

Exodus 1:8-2:10
Psalm 124

Romans 12:1-8
Matthew 16:13-20

Most of us like to think of ourselves as law-abiding citizens. Sure, we may be stopped for speeding or running a yellow light. Those are usually considered fairly minor offenses. However, have we ever intentionally disobeyed a law or a rule because we felt something was unjust or wrong? Is it ever acceptable to disobey and disregard the rules and laws of the land? Our story about these Egyptian midwives delivering Hebrew babies suggest there may be times it is acceptable!

The relationship between Joseph's family and Egypt has changed, dramatically! Joseph, who was an Israelite, had saved Egypt from starvation when he informed the Pharaoh that there would be seven years of abundant crops and then seven years of drought. Pharaoh put him in charge of a program to save up grain during the good years so that there would be food during the drought. The Pharaoh encouraged Joseph's family to move to Egypt and the family prospered there. However, a new Pharaoh comes to the throne and he does not remember what Joseph had done for Egypt. Rather, he is afraid of these immigrants, declaring that they were a threat to security, claiming that they were an internal menace. He began to scapegoat them. Are we not seeing the same thing happen today? To control the Israelites the Egyptians enslave them. The Israelites who had saved the Egyptians were now victims of Egypt's oppression.

The more Egypt oppressed the Israelites, the more the Israelites grew, and the stronger they became. The Pharaoh ordered the two Hebrew midwives to kill any Hebrew males that were born, hoping that this would slow down the growth of the Hebrews. However, these two midwives refused to kill these male babies. When the

Pharaoh confronted them as to why they were not killing them, they responded, 'Well, these Hebrew women are so strong they deliver their babies quickly and before we get there, their babies are delivered.' There is an implication in this story that these women were strong because of the Pharaoh's oppression! These two midwives were brave, for not only do they disobey the Pharaoh, they lied to him! Disobeying their oppressor, lying to the Pharaoh would certainly had been dangerous, would it not? So why would do they do such a thing. One can imagine what the Egyptians would do to the midwives if those same Egyptians enslaved the Israelites with cruel and inhuman actions.

They did so because they "feared God." They did so because they believed it was the right thing to do. As Rita Burns, a Biblical commentator wrote, "Persons who feared God were those who acted according to a moral imperative." As people of God they understood that human life is sacred. The preservation of human lives takes priority over the murderous edict of a very important and powerful person, even at the risk of their own lives. God wants people to be able to live full lives. God opposes anything that makes people less than human. Loyalty to God and God's will for humanity has priority over loyalty to any kind of human power, especially powers which seek to hurt others. For these two midwives to have an integrity, they disobeyed the Pharaoh.

Whenever there are rules and laws of the land that are contrary to God's ways, it becomes acceptable, if not mandatory, for individuals and congregations to disobey and disregard the rules and laws of the land. When is it acceptable, if not mandatory, to decide that there are more urgent concerns, higher values, than telling the truth? The answer is whenever the rules and the laws of the land are contrary to God's ways.

What is very interesting about this passage is that we are given the names of the two Hebrew midwives, but we are never given the name of the Pharaoh! In so much of the ancient literature, including Scripture, we are never given the names of women because women were not important. Only the powerful are named. It was a reversal of the roles of the rich and powerful and the lowly and vulnerable. It is as though the author is declaring that because the women feared God, what they did was important. Yes, they were disobedient and lied, but they feared God. The Pharaoh remained nameless because he was murderous and oppressive.

The story of these two midwives reminds me of the account of Bloody Sunday, an important event in the Civil Rights movement. On Sunday, March 7, 1965, about 525 to 600 civil rights marchers headed out of Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, the capitol of Alabama. There they planned to speak to Governor George Wallace about the shooting death of an African-American protestor by a state trooper. When these marchers were crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they were ordered by the police to disperse. The marchers disobeyed. The marchers stood in place, when they were brutally attacked by state troopers and a county posse. Police dogs viciously attacked the marchers. One woman was beaten unconscious. Seventeen marchers were hospitalized and fifty treated for lesser injuries. Those images seen in newspaper and the evening news were so horrific they outraged many Americans, which hastened the passage of the voting rights bill in the United States Congress. this act of disobedience was one small step in bringing about God's wholeness, one small step in bringing back humanity into the lives of African Americans and others.

The events of Bloody Sunday, the nonviolent acts of disobedience of the Civil Rights Movement, were the actions of people who, like Shiprah and Puah, refused to obey the law. Shiprah and Puah knew that what the Pharaoh had asked was wrong. The activists of the Civil rights movement refused to obey because they knew that segregation, Jim Crow laws, and white supremacy were opposed to God's will of racial equality. Racism is the opposite of God's intention for humanity. Shiprah and Puah were not important people in the eyes of the Egyptians, but what they did was important. Those who disobeyed and crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge were not important people, but their act of disobedience was. It helped to raise the consciousness of the American people about the sin of racism and motivated Congress to pass civil rights legislation. Acts of nonviolent civil disobedience can effect the change God desires.

It is important that note that what we are talking about is nonviolent disobedience. This was very important for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was heavily influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and his use of nonviolent civil disobedience in India. Gandhi's nonviolent disobedience contributed to Indian independence from England.

Last Sunday I mentioned that the church must use her voice to demand God's will for God's people, to speak out against injustice and oppression, even though many may think it is none of the church's business. Sometimes Christians must participate in nonviolent disobedience, as did these two midwives Shiprah and Puah, for obeying God is what we are called to do as God's people.

At the name of Jesu
every knee will bend
and every tongue confess
that Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God. Amen.