

BaptistWay: Women and children first

February 11, 2015

- *The BaptistWay lesson for March 1 focuses on Exodus 1:8-2:10.*

Any time you hear, “Women and children first,” you are in a perilous situation. You’re in a situation in which there are no guarantees anyone—women, children or otherwise—will make it out alive. This is the situation in the opening chapter of Exodus.

In just a few verses, we learn Joseph’s family became numerous, just as God promised Abraham they would (compare Exodus 1:7 to Genesis 1:28). Joseph was well placed in Egypt, but after he and his brothers died, his family no longer had a connection to the Egyptian powers-that-were. This is our first clue a perilous situation is arising.

A new pharaoh

“Then a new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt” (1:8).

So many perilous situations arise with unfamiliarity. The new Pharaoh “did not know about Joseph,” and because the new Pharaoh had no connection to Joseph, he also had no connection to an entire people group. What a difference a single connection makes.

Because Pharaoh did not know Joseph—nor by extension the Israelites—he became afraid of their great numbers, and in fear, he devised a plan he hoped would keep them under control. He made slaves of them. Oddly enough, forced labor seemed to make the Israelites all the more fruitful, “so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites” (v. 12). Fear gives way to

fear. In even greater fear, the Egyptians “worked (the Israelites) ruthlessly” (v. 13).

Fear gives way to fear.

Pharaoh couldn’t find rest in subjugating the Israelites. So, he ratcheted up his plan and ordered two Hebrew midwives—Shiphrah and Puah—to kill whatever Hebrew boys were born. The girls could live, but the boys must die—right there, on the delivery stool (vv. 15-16).

The Nile becomes an instrument for death

Thankfully, Shiphrah and Puah defied Pharaoh and let the boys live (vv. 17-18). Of course, that enraged Pharaoh, who then turned to the Egyptian population and ordered them to throw every newborn Hebrew boy into the Nile (v. 22)—which they also apparently defied to some extent—thereby putting himself in direct opposition to creation and the Creator, trading death for fruitfulness. The Nile represented life for the Egyptian people but was to become an instrument of death. This use of water would come back to haunt Egypt.

Imagine the state of things: The Egyptians were so eaten up with fear of the Hebrews they were willing to throw living, breathing, helpless baby boys into the Nile River where they certainly would drown—if they survived the crocodiles. Perhaps after so many babies had been thrown into the water, the crocodiles simply waited along the edge of the river. Just imagine what fear will do.

Defying Pharaoh

Imagine two powerless Hebrew women being told by an all-powerful king to kill Hebrew baby boys as they were being born. Imagine that: Told to kill their own flesh and blood. The Egyptian women weren’t asked to do that. Imagine the courage of those two women—Shiphrah and Puah—to defy

Pharaoh because they feared God more than him. Just imagine what fear will do.

And to know the situation was so perilous, there were no guarantees anyone would make it out alive.

Oddly enough, Pharaoh and the Egyptians only thought they were in peril; so, in fear, they struck first and put the Israelites in actual peril.

- Is this the last time we have seen anything like this, where one people inflicted actual peril on another people because of a missing connection or a perception of peril?
- When the peril comes, why are women and children faced with it directly?

I can't help but think of the thousands upon thousands of women and children caught up in the sin of men who lust for power, using drugs, violence, money and fear to get it. So many of these women and children are exploited, enslaved and silenced.

- Is it possible that we, like Shiphrah and Puah, are ordered by fearful people to subjugate the powerless? Have we been asked to silence our own flesh and blood for the sake of the fearful?
- Is it possible we are expected to comply with the order of the powerful to silence the powerless?
- Are we afraid? Just imagine what fear will do.

All is not lost.

Sweet irony strikes

Just when it seems Pharaoh has found the upper hand, sweet irony strikes.

One of the Hebrew boys who was supposed to drown in the river instead is pulled safely from the river by none other than Pharaoh's own daughter, who immediately was smitten. Moses had her at the first cry (2:6).

As if this weren't enough, she enlists Moses' own biological mother to raise him, in effect giving Jochebed her son back from the dead. Through his own flesh and blood, Pharaoh took into his household one of the very children he so desperately wanted to get rid of, thereby re-establishing the lost connection between the two families—Pharaoh and Joseph.

In this sweet irony, God was at work, however imperceptibly. Although the Israelites remained enslaved many more years, one of their own sons was being prepared to aid in their deliverance. However, slavery is a perilous thing—for both slave and master—and they were not delivered yet.