

“The Power of Fear”

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Texts: Isaiah 51: 1-14 and Exodus 1:8 – 2:10

Fear. It's real. It is universal. I know, there are those who say they have no fear, but that is unlikely to say the least! We have fears that serve us well: fear of a hot stove, fear of falling from high places, fear of being struck by lightning in a thunderstorm, and so on. Some of our fears don't serve us well, however, and can lead to terrible outcomes. A perfect example is the story from Exodus this morning. The scripture names clearly that Pharaoh, the most powerful person in his day, because afraid of the growing population of Hebrew slaves. He feared for his power, his life, and his nation. While his fear may have been legitimate, the consequences of his fear could easily have led to genocide. Out of extreme fear, Pharaoh orders the midwives (only two for some reason) to find a way to kill all male babies born to the Hebrews. As the story unfolds, the midwives outsmart Pharaoh, and in fact, a lot of women make all the difference to have this story have a different ending than it would have. The point for us is this: could our fears lead to destruction of ourselves or others, and what might we do instead?

Last week, we spoke of Joseph and his brothers and the later chapters of Genesis. We learned that Joseph served Pharaoh and was part of his royal advisors. Exodus opens with stating that there was a new king over Egypt. “The narrator introduces him in terse fashion. He is not even given a name (nor is his successor). The focus is thus placed on him, not simply as a historical figure, but as a *symbol for the anticreation forces of death*

which take on the God of life (Fretheim, *Interpretation Bible Series: Exodus*, pp27ff).” Like I mentioned, the Hebrews (also called the Israelites) have begun to reproduce rather dramatically, according to the story. No, we don’t know for sure if this occurred in this way, whether the numbers were real, or anything like that. All we know is that Pharaoh was afraid that too many slaves were going to lead to rebellion and the fall of the nation. It becomes a matter of national security that the Israelites be kept under control—quite literally. In the words of one commentator, “[Pharaoh] is preoccupied with Israel and their extraordinary growth, that it may be beyond Egypt’s capacity to control, a threat to the status quo. Unless their growth is curtailed, they may become a fifth column in a time of war and escape. The Israelites become an issue of national security.” Now it is up to Pharaoh to convince his own people that these slaves are a threat and that they must be dealt with.

There’s some irony here. Terence Fretheim, in his commentary on the passage names several: 1) Pharaoh is the first to recognize the children of Israel as a “people,” giving them status; 2) In exaggerating the numbers, an “outsider” highlights the fulfillment of God’s promises. His acts of oppression confirm that God’s word to Abraham in Genesis 15:13 was on target; 3) Pharaoh’s concern to act shrewdly will be shown to be folly...Pharaoh’s efforts will lead to an end precisely the opposite of his intentions. In short, Pharaoh’s fears become structured into an oppressive system. As the narrator tells the story, though, the more Israel is oppressed, the more it grows. “As often for Israel, it must pass in and through adversity on the way to the fulfillment of promises.... Egypt’s fears turn to dread.”

We could tear all of that apart knowing that the narrative is written from the perspective of the Israelites. They would not be inclined to present Pharoah in a positive light. Nevertheless, this narrative does remind us that often our fears get misrepresented, exaggerated, and then can be manipulated to make the most horrible things happen. History is full of stories of leaders who either had a fear, or manufactured one, that led to extermination of others. It often doesn't take much to convince a people that they are under threat. And it doesn't take much more than that to turn fear into dread. Leaders throughout the world and throughout history have used these fear-mongering messages to conduct the most evil of actions. At the same time, it doesn't have to be a world leader to convince people of dreadful things and then convince them to take actions that are not good for them. Hackers use these methods all the time to gain new victims. We would be well served to consider fears that are impressed upon us and evaluate them for their veracity—or even if true, are the consequences as bad as we're being told. Who benefits from the manipulation of our fear? Why is someone telling us the things they are? Is there truth? Am I really at risk? Where can I check out my fears to see how real they are?

In short, I'm saying the first response to fear is to ask questions. Even the most powerful person in the known world at the time was easily convinced of the fear, but he seemed not to ask too many questions. People often avoid asking questions and simply take what they are told as truth.

Further, when we become oppressors – often led by fear—we often become less than human ourselves. In the effort to dehumanize another, we lose our own humanity. Humanity, at its best, cares about the rest of humanity. We know that slavery makes

subjects become objects. We know that the more someone can take away the humanity of another, the easier it is for normal people like us to treat them poorly at the least and kill them outright at the worst.

