

“God at Work” Ex. 1-2:10 July 1, 2012

On July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was approved by the Second Continental Congress, explaining why we declared independence from Great Britain. Many regard that moment as the birth of our nation, so we rightly celebrate the 4th of July this week. This summer, we will also be looking at the birth of another nation, the nation of Israel, as we journey together through the Old Testament book of Exodus.

Exodus continues the story that began in Genesis, where God made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants, promising that he would make a great nation of them and that all the world would be blessed through them. Abraham’s grandson, Jacob (also known as Israel), fathered twelve sons who became the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel.

As Genesis ends, these twelve sons, along with their wives and children, are living in Egypt, in the choice land of Goshen, because a horrible famine in the land of Canaan caused them to move there. Here’s the set-up.

These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: ²Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, ³Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, ⁴Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. ⁵The total number of people born to Jacob was seventy. Joseph was already in Egypt. ⁶Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation.

⁷But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

Notice that God is at work. God's people, the Hebrews, are aliens, defenseless immigrants in the land of Egypt. But God is still watching over them and they are prospering. But all is not well!

⁸ Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹He said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰Come, 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.' ¹¹Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. ¹²But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. ¹³The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, ¹⁴and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them. (Ex. 1:8-14)

There are some interesting national dynamics at work here, some of which have implications for our own nation as we celebrate the birth of our country this week. Notice how the Egyptian policy of oppressing the Hebrews came about. It was motivated by fear! Although the Egyptians were the most powerful nation in the world at that time, and although they

were armed to the teeth, they were somehow afraid of these poor, immigrant shepherds. There were two basic reasons for their fear. The first reason is very similar to the reasoning of the Southern states in our own country during the time of slavery. They feared that the slaves might escape and take the economic advantages of slavery with them!

But there was another fear, wasn't there? It had to do with national security. The Egyptians feared that another nation might attack them, and that the Hebrews would join with the attackers- a kind of fifth column. It is ironic, but fear drove the most powerful nation in the world to this brutal policy of oppression and forced labor.

It serves as a good reminder to us, the most powerful nation in the world today, that fear does not lead to good policy decisions for us, either. Wasn't it fear in the aftermath of 9-11 that drove us to war with Iraq? Wasn't it our fear that we weren't completely secure that caused us to misread the intelligence about alleged weapons of mass destruction? Didn't fear cause us to justify the use of torture? Did fear cause us to overlook the consequences of invading Iraq? The recruiting bonanza that the war brought to Al Quaida, our real enemy. The increase in power for Iran, a much greater threat to us than Iraq ever was. And the persecution of Christians in Iraq, over half of whom have had to flee the country since our invasion. Fear, and the desire for absolute national security, can push

any nation to compromise their values and morals and make disastrous decisions.

In Egypt's case, it led to forced labor for the Hebrews, who built whole cities for the Pharaoh, and farmed his fields. But although it seemed like God had forgotten his people, notice what happened during this oppression- *"But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites."* (Ex. 1:12) God was still at work, forming a people for his purposes. Let's continue the story.

15 The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶'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.' ¹⁷*But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.* ¹⁸*So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, 'Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?'* ¹⁹*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.'* ²⁰*So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong.* ²¹*And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.* ²²*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.'*

(Ex. 1:15-22)

Since the fear-driven policy of forced labor wasn't successful in suppressing the Hebrews, Pharaoh decides to implement a more drastic policy. He decides on a policy of genocide- killing all the male Hebrew children. He enlists two Hebrew midwives- Shiphrah and Puah, to help carry out the policy. But the midwives fear the Lord more than they fear Pharaoh, even though he is the most powerful man in the world! They refuse to collaborate with evil, making up a wonderful story about the hardiness of the Hebrew women, which plays right into the fears of the Egyptians. Shiphrah and Puah show great courage, and God blesses them for their courageous act. And God continued to bless all the Hebrew people.

Do you ever find yourself in a situation where someone expects you to cooperate with them in doing wrong? Perhaps a dishonest policy at work that is harmful to customers or employees. A friend or acquaintance that expects you to participate in gossip or the slander of others. A family member who expects you to lie for them or cover-up what they've been up to. Take courage. Do the right thing. God has your back!

The story continues.

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. ²The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months. ³When 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. ⁴His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

⁵ 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. ⁶When 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. ⁷Then 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?’ ⁸Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, ‘Yes.’ So the girl went and called the child’s mother. ⁹Pharaoh’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. ¹⁰When 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.’ (Ex. 2:1-10)

Pharaoh, frustrated that his previous attempts to suppress the Hebrew threat have not worked, now attempts to get all the Egyptian people to cooperate in his policy of genocide. But again, there are courageous women who refuse to cooperate with his new, murderous edict. First, Moses’ mother refuses to cooperate. She hides her son and strategically places him in the Nile at a place where she knows he will be found. And Pharaoh’s own daughter refuses to cooperate. She sees the

child and has pity on him. Even Moses' older sister defies Pharaoh, watching over her brother and volunteering to find a nurse for him. In spite of his wealth and power, Pharaoh's plan is thwarted; but God's plan for his people continues to develop.

Look at the ironies in this part of the story. Have you ever noticed that Moses' mother technically complies with the law? She does put her son in the river, just not in the way Pharaoh intended! There is also irony in the fact that Moses' mother ends up caring for her son and being paid for it out of Pharaoh's treasury! And, because of Pharaoh's horrific policy, the future leader of the Hebrews is given a privileged place in the royal court where he receives the finest education possible, learning from the inside the strengths and weaknesses of the Egyptian empire.

The story reminds us that God is still working out his purposes for his people, even when it appears that things are moving in exactly the opposite way. That God is working for justice for those who are oppressed and weak, even when their oppression is greatest. That God is raising up leaders in unexpected places and in unexpected ways. The ultimate example of this truth is found in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which we will remember in just a few minutes as we celebrate the Lord's Supper. From all appearances, evil had won when Jesus was put to death. The Scribes and Pharisees, in collaboration with their brutal Roman occupiers, were victorious over the powers of good and justice. But it was

only Friday, and Sunday was yet to come! God was still at work, even in the bleakest of bleak hours.

And God is still at work today. Regardless of the state of our economy. Regardless of the unemployment rate. Regardless of the actions or inactions of Congress, or the decisions of our Supreme Court. Regardless of who the president is or will be. Regardless of the actions of our Presbyterian General Assembly in the coming week. Regardless of your work situation. Regardless of your family situation. God is still at work today in your life. And God's good plans for you will not be thwarted. That is where we find hope in the midst of hard times.