

*Exodus 1:8-2:10*  
*August 23, 2020 Sermon*  
*“Resistance Fighters”*  
*Randy Smith*

Growing up, I loved watching WWII movies, and TV programs, such as *Combat!* (1962-1967) with Vic Morrow as Sgt. Chip Saunders. I was in heaven when the movie, *The Longest Day* -- about the D-Day invasion -- came out in 1962. One of the most exciting parts of the war stories for me was the exploits of the **French Resistance**, men and women -- often teenagers -- who organized themselves as guerilla fighters and saboteurs against the Nazi **occupation** and were particularly helpful in the invasion of Normandy, in June 1945. Tens of thousands French men and women died on account of their efforts. Nevertheless, they **resisted**.

They resisted **violently**, of course. Many others resisted -- facing the same danger -- but **non-violently**. One of the most powerful stories of this kind of resistance involved the small town of **Le Chambon-sur-Lignon**, in south-central France. During World War II, the residents of this town -- which was under the control of the Vichy government (the part of France which had surrendered to the Nazis) -- made it a haven for Jews fleeing from the Nazis, helping them get to neutral Switzerland. Under the remarkable leadership of their Protestant (Huguenot) pastor, **André Trocmé**, the people willingly rescued some 3,000-5,000 Jews from certain death, despite the fact that it cost some of them their lives at the hands of the Nazis.

It is **their story** which **aligns** most closely with the story we read this morning from the early chapters in the Book of Exodus. The Hebrew people -- the descendants of Jacob's family which had migrated, with **Joseph's** help, from Palestine to Egypt in time of famine -- find themselves in this era under a similar -- and similarly cruel -- "occupation", namely that of the **new** Egyptian Pharaoh. It's interesting to see how Pharaoh -- *even as an absolute ruler*, holding the power of life and death over all his subjects -- is at the same time the most *anxious* and *insecure* character in the story.

It is out of that anxiety and insecurity that he adopts an ever tougher "**law and order**" **stance** toward these Hebrew *immigrants* who, it seems, are significantly outpacing the native Egyptians in terms of **population growth** (not unlike, by the way, the anxiety that a number of people have over the demographic projection that, by around 2045, **non-white** people will be in the **majority** in the U.S.). This is what the Pharaohs of the world *always* do when they feel **threatened**, namely, *ramp up* their **violence**, *amplify* their **cruelty**, and so *magnify* their **injustice**.

And when they do this, of course, the **easiest** thing to do is not to resist, but rather allow them to **put** you, and **keep** you, under the **crushing pressure** of their **iron fist**. But there is *another* -- at this point all but *invisible* -- actor in this story, other than Pharaoh, and it is God, the God of the Hebrews' ancestors. This God won't make a "grand entrance" into the story of the book of Exodus until c. 3 (the story of the burning bush). But this God *is* present *already*, and is stirring up **resistance**.

**First** of all, in the hearts of two lowly women, who would have *otherwise* certainly remained **unnamed forever** in the annals of human history. Choosing to stand against the oppressive power of the whole Egyptian empire, two of the Hebrew midwives -- **Shiphrah** (whose name means "beautiful") and **Puah** ("fragrant flower") -- **disobey** Pharaoh's orders to kill all male children at birth. We are told they "**fear God**", which means they have a deep **reverence above all else** for what God wants for human life. But they are also **super shrewd**.

Such that even when summoned before Pharaoh himself -- likely thinking there is a good chance they will be put to death -- they have a story to tell in their defense -- about how the **Hebrew** women who -- *in contrast to* the more "refined" *Egyptian* women -- deliver their babies so fast that they cannot get to them in time to carry out Pharaoh's orders! It's a **perfect** story because it uses their oppressor's natural sense of superiority *against* him. And it means that Shiphrah and Puah live to fight -- *viz.*, to **resist** -- another day.

But then Pharaoh -- still convinced that with ever greater violence he will eventually get what he wants -- orders that, *whenever and however* those Hebrew baby boys come, they are then to be **drowned** in the Nile. Taking this step, however, not only *increases* the determination of the Hebrew women -- including now the mother, and sister, of Moses -- to resist, and defy Pharaoh's evil, but inclines one of Pharaoh's own **daughters** (and her maid) to do likewise. Pharaoh's daughter didn't, of course, "fear God". But, even when she realized it was a *Hebrew* baby boy in the floating basket, she "took **pity** on him". A natural compassion welled up within her. She **heard his cry** (cf. Ex. 3:7).

So Pharaoh's daughter -- just as did Shiphrah and Puah -- devises a plan to keep Moses alive, and finally to bring him into Pharaoh's palace, and raise him as her own son, as a "Prince of Egypt".

