

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Exodus 1:8-22

SERMON TITLE: “When Joseph is Known No More”

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. In the space of this one sentence, 12 little words, a profound and ominous shift is signaled in the status of the Hebrew people in Egypt.

You may remember the story of Joseph. His father, Jacob, loved him. His brothers despised him and sold him into slavery. Joseph ended up in Egypt where he became the second most powerful man in the empire after Pharaoh.

When famine struck, Joseph’s family relocated to Egypt. There was an uneasy reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers, but Joseph saw to it that his family prospered in Egypt. And Joseph’s brilliant administration saw Egypt through the famine. Joseph thus became a revered figure in Egypt and the alien Hebrew people were accommodated in the empire and they multiplied.

But then this new Pharaoh who did not know Joseph came to power. He saw the Hebrew people as potential enemies—as a threat to the empire—so he sought to suppress them. He took preemptive actions to save Egypt from a potential national security threat.

First, Pharaoh ordered the enslavement of the Hebrew people, but this did not stop their multiplication. Next, he ordered two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill every newborn male Hebrew child, but the midwives feared God more than Pharaoh, so they thwarted the king’s plans. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people to throw every boy born to the Hebrews into the Nile. We would call this today genocide.

Now it seems to me that the experience of the Hebrews in Egypt has something to say to the church in 21st century America. Now obviously, no one is threatening to make Christians slaves in America, at least not in the sense that the Hebrew people were enslaved, and no one is

threatening to kill our male children, but we do know something of what it's like to live in a time of change in which a culture once perceived by many as friendly and accommodating to Christianity, is giving way to a culture much more indifferent to Christianity.

Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon wrote of this cultural change in a book entitled *Resident Aliens*. One of them recalled an evening in 1963 in Greenville, South Carolina when the world shifted. The Fox Theater defied the state's time-honored blue laws and opened on Sunday. Seven youth from the local Methodist Church skipped MYF that night to see a John Wayne movie at the Fox.

According to the authors: *On that night, Greenville, South Carolina—the last pocket of resistance to secularity in the Western world—served notice that it would no longer be a prop for the church. . . . The Fox Theater went head to head with the church over who would provide the world view for the young. That night in 1963, the Fox Theater won the opening skirmish.*

Hauerwas and Willimon then made this observation: *You see, our parents had never worried about whether we would grow up Christian. The church was the only show in town. On Sundays, the town closed down. One could not even buy a gallon of gas. There was a traffic jam on Sunday mornings at 9:45, when all went to their respective Sunday Schools. By overlooking much that was wrong in the world—it was a racially segregated world, remember—people saw a world that looked good and right.... Church, home, and state formed a national consortium that worked together to instill “Christian values.”*

A few years ago, the two of us awoke and realized that, whether or not our parents were justified in believing this about the world and the Christian faith, nobody believed it today. At least, almost nobody. Whether we are with Pentecostals, Catholics, Lutherans, or United Methodists, we meet few young parents, college students, or auto mechanics who believe that

*one becomes Christian today by simply breathing the air and drinking the water in the generous, hospitable environment of Christendom America....All sorts of Christians are waking up and realizing that it is no longer "our world"—if it ever was."*¹

So what are we to do now that Joseph is known no more? I would suggest that we follow the example of two midwives named Shiphrah and Puah. You see, when Pharaoh said, *Make bricks*, most of the Hebrews started to make bricks. When Pharaoh said, *Build cities*, most of the Hebrews built cities. They thus became Pharaoh's slaves. But when Pharaoh ordered the two midwives to kill the male Hebrew children as they were being born, the midwives refused Pharaoh because they feared God.

Now it seems to me that we have a lot to learn from these two Hebrew midwives about how to say *yes* to God and *no* to Pharaoh in a time when Joseph is not known anymore. After all, as Christians, we're called to seek first the kingdom of God, not Pharaoh's dream, or the American dream, but God's dream. For us, Jesus is Lord and not Pharaoh.

And this can be a costly proposition because the more we say *yes* to God and *no* to Pharaoh in this day and age, the more the people of this culture are likely to feel threatened—and people will think us weird—and people will treat us as outsiders and troublemakers.

Now Jesus told us that it would be like this. Jesus said: *If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you...Remember the word that I said to you, "Servants are not greater than their master." If they persecuted me, they will persecute you.*² This is what we can expect when we follow the example of Shiphrah and Puah and say *yes* to God and *no* to Pharaoh; this is what we can expect when we follow Jesus

¹ Hauerwas, Stanly and Willimon, William H. *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1991, 15-17.

² John 15:18, 20, NRSV.

Will Willimon tells this story of a young Christian woman at Duke University struggling to live the faith of the midwives. He writes: *I have just had an interesting conversation with a college Sophomore. She came here to the university wanting to make friends, desiring to fit in, hoping to do well. Yet she soon discovered that fitting in, doing well, often carried a high price here. There were pressures put upon her, subtle pressures, good natured at first, all very friendly, nevertheless there were pressures, telling her that "People here do things this way," or "You need to lighten up, loosen up, and get with the program."*

She quickly realized that she could not afford simply to "go with the flow," passively drifting along with everyone else. She would have to spend more energy thinking through what she wanted out of life, who she wanted to be, what actions were right for her.

"At first," she confessed, "I was scared. Nobody wants to look odd, to be a killjoy, a self-righteous prig. But then I finally got the courage to say to myself, "This is me. This is the life I want. . . . I am learning the joy of being odd."³

My brothers and sisters, in a time when Joseph is remembered no more, what does it mean for us as the church to find joy in being odd by saying "yes" to God and "no" to Pharaoh?

³ Willimon, William H. "Sermon: The Joy of Not Fitting In." 22 Aug. 1993. 19 Aug. 1999 <<http://www.chapel.duke/sermons/082293.htm>>.