The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birth stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.

The last time we opened the family album we looked at the picture of Joseph forgiving his brothers. We saw that it wasn’t an easy thing for him to do. Forgiveness never is; we carry our grudges for a long time; we have a hard time putting them down. What helped Joseph was that moment when his brother Judah, the very one whose idea it had been to sell him into slavery all those years before, offered to stay in Egypt as a slave instead of his brother Benjamin (Gen. 44:33). That single, selfless gesture seemed to be the thing that cracked open Joseph’s hardened heart and allowed him to forgive. But if you look closely at that picture you can tell that his brothers had a hard time accepting his forgiveness. Genesis 45 says, “Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them” (vss. 14-15a). But it doesn’t say they wept upon him. They weren’t sure they could trust his forgiveness.

After their father died they wondered: “What if Joseph is still holding a grudge against us and decides to pay us back for what we did to him?” So they lied to him. They said, “Your father gave this instruction before he died, ‘Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.’ So, please, forgive us
for what we did” (Gen. 50:16-17). Joseph wept when they spoke to him. It was the first time they had actually asked his forgiveness. Then his brothers also wept. They fell down before him and said, “We are here as your slaves!” But Joseph said, “Don’t be afraid! What you did was meant for evil, but God has made it good. I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” And with those and many other words he reassured his brothers of his forgiveness, and at last they were able to accept it. They settled in the land of Goshen with their families and the children of Israel multiplied.

Our reading for today is from the first two chapters of Exodus. It begins with these words: “Now, a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.” Years have gone by—decades, maybe even centuries. Joseph’s reputation as the savior of Egypt has been forgotten; his family has become a nuisance. The new king said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, 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.” And so he set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor, to wear them out with work until they were too tired to fight back. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.

Now, you could think of this as just another Bible story, or you could look a little deeper, and see that what’s going on here is what always happens when fear sets the agenda. I look back to our own history as an example. When Jeremiah Bell Jeter was installed as pastor of this church in 1836 there were about 300 white members and about 2,000 black members, both slave and free.¹ What that history doesn’t tell us is that five years earlier, in 1831, a slave named Nat Turner led a rebellion just a few counties away
in which dozens of white people were brutally murdered. A widespread panic set in.

Slave owners across the South were terrified that the same thing could happen to them.

But on the Sunday morning after that massacre, as far as I know, the doors of First Baptist Church were open as usual. I picture those 300 white members settling into their pews on the main level of the sanctuary, where they always sat, but aware in a whole new way of the 2000 black members, packed into the balcony above them, where they always sat. I can almost hear that balcony groaning under their weight, feel it trembling as they stood to sing, see it shuddering as they launched into those old hymns with newfound fervor, while the white members clutched their hymnals and glanced upward, afraid that their world as well as that balcony might come crashing down at any minute.

Our history says that the new pastor of the church studied the problems of his “large, biracial membership” for two years after his installation, and in 1838 presented a recommendation asking “that the First Church consider whether its white members might build in another place a house of worship for themselves.” That recommendation was well received. The white members moved into their new building in 1841, just two blocks up the street, and left the old building to their black members, who promptly constituted the First African Baptist Church. That church is still around, and when I had lunch with its pastor recently we talked about our shared history. I asked him, “Why do you think the white members moved out?” He shrugged his shoulders and ventured a guess: “They were afraid.” I think he was right. I think they were afraid, afraid that what happened in Southampton County might happen right here in Richmond. So, the white members moved into their own building, and for a little while, at least, they felt safe. But
the church suffered. Baptisms fell off to almost nothing. The new pastor couldn’t understand why, but maybe we can:

This is what happens when fear sets the agenda.

It set the agenda for Pharaoh. He set harsh taskmasters over the Hebrew people. He intended to grind them down to nothing, to wear them out so thoroughly that they wouldn’t have strength to rebel. But it didn’t work. Hardship seemed to make the Hebrews stronger, cause their numbers to grow. Pharaoh finally called in the midwives who delivered their babies, Shiphrah and Puah, and said, “Listen, when you deliver the babies of the Hebrews, if it’s a girl you can let it live, but if it’s a boy, kill it.” Can you imagine anyone saying such a thing? Pharaoh said it, but that doesn’t mean the midwives did it. The Bible says, “The midwives feared God; they did not do as the king commanded them, but they let the boys live.” I love that last line. It could almost be a bumper sticker, couldn’t it? “Let the boys live! Exodus 1:17,” especially in these days when so many young African-American men are being murdered and incarcerated. But I love that first line even more: “the midwives feared God.” And this may be a good time to talk about what that word means in the Bible.