**We** tend -- don't we? -- to turn this into a "**good guys vs. bad guys**" story. The "good guys" are the *poor, disrespected* and horribly *mistreated* Hebrews, and the "bad guys" are Pharaoh and all his minions. **And** we, of course, **identify with** the "good guys", and celebrate even their small wins over the oppressive powers in their world. **But, what if that's actually not the right way to read and respond to this story?** Cf. the church member who complained to me, "You never preach what I expect to hear." And I was never able to persuade

him that's not only a *good* thing to experience by way of someone's preaching, but actually a *God*-thing.

Sam Wells, former Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, suggests that we read and respond to this story in a way different than you might have expected, namely that we understand that **we are** -- at least in our "**default**" state -- actually the **Egyptians**, and part of an "**empire**" -- *viz.*, *a way of life* organized in ways *not very different* than was Pharaoh's empire, a way of life which is, *by its very nature*, **oppressive**.

How do we *know* we are "Egyptians"? OT scholar, Walter Brueggemann, provides an analysis in his 2017 reflection on the 4th Commandment, a book entitled *Sabbath As Resistance* (p. xii):

"Sabbath [is] an *alternative* to the endless demands of economic reality, more specifically the demands of market ideology that depend, as Adam Smith had already seen, on the generation of needs and desires that will leave us endlessly "rest-less," inadequate, unfulfilled, and in **pursuit** of that which may [finally satisfy] desire. [This **pursuit** lead us into] a society of 24/7 multitasking in order to *achieve, accomplish, perform, and possess...*[a] system [which] **requires** that we *want more, have more, own more, use more, eat more, and drink more*. The [resulting] rat race...when pursued **vigorously enough**, moreover [*propels one*] to **violence against the neighbor** in eagerness for what properly **belongs to the neighbor.**"

Doesn't that sound like the way of life we were all born into, and carefully trained in? And people who are born into, and trained, and encouraged into *continuing* such an endless production-consumption way of life are -- yes -- "Egyptians" who are -- on account of being "Egyptians" -- unable to offer much in the way of **compassion** to all of the "Hebrews" of the world -- the *poor, disrespected, and mistreated* peoples of the world, whether across the border or across the street, those who are **different**, and whose *difference* presents, *not* an **opportunity for compassion** but rather **a threat**.

That's the **bad news** in this *ancient* -- and yet, o so *contemporary* -- story, that yes, we are the Egyptians. But there *is* also **good news**, which is, as Sam Wells puts it, that "There's **more than one way** to be an Egyptian." We can be Egyptians, but *still* be on God's side. We can find ways -- as did those Hebrew midwives, and Moses' mother and sister, and even Pharaoh's daughter and her maid -- to **subvert** the various -- un-Godly -- *forms, and systems* of oppression we've been *born* into, and so well *trained* into.

I would say that this is, in fact, **part and parcel of the Good News of God**, *whether* in the time of *Moses* or in our *own* time, as made known to us through Jesus. How many Christians, how much of Christ's Church, have simply **given up** and **given in**, to *Pharaoh's* way of running the world -- endless work, endless

worry, and most of the profits flowing to those at the top -- *accepting* it, *acquiescing* to it, as *inevitable*, as **irresistible**?

The point of these ancient stories, however, is that it doesn't take a *massive, revolutionary groundswell* to *resist* the system.

The **open secret**, about how we are to live as God's people in the world -- no matter the social or economic, or political shape of the world we live in -- is that we are, *first*, to "**fear God**" above all else. And what that looks like *in practice* is to **honor the compassion** for others God puts in our hearts (versus *denying*, or *suppressing* it). And the *second* is to then **do what we can** -- with *courage* and, yes, even with *cunning*. **This is what the "resistance fighters" in our story this morning all did: what they could.** The relatively *powerless* (Shiphrah and Puah) relied *mainly* on **courage and cunning**. The relatively *more powerful* one (Pharaoh's daughter) could *also* do that, and *more*: she could **leverage her privilege** to save the child.

The **big takeaway**, then, for you and me, who are the Church -- *given* just how *privileged*, and so *powerful* most of us truly are -- is that **we are called to leverage that privilege and power to do what we can, to influence the world around us toward being a way of life founded, above all else, on what God desires, and guided by the compassion of God toward ever greater justice.**

And the time for us to do this **may be running short**. As a *younger adult member* of a former congregation posted on my Facebook page yesterday:

"[My wife] and I have been having a conversation about [politics in the church]. Our take is that equality, justice, love for your neighbor, recognizing discrimination and economic fairness are all values taught by Christ [and] we both feel the United Methodist Church (and many others) have **abdicated their role in advocating** for these causes, **all in a failed attempt to not be branded as "political"**. *Appeasement* of the current members may also play a role. Sadly, I believe the capital C "church" has lost their way by their failure to address these **real issues**, and [that] **the damage may be permanent.**"

That last phrase -- "the damage may be permanent" -- struck me **really hard**. Which is why I share their perspective with you today, at the close of this sermon, so that it will **strike you hard** -- but, hopefully, in a *challenging*, and eventually faithfully *fruitful* way -- as well.