

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO CHANGE THE WORLD?

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The Rev. Dr. Howard Chapman
First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa
Text: Exodus 1:8-2:10

SCRIPTURE

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. 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." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

The Word of the Lord...

Thanks be to God!

SERMON

Michael Leunig is a cartoonist, writer, thinker and poet. He is very well known in his own country of Australia, but not so much here in the U.S. I confess that I had never heard of him until a couple of months ago, when I encountered one of his poems entitled "Love and Fear." It goes like this:

There are only two feelings, Love and fear:
There are only two languages, Love and fear:
There are only two activities, Love and fear:
There are only two motives, two procedures,
two frameworks, two results, Love and fear,
Love and fear.

Now, Michael Leunig is not by any means a religious writer, and yet he touches on something that is at the very core of our faith. In 1 John 4:8 it says, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear...” For the followers of Jesus Christ, for those who are striving for God’s Beloved Community, the opposite of love is not hate. The opposite of love is fear.

“There are only two languages, Love and fear: There are only two activities, Love and fear...” Our text for this morning is the epitome of what Michael Leunig is talking about. It is all about this tension between the two opposites of love and fear. The opening sentence kicks it off for us, “Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” You can tell right away that this is not going to be good.

Last Tuesday evening, our session met and the elder who was giving the closing prayer asked God to guide us “in this crazy world!” I don’t know if it is just because I am getting older, or because I am now a grandfather, or what it is, but almost every day I find myself thinking that it is indeed a crazy world we live in. Does anyone else ever feel that way? Not crazy in a fun, silly way, but crazy in a frightening, unpredictable way. But then again, I can remember when I was a kid hearing my grandfather complaining vehemently that things were not the way they used to be. I suppose back 40 or 50 years ago, he too thought it was a crazy world. So I am willing to admit that while things seem crazy now, perhaps it always seems that way to those who have lived through five or more decades. It must have seemed that way four thousand years ago, when the events of our story took place.

There arose a king who did not know Joseph. Of course this was possibly hundreds of years after Joseph. There arose a king who did not remember what Joseph had done to save the Egyptian Empire. All this king could see was a minority ethnic group, a race of outsiders, a bunch of refugees or immigrants that were a threat to him and his power. There are only two languages, love and fear. This king spoke the language of fear. For generations, the Israelites and the Egyptians had lived side by side in the same communities. They worked together out in the fields. They shopped in the same markets. They drew water from the same wells. They washed their clothes in the same river. Their kids played together. But there arose a king who did not know Joseph and the world became crazy. In the language of fear this king said, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them...” We need to be careful, because they are not like us. They are dangerous. They want to destroy our way of life. They are out of control. They want our jobs. They are criminals. They are rapists. They are drug dealers. They are terrorists. We must stop them or we will be in serious trouble. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them. And the world got really crazy.

So the language of fear shifted to actions of fear, and the Israelites were forced into slave labor. But the thing about having your life controlled by fear is that it never ends. You will never feel safe enough. The fear will never go away. You have to keep doing more and more. Fear feeds upon fear and it says that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. Finally, the king’s paranoia turned against the most innocent of all, newborn babies. Cruel, slave labor was not enough to calm his fears. Babies had to die. That is about as crazy as it can get.

So how does God change a crazy world like this? God doesn’t use a general with an army. God doesn’t use a politician or a journalist or a scientist or even a preacher. God uses five persistent women and girls to save one little baby. But that baby grew up to deliver his people from slavery and turn everything around. What does it take to change the world? Our story tells us it takes two midwives, a mother, a princess and a babysitter. I want us to look at these women who were motivated by love rather than fear, and the things they did that changed their crazy world.

The first were the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. Isn’t it interesting that we know their names, but we do not know the name of the paranoid king? The text says that they feared God, but it is an entirely different word than the word that was used a few verses back when it said that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. To fear God is to respect God, to be in awe of God, to know the true nature of God, and can even be interpreted as

loving God. But however you interpret that phrase it is clear they loved babies. That love for babies far outweighed their fear of the king. So we have the first recorded instance of civil disobedience. It is clear from many stories in the Bible that if a law is sinful, you break the law. These midwives were not going to hide behind the excuse that they were just following orders to do something despicable. So what did they do? They used humor to defy the orders of the king. We have the first recorded instance of civil disobedience, but also the first case of political satire.

Last week, comedian and black activist, Dick Gregory died. He was very involved in the civil rights movement of the '60s. He was arrested, beaten up, even shot, but he was also a very funny man. One of his stories was that he went into a restaurant for lunch, and the waitress said to him, "We don't serve colored people in here." He replied, "That's okay. I really don't like to eat colored people. Bring me some fried chicken instead." Dick Gregory would find a kindred spirit in Shiphrah and Puah. They feed right into the king's paranoia with tongue planted firmly in cheek. "Yes, your Majesty, the Israelites are a strong race of people; stronger than you can imagine. Their women are not delicate like Egyptian women, not by a long shot. When it comes time to have their babies, they are so quick. It is over and done with even before we show up." These women are being sarcastic, of course, mocking the king's prejudice, laughing to themselves the whole time.

Have you noticed that whenever you see pictures of the white supremacists or the neo-Nazis you never see them smiling or laughing? When you speak the language of fear, when you are motivated by fear, when all you feel is fear, nothing is funny. On the other hand, have you noticed that to a couple falling in love, everything is funny? They smile and giggle and laugh all the time. Those who speak the language of love, who are motivated by love, are always laughing. We need to laugh. We need a strong sense of humor if we are going to change this crazy world.

