

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
Woodhaven Presbyterian Church
August 24, 2008
Exodus 1:8-2:10

YES and NO

“Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.”

If our Bible came with a soundtrack, this is a moment when we would hear an ominous musical score playing underneath the words. “Now, a new king arose over Egypt and this king did not know Joseph.”

It was bad news for the Israelites that a new king was coming into power who did not know of Joseph or his legacy. For years, even though he was not an Egyptian, Joseph had been second in command in Egypt. According to Genesis 41, the Egyptians had come to know Joseph as one who was wise, discerning and filled with the Spirit of God. Joseph spent years cultivating the Pharaoh’s trust. And it had paid off. He was just one step below the Pharaoh in terms of influence and power. So, during the years of famine and after their reconciliation, Joseph brought his father, brothers and their families into Egypt where they settled. Because of Joseph, their man so close to the center, the Israelites in Egypt had a certain status, a certain favor, and a certain amount of power.

And as a result, even though the Israelites came as immigrants, they had done well. They had flourished throughout the land. But then, Joseph died. And apparently, enough time and enough generations had passed between Joseph’s death and today’s story that Joseph’s legacy no longer held any influence on those in power. His legacy, never forgotten by the Israelites, had been completely forgotten by the Egyptians who lived in the palace. And now, a new king had come into power. A new king who had no idea who Joseph had been for his ancestors. A new king who only saw that these immigrant Israelites seemed to be taking over his land. A new king who felt just one thing about the Israelites—they were a threat.

Well, no one threatens the power of Pharaoh and lives to tell of it. Pharaoh decided to squash the Israelites’ spirits and bodies by forcing them into slavery. When the Israelites continued to flourish, he made their work harder. *Are they getting faster at making bricks?* Make them gather their own straw for the brickmaking. *Do they seem to have the stamina to last long hours out in the fields?* Ring that bell and wake them up before dawn. Then keep them out picking cotton on the plantation until long after the sun has setⁱ. *Do they still have a gleam of freedom shining in their eyes?* Command them to build the storehouses for Pharaoh so that they will be forced to see the way he keeps all of the food of their labor. Let their stomachs growl in hunger as they make Pharaoh’s storehouses bigger and bigger. *Do they still pray out loud to their God of the covenant and sing songs of their faith?* Make them sit in the balconies of the churches while the preacher preaches submission to the master as God’s will for their lives. Whatever it took, no matter how long or how inhumane, Pharaoh was determined to crush the Israelites’ spirits and bodies. No one threatens the Pharaoh and lives to tell of it.

But those Israelites were a lot tougher than he expected. No matter how hard the Pharaoh tried to crush their bodies with backbreaking work; no matter how hard the Pharaoh tried to crush their spirits with humiliation and degradation; no matter how hard the Pharaoh tried to keep the Israelites down; they kept on risingⁱⁱ. They kept on flourishing. They kept on having babies and having hope.

So Pharaoh got angrier and Pharaoh got personal. This Pharaoh, for whom we have no name, summoned two Israelite midwives, for whom we do have names, amazingly enough. Shiphrah and Puah were called into this Pharaoh’s presence and given the royal order to kill each Israelite baby boy as he was born. They did not need to worry about the girls, though, because Pharaoh decided a girl’s life wasn’t much use anyway. Especially a slave girl.

Now, I am not sure what kind of musical score we would hear during that dreadful scene when Shiphrah and Puah were given their marching orders. But I can almost guarantee that as those words came from Pharaoh's mouth, all the blood drained from their faces and their stomachs felt inhabited by hot coals. There was no way that they, midwives, those who helped to bring new life into the world, could ever contemplate snuffing it out just because a Pharaoh said so. They could not do it.

They knew their refusal would be risky, probably life and death risky. For they were fully aware of Pharaoh's power over them. They were reminded of Pharaoh's power every time one of their children was put up on the auction block. They were reminded of Pharaoh's power every time they were told not to look their taskmaster in the eyes. They were reminded of Pharaoh's power every time their husbands came home with a fresh wound from a whip on his back. They knew the Pharaoh had power over them and that to defy him might be to sign their own death certificates.

But they also knew, though, that the no-named, easily threatened, Joseph-forgetting Pharaoh did not own them. They belonged, body and soul, only to God-- to the God who had created them; who had called them to follow; who had made a covenant with them; who had promised to always be with them. Their Creator God was the only Power to whom they belonged. And no Pharaoh could ever take that identity from them. It would always rise.

So Shiphrah and Puah made a decision that would echo down from generation to generation, eventually giving birth to an entire nation of people. They made a decision to say a quiet but defiant "NO" to the death-dealing powers of the no-name Pharaoh. Grounded in their trust in the Creator God, the God of life, the two midwives made a quiet, faithful decision to defy the powers-that-be, no matter what happened to them as a result. With their actions, they said NO.

