

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Bart Roush

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Exodus 1:8–22

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

God of extravagant grace, may your Spirit refresh our hearts through the reading of the scriptures that we may perceive where you are leading us. By the Spirit that binds us together, speak to us that what we hear and ponder may enliven us and stretch us to trust and follow you, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰Come, 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.”

¹¹Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. ¹²But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. ¹³The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, ¹⁴and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶“When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” ¹⁷But the midwives feared

God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ¹⁸So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” ¹⁹The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” ²⁰So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. ²¹And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. ²²Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.”

Near the house where I grew up there was a church with several acres of property. There was a small, wooded area, a few grassy hills to roll down, the parking lot, the house where the pastor lived, and the church itself. As kids we were welcomed to play on the church property, and I spent many hours there. One day, at dusk, I was at the churchyard with my sister and some of her friends. My sister is almost five years older than me, so I think she and her friends were teenagers and I was probably 9 or 10-years-old. As we were at the church yard, and as the sun was setting, I noticed several birds in the sky. At least I thought they were birds. They were not. They were bats.

As they flew and swooped in the air, one of my sister’s friends turned to me and said, “you better get low to the ground. That way the bats won’t get you.” As soon as he said this it seemed as if the bats were getting closer. I dropped down to the ground pressing my flesh on the damp grass as close as I could get it. I was terrified. My sister’s friend said I better crawl so the bats wouldn’t come down and bite me. I crawled through the grass until I thought I was in the clear and then I ran all the way home. I’m pretty sure I heard laughter behind me as I ran. To this day, I have an irrational fear of bats. And I know some say they are cute,

and that they eat mosquitoes, so I should love them. I don't. I won't. Ever. They are the creatures of my nightmares.

In her book, "This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us," Cole Arthur Riley talks about fear.¹ She describes three different types of fear. There is fear attached to the past. It is some memory or event in your past that the mere memory of it brings you back to a place of fear. You do not want to be around me if there is a bat in the vicinity. I'm useless and scared.

There is a present fear. This is some situation or event unfolding in the present time, and often has to do with survival or is wrapped up in pain. I can only imagine the fear that some of the people of Maui felt as they ran into the ocean or into pools to escape the fast-moving flames engulfing their town. It is an immediate fear.

The third type of fear she writes about are the things we call "fear" themselves, "concerns of future abandonment, embarrassment, death, or loss." She notes that this is the form of fear most hidden from ourselves "because fears tend to hide behind one another. Ask fifty people what they are afraid of and see how many say heights or spiders and how few have the presence of self to say they are afraid of abandonment or a deteriorating mind." She says, "telling the deepest truth of the fear requires thorough acquaintance with our own stories and interior lives... Fear reminds us that we are not in control, that there is far more in life that is inevitable than preventable. In response, we grasp and cling to what control we have."

And of course, there are those who play on our fears. So much of advertising and selling of products is based on playing into our fears and inadequacies. The fear of not being enough. And then there are the politics of fear.

The opening of Exodus is very much a story about the politics of fear. A new Pharaoh has come to power, and it is a ruler who is not familiar with Joseph. Joseph was the previous ruler's right-hand man who got the entire world through a famine. He was a man of stature and great power. But now, there is a new king and as he looks around, he is fearful of the Israelites. This new Pharaoh fears that there are too many of them and that they may rise up against the Egyptians. Because of this, the Pharaoh deals harshly with the Israelites, he increases their workload, and he even goes so far as to decree that all the male babies of the Israelites should be killed when they are born.

It's an ancient story, but fear and the evils it brings about are as contemporary as today. We aren't that far from seeing multiple advertisements for political campaigns on television. Take notice how many of them prey upon fear. Fear of the other, fear of someone taking something from you, fear of crime, fear of economic ruin. Fear of discomfort and facing hard truths. Fear.

Fear is a strong motivator. Riley writes, "in communities of fear, a kind of sectarianism emerges. People group together by allegiances because there is power in numbers.... A fear's economy is so scarce, you must choose whom to be afraid for and whom to hope for. Then you steady yourself for the relentless accumulation of power, never realizing that stealing power doesn't diminish your fear, it only increases it."

She continues, "tyrants thrive in communities of fear. They deceive the fearful into believing they will resolve their agony. They'll promise safety, power, belonging to those who require their hope be attached to a person, usually a person of status. But as tyrants gain confidence, they have less need to obscure their evil. They learn they can threaten, insult, and abuse their followers directly and openly, past the point of rebuke.

They have become salvation to some sect of the community. And in their terror, who would dare rebuke the rescuer?"

Pharoah, through his fear, demands the eradication of the male children of the Israelites. The story tells us that the Egyptians went along with Pharoah and were harsh with the Israelites. The Pharoah's fear multiplied into actions taken by his followers to make others suffer. But then we get to Shiphrah and Puah; the midwives who helped the Israelite women give birth.

