

“A New King over Egypt” / Exodus 1:8-22 / 24 August 2014

Fear, fear, there's fear written all over this text from Exodus. You've got pharaoh's fear of these strangers in his land, these foreigners. You've got the midwives' fear of the pharaoh, but also their so-called “fear of God,” which prevents them from carrying out the king's command to kill the male Hebrew babies. You've got the unspoken fear of the Hebrews for the tyrant who has it in for them. Fear! So many of the stories in our sacred book are set against a grim backdrop of absolute terror. And yet, even in an age of uncertainty and fear, two humble midwives find it in their hearts to do the right thing, and that's really what the story is all about. Two powerless midwives put aside their fears in order to act on their compassion; isn't that what faith is largely about? In an age fraught with fear, those who manage to live for something other than their fears, something nobler, they turn out to be the unexpected heroes of the story.

My wife has a friend who holds a PhD in psychology. I like him, and I respect him despite the fact that he is perhaps the last of the true Freudians. The first time he ever came to visit us at our home in South Fayette, this fellow admitted that he would be afraid to spend a night in our house. It's odd. To him it looks like a choice location for supernatural occurrences—even though he doesn't believe in such things. Fears don't have to make sense. Fears just are. If people keep telling us our house looks haunted, I might actually have to give in and mow the yard...or cut down the dead tree out front. I spent a few nights home alone when Michelle was away at a conference and the kids were staying with grandpa. And though I absolutely do not believe in ghosts, and I'm not at all afraid of old buildings—in fact I prefer them—I admit that being alone there really did amplify the nighttime noises. It was the merely power of suggestion. It didn't help that I got bored all alone and watched a cheap horror film on Netflix before going to bed. When we don't have anything real to fear, very often we fill that void by making things. It's as if fear is so hardwired into the most primal, reptilian quadrant of our brains that when our fears don't have a reasonable object, we're left with the task of creating one.

People will always have their objects of fear—whether real or imagined. What era of human history has ever been without its fears? If you grew up in the 60s, 70s, or 80s, you remember nuclear war drills where an alarm went off at school, and all the students had to practice taking shelter beneath their desks. Back in those days, people lived with a looming sense of dread that all the world could come crashing down at any moment, whenever someone decided to push the proverbial button. Most people at most times in history have lived with the real fears of war, and epidemic, and crop failure. Most people at most times throughout all history have lived with the fear of diseases, and droughts, and plagues of locusts. And in addition to all these concrete and justifiable fears, they added their fears of the unknown and the unknowable, for down through the centuries, most people have believed in supernatural fears, too. There were ghosts to be feared, and mythological creatures. There were boogymen, and devils, and things that go bump in the night. And most people down through the ages feared their gods, too. A deity had to be placated. A deity had to be appeased and won over. A god was a thing of power, who made lightning when he was angry. Not only were there real and identifiable threats to health and well-being and life itself, but a god too was a thing to be feared.

The fears that creep across the heart and mind in the course of a single day are uncanny—some unwarranted and others justifiable. “There's a guy in the car behind me who's been back there for about six miles. Is he following me? I check the stove at least three times before leaving the house, but I wonder if I turned off the stove today.” Each time I put my kids on the bus, I close the front door and a nagging little question tugs at my soul: Have I given them what they need for life out there in that big world, that scary world, the world to which I just handed them over? What about the future that I cannot control, with all its potential from crime, and calamity, and illness? We, all of us cope with daily fears. And if we allow them, they will govern our lives and makes us their poorly paid servants...perhaps even their slaves, like those fear-filled Hebrews under the yoke of pharaoh's bondage down in Egypt.

I like the way today's reading from the Book of Exodus begins. It says, “Now a new king arose

over Egypt, one who did not know Joseph.” I like that beginning because it illustrates very clearly where most of our fears come from: they come from the not knowing. When we don't know others and aren't willing to be in relationship with them, then of course suspicions will arise. And because pharaoh didn't know Joseph, the long-ago Hebrew who had risen to such prominence in ages past, he had no affection for all these Hebrews living in his land, speaking their foreign language, worshipping their one God—an invisible God with lots of rules but no face. This is actually the first place in the Scriptures where the word “Hebrew” is used, and all the word means is “the others.” Who are these foreigners, these others? What are they doing here? Will they overrun us, outnumber us, take our jobs, marginalize us in our own country? I'm afraid of the security threat that they pose; I'm afraid of their very otherness. We've got to get them—these “others”—before they get us! Pharaoh is afraid, and fear doesn't mix well with power, and so he spreads his fear by engaging in acts of terror. He commands the midwives to allow only female children to live, so that in time these others will disappear from his land. Now, everyone was afraid of Pharaoh. Wasn't he a god himself, the very incarnation of the Egyptian Sun God, Ra? He surely looked like a god, sitting high on his lofty throne, in his shiny, gold, cobra-shaped hat. But this powerful man is afraid, and the powerless midwives are afraid. Soon, all the hapless Hebrews will be afraid.

Aren't most of the world's injustices born of the fear of the other, the one we do not know or understand? Isn't that what apartheid was, and slavery, and the Holocaust? Isn't that what the wars of religion always are? And the smallpox-contaminated blankets sent to the Indians surrounding Fort Pitt—the world's first instance of biological warfare, enacted right here in Pittsburgh in the 1760s? And into this cycle of alienation, and not knowing, into this reign of terror—into all this senseless fear—someone must step forward to act with courage. Someone must defy his or her fears in order to do the right thing. That is what the powerless midwives do; they defy pharaoh's orders and let the male children live. In a world of fears, faith lives not for fear, but for compassion.

