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Christmas 1 2017

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. Our Gospel reading this morning told us about a horrible crime. King Herod, afraid of the threat he thought was posed to his rule by the toddler Jesus, ordered that all the boys 2 years and under in Bethlehem be killed.

At Herod's command, his soldiers killed possibly dozens of small children, all because Herod cared only about himself, and saw his earthly power as a way to serve himself, not those over whom he ruled.

But this was not the first time in the history of God's people when a king had been threatened by the smallest among them. The text for our meditation this morning brings us back to when God's people were still enslaved in Egypt. We read in the beginning of Exodus, starting with chapter 1, verses 8 through 14:

Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, "Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves.

For as long as the rulers of Egypt remembered Joseph, the people of Israel were fine. Joseph was the one who had saved the people of Egypt from starvation and ruin. Joseph had guided them to store up enough food during 7 years of abundant harvests so that during the 7 years of famine,

Egypt had enough food to not only feed its own people, but also to sell some to its neighbors.

Of course, it had not just been Joseph who was doing this, but God, who was working through Joseph, for His divine purposes; so that along with saving the people of Egypt, Joseph' family would also be saved. It eventually worked out that, in thanks to Joseph, Pharaoh welcomed his family to settle in northern Egypt in the land of Goshen.

While in Goshen, the people of Israel flourished. When they moved there, there were less than a hundred of them. But in the course of three centuries, the Bible tells us that the land became filled with them - many thousands of people.

And if the Pharaohs of Egypt had continued to remember who these people were, and why they had been welcomed to settle in Egypt, none of this would have mattered. But because the memory of Joseph and what he had done gradually faded, the people of Israel became less and less welcome in the hearts of the Egyptians until they became seen as a threat.

There were many of them, and in their religion and culture the Israelites were nothing like the Egyptians. So we have no choice but to admit that we can understand why the Israelites made the Egyptians feel uneasy. Like the Egyptians, we are also sinfully prone to see those who are different than us as a threat to what we consider to be normal.

But when we encounter people who are not like us in their culture and faith, we should not automatically see these people as threats to the ongoing consistency of our lives. Instead, we should see them as God sees them - people to whom God has given physical life - people for whom Jesus gave his life on the cross to pay for their sins.

This payment has been made even for those who don't know about it. They don't benefit from it if they don't know - if they don't believe in Jesus - but that doesn't have to be someone's permanent state. At one point, all of us were ignorant of Christ.

And how did that change? It changed when someone spoke the Gospel to us. It changed when our parents

brought us to the Baptismal font, and then kept on bringing us to Church, and Sunday School, and Confirmation Class.

Just as the Pharaohs of Egypt should have never forgotten Joseph, and should have always viewed those different people who lived up north in light of his memory, so also we should never forget Jesus, and we should always view those who believe and live differently than we do in light of Jesus - remembering 2 things: that all people can believe, and be Baptized, and be saved; and also that God does not demand that all members of His church have the same tastes, and live in exactly the same way. The Christian Faith is not bound to one single culture.

Even in our small congregation we are not culturally homogenous; and nether has God's New Testament Church ever been comprised only of people from one nationality and culture. As St. Paul writes in Galatians chapter 3: There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Now because the Egyptians felt threatened by the Israelites, they oppressed them. The Israelites were

enslaved, and forced to build Pharaoh's cities. But this didn't stop the Israelites from continuing to be fruitful and multiplying; and continuing to grow as a problem in the sight of their Egyptian masters.

We continue in Exodus chapter 1, with verses 15-22:

Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live." But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and let the male children 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 grew very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every son that is born to the

Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live.”

So this is where Pharaoh threw in with King Herod. He commanded the Hebrew midwives to kill all the newborn baby boys. The reason why they were commanded to kill the boys, but not all the babies, was because the Egyptians liked the idea of having this captive labor force. Women could work, but they weren't seen as much of a military threat as men were.

But we heard that the midwives refused to do this, **BECAUSE** they feared God. They knew that this infanticide was obviously wrong. It was murder. And they were not going to be part of it.

So the midwives lied. They claimed that before they arrived to assist in the births, that the Hebrew women gave birth without them, making it so that the midwives weren't able to sneakily smother the baby boys or kill them in some other way like Pharaoh wanted them to.