The second of these persistent women is Jachebed, the mother of Moses. No one speaks the language of love stronger than a mother protecting her child. There is so much that could be said here, but let me focus on one subtle little detail that is easy to overlook. The text says that when she could no longer hide the baby, she made "papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch..." Now, that word translated "basket" is not quite accurate. It is an odd word that only appears one other place in the Hebrew Scriptures, and that is over in Genesis 6, 7 and 8. There we find God speaking to a man named Noah telling him to build an ark and to plaster it with bitumen and pitch. That is what Jachebed makes for her baby. She builds him an ark.

I will not deny that Jachebed must have been terrified and desperate, but she remembered a story. It was a story of a time when the world was as crazy as it could be and lots of people died. But God was with someone, and promised this someone that he and his family would survive. She loved that story and loved this promise keeping God. She didn't just make a basket. She made an ark, a means of salvation, a promise of hope. She trusted this God who provided for Noah to provide for her baby boy.

There are only two feelings, Love and fear: There are only two languages, Love and fear: There are only two activities, Love and fear: The love of her little child, and the love of God drowned out the language of fear for Jachebed. Nothing can stand up to love like that. That is what we need to change our crazy world.

The third persistent woman was an Egyptian, not an Israelite. She was wealthy, powerful and her father was the frightened king who was wreaking so much death and destruction. We have no idea what she thought of her father's policy towards the Israelites. She may have been in total agreement. She may have been vehemently opposed, or she may not have even cared. What is clear is that it was not the language of fear that lifted that baby out of the water and held him close. Her motivation was love, love for one particular child. But that love made all the difference.

What the princess did reminded me of a quote by Helen Keller. I am fairly certain I have used it in my sermons before, but it bears repeating. She said, "I am only one, but I am still one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something. And because I cannot do everything I will not refuse to do the something that I can do." The princess could not save all the Hebrew children, but she knew she could save this one. She could not do

everything, but she could still do something. We need to keep this in mind when we are facing those who know only the language and the motivation of fear. No, each of us on our own cannot end racism and hatred in this country. We cannot do everything, but we can do something. We cannot speak the language of love to every African American or Muslim or Latino in this country, but we can show respect, decency and love every single person we do encounter in our lives. When we combine the somethings that each of us can do, we can make a difference. We can change this crazy world.

So the last of these persistent women was a girl actually. We have no idea how old Miriam was. She may have only been 9 or 10. But she was the babysitter. Her job was fairly simple. Make sure the little ark didn't go astray. Make sure it didn't capsize or get sucked into some drainage ditch or float too far out into the river. That was all she was supposed to do. But like many of those who are young she saw things that perhaps the older ones in the story did not see. She was supposed to be quiet, stay out of the way and not mess things up, but she had ideas. She was creative. She saw a win-win opportunity. Did Her Majesty, the Princess, perhaps need a nanny for the child? Well, she might be able to find someone who could help out. She would be willing to look into the matter. No promises, mind you. But perhaps, just perhaps, there might be someone who could look after the boy, at least until he was potty trained. Her Majesty, didn't want to have to bother with all that, now did she?

It is indeed a crazy world out there, a world that at times I do not understand. I want to be able to fix things quickly, to make it all right, especially when I think about the young people out there, and especially when I think about my own granddaughters. But maybe the best thing I can do is to shut up and listen. There are many young people in this world, in our community, in this church, in our own families who are strong and creative and not intimidated in the least by those who speak the language of fear. They are not afraid of the paranoid kings of this world. They see win-win solutions all around and are dumbfounded that those of us with gray hair cannot understand what is happening right in front of us. They are the ones who will change this crazy world. It is a wonderful story, isn't it? A story of hope, a story of courage, a story of love.

These five women remind me of another woman, a teenage girl actually, that some two thousand years later would be asked to speak, act and be motivated by love. She shared the same name as the babysitter in our story, Miriam, or Mary as she is called in the Gospels. She was the mother of the One who truly changed the world forever. She had a lot in common with the women of our story. She must have had a sense of humor when she realized what she was asked to do. She certainly had a mother's love, as well as a strong faith. She also knew there was only so much she could do, yet she was more than willing to do what she could. And we know for certain that she was very creative. Why do I say that? Because she composed a beautiful song. We call it the *Magnificat*, and it is found in Luke 1:46-55. The next time this crazy world starts to get to you, look up Mary's song and read it again. We are going to sing a version of her song at the end of this service. It has become one of my favorite hymns. The third verse, in particular speaks to our story for this morning. Listen to how it goes:

From the halls of power to the fortress tower, not a stone will be left on stone.

Let the king beware for your justice tears every tyrant from his throne.

The hungry poor shall weep no more, for the food they can never earn;

There are tables spread; every mouth be fed, for the world is about to turn.

My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn.

Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn.

What does it take to change the world? It takes midwives and mothers and princesses and babysitters and very ordinary people like you and me who defy the paranoid kings of this world with the language of love. For God is always on the side of the weak rather than the strong. God is on the side of the powerless and not the powerful, on the side of the humble not the proud, the side of the oppressed and never the oppressor. God is always on the side of the poor, the abused, the slaves and the outcasts, and never on the side of the rich, the abusers, the masters and the insiders. Now, if that is too hard to figure out who is weak and who is oppressed and who is an outcast, here is a simpler way to think about it: God is always on the side of love and never on the side of fear. Let us keep that in mind, for the world is about to turn. Thank God for that. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.