It is virtually impossible to adjudicate most conflict, especially when it gets out of control as most current wars have; but justice, Francis teaches, is something we must use our power to restore and preserve. Justice in protecting the innocent and powerless is worth fighting for.

His words have power – not only for a world that has forgotten about the moral authority of the gospel, but also for us as those who have been called by the same gospel into discipleship. Do we follow in the tradition of those who risk themselves for the sake of justice? Does our love of justice and faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ lead us to use our power, however limited, for good? to preserve life?

Like so many in our community, I am deeply troubled by homelessness and poverty in Waterloo Region. And the cancellations of the past two weeks of several of our Out of the Cold programs only adds to my concern. I understand the need to shift the responsibility for care of homeless persons to its rightful place as part of social services. The conversation should have taken place before now. I understand that our taxes are intended to be used, among other things, to protect those who are unable to look after themselves. This conversation has been ignored in every recent election. But I worry about those who may not be served by the existing structures, however enhanced they become through increased government funding. I worry about those who need ministry and not management. I worry about those who need the compassion and care that is now less available than it has been through our church volunteers.

I'm not sure what our power is at this point in the process of taking care of those without power; but I know that whatever it is the gospel calls us to use it for justice and to preserve life. I know that we are called by the moral authority of the gospel to protect the innocent as clearly as Francis has been to speak out against the atrocities that are taking place in Iraq.

Our reading from Exodus today provides us with several examples of those who used their power for good. As those called by the gospel of Jesus Christ, we can do no less. And so we must listen and discuss and question and reflect on how best to act; how best to protect; how best to preserve life.