We might wonder if these women were committing a second sin in the process of avoiding the first, but they

weren't. Just as those Christians who hid their Jewish friends and neighbors and lied to the Nazis about it did a good, righteous thing, so also it was good that the Hebrew midwives said what they had to to save the lives of these newborn boys.

All the commandments are the same. We should not want to disobey God in breaking any of them. But not all the ways in which we are obligated to keep the commandments are the same. In situations like this, where we will either have to break the 5th commandment - that to not murder - or the 8th commandment - that to not lie, we will always use our words to preserve human life.

And this is not just a human rationalization. We are told that because of their faithfulness, even though it involved a lie, God dealt well with the midwives. And in the New Testament, St. Paul also writes: God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape.

So Pharaoh was not able to accomplish his evil purposes sneakily. The Hebrew midwives refused to be his

vehicles for murder. But instead of abandoning this horrible idea, Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live.”

Imagine how it must have been for expectant parents, hoping that when their child was born, it was a girl, not a boy; and then trying to figure out some way to conceal the birth of a son, even though the odds of being able to do so would have been very slim.

But there was at least one set of parents who were able to save the life of their newborn son, of whom we now hear in chapter 2, verses 1 through 10: Now a man from the house of Levi went and took as his wife a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him three months. When she could hide him no longer, she took for him a basket made of bulrushes and daubed it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in it and placed it among the reeds by the river bank. And his sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him. Now the daughter of Pharaoh came down to

bathe at the river, while her young women walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her servant woman, and she took it. When she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the baby was crying. She took pity on him and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children." Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go." So the girl went and called the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child away and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him. When the child grew older, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, "Because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

Humanly speaking, imagine that Moses' mother hadn't been able to hide him, and eventually get him into the care of Pharaoh's daughter. Who would have been able to lead God's people out of slavery in Egypt?

Humanly speaking, imagine if Herod had been able to accomplish his goal in killing all the young boys of Bethlehem, including Jesus. The cross of salvation would have remained empty, and the tomb out of which Christ came in victory over sin and death never would have been entered.

I say humanly speaking, because none of these things happened or didn't happen only according to the will of men. Just as God's hand kept the basket that carried Moses from capsizing, and guided it into the arms of safety, so God guided Joseph to take Mary and Jesus out of Herod's reach before his sword fell.

In both cases, God didn't completely stop the evil from taking place. We can be sure that many young Hebrew boys had their lives snuffed out in the Nile as Pharaoh had commanded, just as we grieve that so many of the young mothers with whom Mary would have had playdates never got to see their sons grow, but had to bury them in coffins that were far too small.

But in both cases, God did limit what evil could accomplish, and he kept his promise of deliverance from sin and death going in spite of the evil. Through Moses, God eventually called his people out of Egypt, and brought them into the land he had promised to give them.

And eventually God called his only-begotten son out of Egypt, to return to the land of his ancestors, where he would grow in wisdom and stature to accomplish the salvation for which his ancestors had hoped and believed.

There are three main things we should take away from our sermon text today. First of all, we should not be like Pharaoh and view those who are different than us as a threat. We should remember that God has given life to all people, and that Jesus has given his life on the cross to pay for the sins of all people.

This doesn't mean that all the world's sins have been forgiven apart from faith; but it does mean that everyone can believe, and be baptized, and be made part of Jesus' death and resurrection, just as happened for us.

And even in the Christian Church, not everyone has to be the same. Not even all of us are the same. There is such a thing as a “Christian culture,” as that is defined by the standards of faith and life in the Bible. But this Christian culture is not one that can only exist in its purest form in one time and place.

Second, we should never cave into the pressure exerted on us by the world, and powerful people, to go against the most basic standards of human decency. Just as the Hebrew midwives feared God, and refused to commit infanticide, so also we fear God, and we refuse to be part of, or encourage in any way, the murder of babies.

And finally, we should bring all of our past sins for when we haven't been decent to God, and trusting in Christ, ask him to forgive us of them. None of us have done what God demands. None of us have allowed our faithful fearing of God and our knowledge of his holy law to always guide us in our decision making.

But through faith in Christ, God washes us clean. He takes away our sins, and remove from us their eternal

consequences; so that with clean consciences, we can re-enter the world to live lives that honor God - confident that no matter how poorly the world might treat us because of this, that God has and will deal well with US. Amen.