

“Dismantling Pharaoh’s Systems, One Brick at a Time”
Exodus 1:22 - 2:10
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Because of policies of Pharaoh, Hebrew boys were more at risk than their Egyptian counterparts. Like every social inequality, if you want to understand how this came to be, you have to go back a little bit and understand the history; understand how it is that one group of human beings became more feared than another group of human beings. None of our intra-human conflicts have always been conflicts. If you go back far enough, we’re all related. No Egyptians or Hebrews, no documented/undocumented, no people of color and white people. Just people who by twists of history notice differences that some begin to fear. That’s one way of looking at history. The other, more cynical way, is to notice Pharaoh’s bricks. Pharaoh had some building projects he wanted to accomplish. And here, right before him, was a people whose labor he could exploit by convincing fellow Egyptians that the Hebrews were a threat.

“Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we,” he said “Come, 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.” Whether the exploitation follows the fear or the fear follows the exploitation, neighbors are othered in the name of justice. “Us” and “them” - the language of Pharaoh’s tricks, turning one group of people in something other than normal, other than acceptable, other than benign. Task masters are set over them to extract their labor for profit. Public safety schemes are set up to monitor their behavior and keep them in line. A whole system built, brick-by-brick until the foundation of oppression is so solid that it seems to some like it’s always been that way, like it’s supposed to be that way.

The fear, of course, doesn’t originate with the Hebrews. There’s no account of any Hebrews conspiring to overthrow any Pharaohs before they were enslaved. The fear originates with those who are afraid of losing what they have to people they don’t fully know. This shouldn’t be a surprise to any of us at this moment in history. Hate, Howard Thurman, wrote, derives from proximity without fellowship.¹ Living close enough to people that you do not fully know, close enough to, you know, see that they eat differently from you, dress differently, speak differently, celebrate different rituals -

¹ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, quoted from memory.

close enough to see enough difference to give you fodder for making up stories about who they are, why they do this or do that, and what must be done to stop them.

Notice how the fear is projected back on the people who are being oppressed. The more ruthless the Egyptians are toward the Hebrews, the more their Egyptian fear seems to deepen, driving their violence to new levels, one horrific human feedback loop of horror, until Pharaoh chooses the ultimate control tactic. If we can't control them, we'll kill their male children - anyone who we believe could become a threat. That will keep them in line.

What's amazing is how this exodus story, written, (who knows, 2500 years ago?) seems to have predicted that old human cycle of fear & exploitation, leading to scapegoating, leading to violence - the bricks of Pharaoh's machine. And it's no accident that it's a text handed down by the Jewish people, who have had plenty of experience in observing that cycle from the standpoint of the exploited, oppressed ones, culminating, of course, in the Holocaust. Fear that leads to othering that leads to violence that culminates in death, always carried out by people who believe they are justified in their actions. And how many times now have we witnessed that cycle in human community beyond the Jewish people. Europeans driven by the pursuit of wealth, enslaving Africans and creating a whole system of fear that persists all the way to day of dog walking and bird watching in a NY park, or a police murder in Minneapolis or any city, to a restaurant rejection in Baltimore. Fear of the immigrant, the Iraqi, the Iranian, the Mexican, the Salvadoran. Fear and profit, that unholy alliance that leaves some more at risk than others in world where, we once began not as any of those labels - just as humans. Differences between us being, just that, differences.

On that pre-exodus day down at the river so many years ago, the mother of Moses didn't have the luxury of staying at this 30,000 foot view of history. She finds herself down in the bullrushes, the muddy banks of the river forced to do what she can with the hand of history that had been dealt to her. In many ways, it's the same for us. You can understand the cradle to prison pipeline all you want, the legacy of Jim Crow, the slave trade and the colonialism that built it. You can understand all those forces from an intellectual distance - a privilege in itself, but sooner or later that system comes to meet you down at the river and you have to decide how am I going to act today? What choices am I going to make in the daylight hours that I've been granted? Whose life may be at stake as the result of my actions or lack of action?

That last question is what makes this story so hard and so relevant to us - we who preach the hope and possibility of a unified community. History meets us all differently, usually by no fault of our own. The mother of Moses did not choose for her Hebrew baby to be born into the time when a new Pharaoh had arisen over Egypt - one who wanted to kill her boy. And the bathing daughter of Pharaoh, a princess really, did not choose to find a helpless child in the water, under threat by the edict of her father's

house. The princess didn't choose her privilege anymore than the mother chose her oppression. But there they are, with decisions to make.

As a child I somehow imagined the scene of Moses floating down to Pharaoh's daughter as divine-inspired luck. But that's not right. This whole thing has been organized. The time of Pharaoh's daughter bathing at the river surely observed. The best place to float the basket down decided. The basket waterproofed and tested to make sure it is water tight. The baby's sister given a clear, assignment that she must have rehearsed again and again in all of her anxiety. Even so, for the mother of Moses it was a huge gamble - as big as they come. Floating her child down to the daughter of the oppressor. Giving her over into the hands of the house of Pharaoh. That's what mothers have to do in lands where they do not have sufficient power to change cultures that are hostile to their sorts of children: hope that the humanity of their oppressors has not been completely defaced by the virus of hate.