And you, what are you afraid of? What fears gather around your bed like half forgotten memories in the silent moments before sleep? What fears, whether real or imagined, crowd around you like the ghosts of everything that ought not to be? What fears keep you paralyzed, immobilized with the not-knowing? Fears for the future, fears of the unknown, fears of “the other.” What fears would prompt you to strike out at the other before the other strikes at you? Your fears would bid you turn a blind eye to injustice, to play it safe, to disobey your own conscience and instead obey the powerful of our age. Oh, the fears that keep us from doing the right thing in our lives and in our world! Fears will enslave us if we let them. I daresay, most of the world is enslaved by fear. But faith calls us to defy our fears and do the right thing in spite of them.

Admit it: The best things you've ever done in this life, the most meaningful, the most fulfilling, the most rewarding, all these things came attached to a big old bundle of fears that had to be ignored in order to get to the good stuff. There is no joy in this life without facing fears. Going into a new job is scary. Getting married is scary. Having kids is the scariest thing yet so far in my life. Committing time and money to a good cause, to a church, these things are scary, for we know that they will cost us, and we don't know how much. But there are scarier things. Speaking out when everyone around us is willing to collude with the forces of greed and injustice: that's scary! All the mission ventures that this relatively small church has undertaken, each of them was plenty scary at first. Just yesterday, at the church picnic, I met a couple from Bosnia that this church brought to safety in the US in the 1990s. You set them up in a home, got them on their feet, even gave them free dental care. Was that not a classic example of taking in “the other,” the one who can never pay you back? But I'm sure it felt risky at the time. You can cower with fear and allow the powerful forces of this world to have their way. If you do, you will know in your heart that you backed down when it really mattered, and you'll live with that secret shame. Or you can follow the way of Jesus, which always, always leads to a cross, and take satisfaction in the knowledge that—though it might have cost you—you defied your fears and did what needed to be done. Into every life there comes a silent moment when we ask ourselves, “Will I live for

my fears, or will I invest my life in compassion?”

Shiphrah and Puah, those midwives in the Book of Exodus, they're not very likely heroes in the narrative of faith. But who is a likely hero, really? Are there heroes, or are there just regular midwives, and housewives, and working people, and professional people, and retired folks, and even children who hear the commands of fear, that ancient pharaoh, but instead obey the voice of faith? Was André Trocmé a likely hero, the French Protestant minister who hid dozens of Jewish children in his home, right under the noses of the Nazi occupiers of France? He was obscure before his act of bravery, and he remains obscure still today. Was Nicholas Winton a likely hero, the elderly Englishman whose wife accidentally found his journals in the attic in 1988, only to discover that her own mild-mannered husband, during the war, had smuggled 669 Jewish children to safety? What had begun for him as a ski trip to Central Europe in 1938 turned out to be one of the least-known rescue operations of the Holocaust. He never said a word about it to anyone, but in the late 80s, his wife tricked him into going onto a British talk show, where he was reunited with many of the children whose lives he saved. All he could do was shake his head and wipe back tears. The courage of Shiphrah and Puah is the courage to live for things that matter. It exists in all of us, but it must be claimed. In the end, even the most fearsome stories turn out not to be about the fears themselves but about the people who faced them and did what was right.

Truly, fear is at the heart of all evil, for fear causes us to grasp for control that is not ours. Let me ask you this: What if our worst fears are realized? What if there are wars for religion or for water? What if there's an epidemic? What if foreigners do overrun our land? What if there's not enough for everybody? I'll tell you “what if,” for all these things have happened before in the history of our world. It's all been done before. If any of those things happen—even if there's another ice age—some will panic and live mean existences according to their fears. They'll turn selfish and cause great suffering, and in the end they will be reclaimed by the calm eternity from which we all come. Others will draw upon the deep resources of their faith—or at least their hope, if they don't have faith, or their community—and even amid a fearful age, they will live for compassion, for mercy, for justice and for the acts of generosity and kindness that they know are right. And in the end, they will return to the calm eternity from which we all come. Life must be lived for the good things that ought to be, not for all the fearful things that could be.

Oh, Pharaoh was afraid, and he spread his fear around. And now, strangely enough, there are bands of children standing on our southern border, representing the ever-present “other.” Putting aside all the political arguments, let's just think about the humanitarian crisis of it. Fear or compassion? In Ferguson, Missouri, and all the many places in this country that could erupt just as quickly. Fear or compassion? There are huge swaths of our own city, blocks and blocks, locked tight in the deadening cycles of poor education, street gangs, drugs, and generational poverty. Fear or compassion? There are inmates on death row who ought to be in mental hospitals; we have so-called enemies who are really just desperate people living without hope. Fear tells us to get them before they get us; faith tells us to defy our fear. Fear or compassion? There are all manner of dire threats in our private and public lives. In the end, it doesn't even matter what the fear is. How we lived in the face of those fears, that's what matters. Humanity has always lived with fears and always will. Every age has had its fears, as had every individual. The object of those fears isn't really all that important or even all that different. What matters is whether you allow them to enslave you, or whether you face them with all the resources of faith. In an age fraught with fear, those who manage to live for something other than their fears, something nobler, they turn out to be the unexpected heroes of the story. Amen.