

Exodus 1-5

Fear is a word we often hear in our society. We fear the unknown, the other, that which we do not understand. Fear, when associated negatively, can cause us to make assumptions at best and implement harsh laws at worst.

When Covid-19 descended on our world nearly two years ago, many of us reacted in fear, and for good reason: we did not understand the effects, let alone the implications of the virus. We feared that which we did not know. Now, we do know. So, we urge our congregants and our communities to mask up, to get the vaccine and the booster soon after it. We mourn those who've succumbed to death at the hands of the virus. We seek justice for the good of our neighbors and for the world around us.

We know better, and so even in our fear, we try and do better.

Of course, fear also makes quite the appearance in this week's readings. Take, for example, the first two chapters of Exodus: in Exodus 1, because Egypt's new king does not know Joseph and the legacy of provision he brings with him, the king fears the potential uprising of the people of Israel. "The text does not include a single hint of any rebellious spirit in the Israelites," writes theologian Roger Nam, "yet this fear becomes the driving force to a series of escalating oppressive policies, even to the point of planned genocide."^[1]

This fear, writes Nam, is a baseless kind of fear that results in nothing but generational suffering for the Israelite people.

This, of course, is juxtaposed next to a healthy kind of fear, a fear that is more often ascribed to a sense of awe and submission to God. Just as the Egyptian king tells the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill any boys they deliver, we learn that "the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live."^[2] When questioned by the king, theologian Patricia Tull notes that the midwives offer an explanation by way of insult:^[3] *Hebrew women and Egyptian women are not the same, you see, but Hebrew women are stronger. They have those babies before we midwives can even arrive on the scene!*

Throughout the first five chapters, a paradox of good fear (of the Lord) and bad fear (of the stranger and the unknown) is shown. Most of the time, good fear is shown on behalf of God and of the people of God, while bad fear succumbs to those who do not believe in the one True God (which, in this case, is the Egyptians).

One friend calls this the greatest Search and Rescue Mission known to humankind; still others call it a response of sovereignty or further evidence of special calling rooted in divine relationship. Tull, as noted earlier, states, “Thus unfolds the story of God’s preferential option for those who otherwise appear powerless. Far from being the God of the Establishment, far from being manageable or tame, the Hebrew God spurns human power, makes fools of the pretentious, and honors those, whether princesses or slave girls, who act on their instinct for justice.”^[4]

But does the theme of fear still make an appearance in the last three chapters of this week’s reading? You’d better believe it does, for in these chapters we get to know the beloved, fear-filled character of Moses.

In chapter 2, Moses is born. As the well-known story recounts, at three months old, he scoots down the river in a tiny little basket-boat waterproofed with tar and pitch.^[5] Just as he is rescued and grows into a man, his temper gets in the way and he makes a big mistake. Still, we are reminded that this is not merely the story of one man, but the story of a people and a God who listens to their groanings. It is the story of a God who remembers the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who sees what’s going on with the country of Israel, and who understands.^[6]

And this same God meets Moses in the fieriest, holiest of burning bushes.

In chapters 3 and 4, some of the most powerful and dynamic of dialogue scenes happen between God and Moses. God shows up: at first Moses peeks at the bush and responds with a simple, “Here I am,”^[7] but then fear takes over. Yes, it’s a healthy fear of the Lord, but it’s also a fear caked in whys, a fear that causes him to look away and hide from the one who calls him by name.

Their dialogue continues: God gives him a vision of how Moses is going to bring God’s people out of Egypt. Moses asks, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”^[8] God lets Moses know that he will not be alone; Moses starts throwing out best-case, what-if scenarios, over and over (and *over*) again.