We don't know where Moses' father is while all this is happening. Had he already grieved the expected loss of his son, could he not bear to come to these waters that day, or was it too dangerous for a Hebrew man to be anywhere near the bathing daughter of Pharaoh?

These are all interesting questions, but what's got my attention this week is how Exodus invests all of its hope in the young people. Without Moses' big sister ready to roll up on Pharaoh's daughter at the perfectly precise time, there'd be no chance of Moses' mother nursing her own son. Without Pharaoh's daughter - more privilege that you could possibly imagine, willing to disobey her own father, take on this Hebrew child, effectively hiding him from the violence of her father, there would be no Moses. Despite the commandment to obey one's parents, sometimes the faithful thing to do is the opposite.

Two young people, conspire, from opposite sides of the system they were born into, to pull a helpless boy out of the waters. And without Moses, there's no exodus, no liberation. At least not the one that unfolded.

In other words, there's a role in this story for everyone. Whether you are at the height of privilege or barely scraping by. Whether you are the smartest person in the room, or think of yourself more as the person who watches history roll by like a stream. There is a role to play in the exodus. It's almost as if in the cooperation between Hebrew and Egyptian, daughter of the oppressor and daughter of the oppressed, God is hinting at the kind of unwinding of division that is still to come. The foreshadowing of the time when there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female in the words of Paul in Galatians. The Pentecostal time when differences are not overcome, they are held, respected, known, cherished, not as barriers to our humanity but as revelations of God's majesty, God's sublimeness.

There is no way to do that work at 30,000 feet. It has to be down in the trenches, in the neighborhoods where we live, the schools where we attend or send our children, the places where we shop, the social media apps that we use, the relationships that we encounter, the family members that we engage. If we want to be more than just a victim on the one hand, or just an oppressor on the other, then we've got to engage the racism of America in the center of our own lives, the centers of our own stories.

Bill and Shanna Janu don't have the luxury of the 30,000 foot few either. He's a white sergeant in the Baltimore Police Department. She's a Black attorney at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. They have two children and like most parents they worry over how to keep them safe and they struggle together to define how to do their part to make the world safer for their children and others. Maybe you saw their story in the Sun paper.

They are not of the same mind when it comes to how they see the world, or what must be done to make it safer for Black children. But in the words of the Sun "with shared curiosity and respect for each other's open minds, they've built a loving relationship across the divides that seem unbridgeable to many Americans."² "Shared curiosity" and "respect for each other's open minds." That may be the only way we can take all the potential power that has been brewing in the streets of America, and translate into the concrete reforms, the particular policies, and changes that we must have to move us toward that day when all Americans are truly free. Not free from the responsibility of wearing masks, not free from some disembodied boogeyman government, not free from each other. But free to love each other as God loves us and free to live in a world where justice is defined by our common accountability that that single standard.

You may have noticed that none of the women in this story are named. It's typical of the Bible, I'm sad to say. From 30,000 feet it reflects the same old patriarchy from ages ago, enshrined in the biblical texts. But in this particular story, I also find odd hope in the absence of their names. For one, Pharaoh also lacks a name. Pharaoh is just a title - like "monarch" - no name like "Ramses," dignified in the pages of scripture. It's like the text is saying, when you've seen one tyrant, you've seen them all. There is no particularity that needs to be remembered when it comes to leaders who destroy the common good. Let their names fall from the buildings they once built with other people's labor. You can erect monuments to hate while they are alive, but one, two, four or five generations later, they'll come tumbling down.

But when it comes to the absence of names for Moses' sister, or Pharaoh's daughter, it's the flip side of the same coin. It's like the text is saying, no one owns

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<https://www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/baltimore-city/bs-md-janu-interracial-couple-20200702-dyt2fnt5o-vh7nmust3eju2wq6a-story.html>

these roles. You, too, can be Moses' sister or Pharaoh's daughter. Not because your name has a chance of being remembered. That's Pharaoh's ownership way of thinking. You can be Moses' sister or Pharaoh's daughter because your actions are forever enshrined in the legacy that you leave to the next generation and the one after that. Remembered in the lives of people whose freedom you had a part in midwifing.

Let it be so for us whenever we risk ourselves down in the bullrushes, to further the liberation of our own families, our brothers and sisters who are being oppressed. Or whenever we take what privilege we have, however large or small, and use it to love, in public. There's a role in this story for everyone. I hope you find the role you were meant to play, becoming the person you were meant to become, unwinding ancient divisions, dismantling Pharaoh's systems, one brick at a time.