And the babies kept being born. And with those babies, the hope of the Israelite people kept being born. And with that hope, their determination to survive and thrive even in the face of the Pharaoh kept being born and renewed each day. And Pharaoh noticed. He noticed that his covert plans of death were not working. And he called Shiphrah and Puah back into his presence to ask them point-blank what was going on. And with wide-eyed innocent stares, with as much courage as they could muster, those two midwives told him that it was not their fault. The Israelite women were so strong and so vigorous that they would pop those babies out before the midwives even had a chance to get there. And well, once the babies were in their mother's arms, they could not very well carry out Pharaoh's plan without blowing his cover.

And the Pharaoh, who did not realize he had just been defeated by two lowly slave girls, went back to his drawing board. And when he came back with plan number three, he threw all caution to the wind and decided to not simply **control** the Israelite population, but to **eliminate** it altogether. He commanded all his people to go and take every baby Hebrew boy and throw him in the Nile. But he still thought they did not need to worry about the girls, for what use is a girl's life anyway, especially a slave girl. (*He did not learn very quickly, did he?*) And from that moment in Egypt, murder became national, public policy. And the death-dealing powers of the Pharaoh took center stage.

And yet, though he continued to exercise power over their bodies, Pharaoh still could not capture the Israelites' spirits. No matter how many babies were taken away; no matter how many mothers cried buckets of tears at the discovery they were pregnant; no matter how many fathers had to sit and watch as their families were turned upside down; the Israelite people, with their firm trust in the God who would deliver them, were not destroyed. They were not vanquished.

As Maya Angelou writes, "You may shoot me with your words, You may cut me with your eyes, You may kill me with your hatefulness, But still, like air, I'll rise." Even when their eyes were emptied of tears from too

many hours of crying, their hearts were still **not** emptied of hope from so many years of covenant promise. They kept on rising.

And in the middle of Pharaoh's death-dealing power, some other "NO's" were quietly uttered and acted. A quiet "NO" came from a newly married couple as they gave birth to a son and hid him away for as long as they could. A quiet "NO" came from the mother as she created an ark for him, a basket, to try and keep him safe on those chaotic waters of the Nile. A quiet "NO" came from the sister as she sat, hidden, watching her baby brother as he waited for his deliverance. And a not-so-quiet "NO" came from the Pharaoh's own house as his daughter found that baby, had compassion on him, and decided to draw him out of the waters that had become the grave of far too many others. And when she took that child into her house, into the literal center of Pharaoh's death-dealing power, she said "NO" again and made him family, naming him Moses. And her "NO," like the "NO" of Shiphrah and Puah, would echo down the generations, eventually leading to liberation, to freedom.

And it all happened because the people **had more trust** in the God of the covenant, than they **had fear** of the power of Pharaoh, and they said "NO." All of it happened because the people of the covenant made small, faithful decisions to quietly defy the powers of Pharaoh. Decisions to quietly defy the powers that deal only in death, in division, or in fear. For the Israelites may have been at the bottom of society's power structure, but they were certainly **not powerless**, were they. Every time they said "NO" to the powers of fear, "NO" to the powers of anxiety, "NO" to the powers of division and hate, "NO" to the powers of the death-dealing Pharaoh; every time they said "NO" to those powers, they said "YES" to God. Every time they said "NO" to the ownership of the no-name Pharaoh, they said "YES" to the One to whom they belonged.

And it was the power of the midwives' YES that gave them the courage to keep dealing in life. It was the power of Pharaoh's daughter's YES to Moses that led to his calling and to our liberation. It was the power of Israel's YES to freedom that led to their wilderness survival. It was the power of Mary and Joseph's YES to the Angel that opened the door for God's surprising plan of incarnation. It was the power of Jesus' YES in the baptismal waters of the Jordan that led to his full embrace of just who he was and what he was called to do.

It was the power of the YES to Jesus' invitation to follow uttered by Peter and James and John and the countless, nameless women whose lives **did** matter, that led to the formation of that first group of disciples. And it was the power of the YES of a crucified Messiah who was willing to first say NO to retribution and violence that led to the death of Death at the cross and in the empty tomb.

Sisters and brothers, it matters where and when we say NO to the death-dealing power of the no-name Pharaoh, and YES to the life-giving power of our covenant-making God. Not because God can't be God without us. God will still get the job of mercy and salvation done, whether we decide to participate in God's work or not. But clearly, from this story alone, God prefers to work in and through us as **conspirators of mercy**ⁱⁱⁱ in this world.

And our NOs and our YESs have a tremendous effect on our own lives, and on the lives of so many others whose names we do not even know. It matters where and when we follow in the footsteps of the midwives. Perhaps we should commit their names, Shiphrah and Puah, to memory so we might never forget the power contained in a quiet, faithful NO.

Because the way we live out our faith, the ways we say yes and no with our own lives, will also echo down from generation to generation.

ⁱ I was heavily influenced by some of my reading into the lives of slaves in this country. You will see and hear that influence running throughout the sermon.

ⁱⁱ The language of "rise" is directly influenced by a poem of Maya Angelou's entitled "Still I Rise." I quote directly from it later in the sermon.

ⁱⁱⁱ A phrase used on the Lectonary Homiletics website, www.goodpreacher.com