It is unclear in the original text if Shiphrah and Puah are Egyptians who help the Hebrews with childbirth or if they are Hebrew themselves. But what is clear in the story is that they also fear something. They fear God. The passage says, "But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live."

In "holy defiance" they help deliver every child safely. When the tyrant Pharoah summons the midwives to him to explain why the male children are not being killed, the midwives lie to his face. They say that the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, and they give birth before the midwives can even get there.

Riley says of this holy defiance by the midwives, "Perhaps to fear God is to refuse to submit to the demagogues of this world, to refuse to grant them the power they crave, and to place our waiting in the hand of God, who won't manipulate and wield our fears against us but will hold them in tenderness."

Fear, when related to God, is something else altogether from the fear that drives tyrants. Perhaps you have heard the phrase, "God-fearing Christian." Many Christians will talk about the necessity to fear God. It comes from scriptures passages in the Old Testament that says things

like, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Proverbs 1:7).”

However, while many bible translations use the word fear, the word “yara” can, according to many biblical scholars be translated as “awe” or “revere.” So, an equally good translation of a verse might say that “Reverence to God is the beginning of wisdom.”ⁱⁱ

When we use the word fear over the word reverence, it makes it seem like we better fear God because if we mess up, God will come after us. So, we should cower and cringe because God is out to get us. And when we live in fear, we see from our story today that fear spreads. If we think of God as a tyrant whom we must fear, it isn’t long before this fear has spread from fearing God to fearing other people. Particularly people who are not like us. You know, those people. And if we are fearing those people, how on earth are we to love them?

I find it fascinating and lovely that whenever a messenger of God, an angel, shows up with some news that one of the first things they say to the person receiving the message is, “Do not fear.” About the opening words, “do not fear” Cole Arthur Riley writes, “some have interpreted this as an indictment on those who are afraid, as if to say fear signifies a less robust faith.... God is not criticizing us for being afraid in a world haunted by so many terrors and traumas. I hear *Don't be afraid* and hope that it is not a command not to fear but rather the nurturing voice of God drawing near to our trembling. I hear those words and imagine God in all tenderness cradling her creation against her breast.”

God knows fear. God experienced fear. Would we criticize Jesus, in the face of immanent, for weeping and pleading through a sleepless night in the garden to let this cup pass from him? If God has been afraid, surely God holds are own fears tenderly and does not critique our fears.

There are times when a little bit of fear is healthy. There is that still small voice that warns us of impending danger. Fear can heighten our senses, steady our impulses, and alert us to potential harm. To be human is to be vulnerable and healthy fear can guide us in protective ways. But if fear drives our very being, drives our primary narratives, if it becomes the source of all of our decision making and how we view the world, then it stops being healthy. It becomes consuming and then, as we see in our story from today, consumes.

But if our primary driver is love, if we are rooted in love, that is the counter to fear, even in the face of would-be Pharaohs. Even in the face of danger. 1 John 4:18 says, “there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.”

I recently heard a story on the Moth radio hour told by a dad who went hiking with his 8-year-old daughter.ⁱⁱⁱ It was their first-time hiking in the mountain of New Hampshire and without realizing it, the father had picked a difficult path up and down a mountain. He recounts his mounting fear as they progress on the hike and as the weather turns and as the darkness starts to come. He, of course, did not tell his daughter he was scared; that he feared they may be lost and stuck on the mountain. He did not tell her of his fear of hypothermia and wild animals. While they were hiking, the daughter, about halfway into the hike, began telling herself a story. When they made it out of the path and back to the safety of their car, the dad asked his daughter what her story was about. She replied, “Oh, that was nothing. I was just really scared we were lost and telling the story was the only way I could keep from crying.” He hugged his daughter and apologized for putting her in a situation where she didn’t feel safe, and she said, “It’s ok. I know you didn’t do it on purpose, and I could tell you were scared too.”

Perhaps Shiphrah and Puah were able to face the fear of a tyrant because they had one another, because they lived from a place of reverence of God and love for the other. Riley writes, “we stave off fear in its most dangerous forms when we allow our agony to be held safely by a number of others.”

It is not foolish to fear. How could we not? We have seen what the Pharaoh’s can do in this world. It can even be healthy to fear. But we need not fear alone. We can hold one another’s trembling hand along the way. It’s ok, because I can tell you are scared too. Do not fear. Amen.

ⁱ Cole Arthur Riley, “This Here Flesh,” chapter 7.

ⁱⁱ See for example, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/teachingnonviolentatonement/2018/11/3-reasons-why-you-should-not-be-a-god-fearing-christian/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://themoth.org/radio-hour/kids-leading>