At the same time, this narrative is inviting the reader to identification with those who suffer. This is easier said than done, but if read closely, perhaps we can feel something of what the Israelites felt. Or we might begin to see how it was possible for Pharaoh to convince the Egyptians of the danger of the Israelites. We can see, if we read closely, how power was misused and the almost disastrous consequences that would have resulted.

But there is more to this story than Pharaoh's attempt to eradicate the sons of Israel to control its population. The other important theme is the work of small groups of people to change the outcome. Even more so, women in ancient Egypt didn't have a lot of power, and yet it is them to have the largest impact in this narrative. We could learn from them how a small group of committed people can resist and even circumvent the powers that be.

Another irony in this story is that two Hebrew midwives outwit the king of all Egypt. The women, ironically, are named whereas Pharaoh never is. Goes to show that the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible) has more to offer us than we first imagine. In Fretheim's words, "The irony is compounded when Pharaoh can get the entire Egyptian community to bend to his will but fails to get two daughters of Israel to so respond." Dr. Fretheim wants to be sure that we notice that even in the very face of death, the community as a whole continues to thrive; the recurrent theme of growth is once again front and center. God's creative work enables life to abound."

Again, we look at history and some of the most terrible things that have ever occurred in the hands of humans. As horrific as those stories are, they are also counter-narratives about what people have done in the face of the worst atrocities that have brought life, freedom, hope, and possibility in the midst of death and destruction. Pharaoh even attempted to turn Hebrews against one another. Despots will do that. And yet, he could not prevail in this way, either.

In the words of another commentator, “In the refusal of women to cooperate with oppression, the liberation of Israel from Egyptian bondage has its beginnings.” Fretheim continues, “It can be rightfully said that women are here (Exodus 2) are given such a crucial role that Israel’s future is made dependent on their wisdom, courage, and vision. They make a difference, not only to Israel, but to God. God is able to work in and through these women and that creates possibilities for God’s way into the future with this people that might not have been there otherwise.” We haven’t even gotten to how the daughters save Moses in Chapter 2, but I’ve already thrown a lot at you this morning. Let me see if I can put it all together.

The first and most crucial point is that fear is real and sometimes helpful to our safety and protection. At the same time, fear can be exaggerated, manipulated, and ultimately used to cause harm to us or to others. Be cautious, especially of people in power, who seek to gain for themselves through manipulation of fear. Any of us can be led down a road of destruction if we simply believe without asking questions, doing research, participating at some level, and seeking where God would have us act and not act. Human history has multiple stories of deranged leaders manipulating or even manufacturing fear

to the destruction of both oppressors and those oppressed. This can even lead to genocide in its most egregious examples.

Amid all of the horrible, there are also numerous stories in history of individuals or small groups who impacted the outcome of the crisis. Sometimes they work directly against the oppressive system. Sometimes they work behind the scenes. Sometimes they lead people to safety or simply find a way not to execute when told to do so. Often, they are the people with the least amount of power who “save the day,” which should give us something to think about. All the time, God is at work in and through people (sometimes even those who are opposed to God), to make a way when there seems to be no way.

God’s plans for the future almost always rest on the least expected, most ill-equipped, scared, and powerless people. Sometimes we’re led to believe that God is on the side of those who are winning. Sometimes...but most of the time God is on the side of the one most oppressed, most left out, and most left behind. Stories like our story today beg us to look at the Bible again and see what it really says, versus what we’ve been told. A re-reading may lead us to make different choices than we are today. Or, the re-reading may make us more confident that we are on the path God intends.

No matter what we do, fear will be present. Often the greatest fears are held by those doing the godliest thing. Fear itself isn’t bad. It can be a powerful motivator. At the same time, we have to be aware that there are those among us manipulating our fear and the outcome could be disastrous. Fear always has power. The question is: is that power for good or is that power for bad...or somewhere in-between. There is only one way to find out.

We must engage our fear. We can't ignore it, and we can't give others the power to define it for us. For if we allow others to name our fears without considering them ourselves, we, too, can be led down the most destructive path possible for ourselves, for our neighbors, and perhaps for humanity. Life presents a lot of choices. May we all make the right ones.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.