People sometimes ask me: “Are we supposed to be afraid of God?” They’re thinking about that verse from Proverbs 9, the one that says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (vs. 10). But I tell them, “No, in that context the word fear means something more like “profound reverence and respect,” but you can see where it gets its name. Think about this storm, for example, Hurricane Harvey, that is even now drowning the state of Texas. If you had been in Corpus Christi last week and someone told you, “Hey, a big storm is headed this way. You’d better get out of town while you
can,” and you said, “Aw, I’m not worried about some silly storm. I’ll just hunker down here,” there might be some who would say you didn’t have the appropriate amount of fear, that is, you didn’t have enough respect for what a storm like that can do. If you did, you would have evacuated, and then even if the storm destroyed your house it couldn’t hurt you.

Shiphrah and Puah had the appropriate amount of fear: they feared God more than they feared Pharaoh. They seemed to understand what Jesus would later say to his disciples: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt. 10:28). If the body was like a house and the soul like the person living inside it, then Pharaoh could destroy the house but he could never touch the person. God alone had that kind of power. And Shiphrah and Puah respected it. They respected God. They feared him in the very best sense of that word. So, they did not do what Pharaoh commanded; they let the boys live.

When Pharaoh found out about it he was furious. “Why have you done this?” he asked. And Shiphrah and Puah looked at each other and said, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women (are they, Pooh?). They’re strong! They’ll be working down there in the brickyard, have a baby on their coffee break, and then go right back to making bricks (won’t they, Pooh?). By the time we get there that baby is already weaned! Why it was just last week (wasn’t it, Pooh?) that one woman had a baby and by the time we got there it was already up walking around!” It wasn’t exactly the truth, but God looked the other way, and when he did he must have had a smile on his face. He blessed those women and gave them families of their own. Their names in Hebrew mean “Beautiful” and “Splendid,” if only because they did a beautiful and splendid thing. But
that’s not the end of the story. Those vigorous Hebrew women continued to have babies. The offspring of Israel multiplied and grew strong. Pharaoh became even more afraid. He told his people, “You can let the little Hebrew girls live, but if you see a little Hebrew boy, throw him in the river.”

This is what happens when fear sets the agenda.

Unthinkable as it seems, I suppose there really were some baby boys who were thrown into the Nile. But the Bible focuses our attention on one boy, the son of a man and woman who came from the priestly tribe of Levi. When his mother saw how beautiful he was she hid him as long as she could, but as he got older his cries grew louder and she knew she had to do something. She got a big, papyrus basket and smeared it on the outside with bitumen and pitch until it was waterproof; then she lined it with a warm, dry blanket and tucked her baby boy inside; and then, just before daybreak, she put that basket in the bulrushes, right there at the edge of the river where the Pharaoh’s daughter came to bathe. If one of Pharaoh’s soldiers had caught her in that moment and asked her what she was doing she could have said, truthfully, “I’m throwing a baby boy in the river.” But it may have been the gentlest and most loving “throw” anyone has ever made, and walking away from that basket may have been the hardest thing she ever did.

When Pharaoh’s daughter came for her bath that morning she saw that basket. She sent her maid to fetch it and when she opened the lid there was a beautiful baby boy in there, and he was crying. Her heart just melted. About that time a little Hebrew girl came trotting up and said, “If you want me to find somebody to nurse him for you I can.” And Pharaoh’s daughter thought, “What a good idea!” not knowing that it was the little boy’s sister, or that the wet nurse she went to fetch was the little boy’s mother. She was
just so taken with this beautiful baby boy. She took him home and said, “Daddy? Look what I found in the river! Can I keep him?” And because it was his daughter, because he couldn’t say no to her, Pharaoh said yes. She named him Moses, or in Hebrew Moshe, which means something like, “to pull out,” because, as she told everyone later, “I pulled him out of the river!”

This is what happens when love sets the agenda.

You’ve heard me say it before: the two great motivators in life are love and fear. They are the things that move us to action. And I believe that now, more than ever, we need to decide which one of those two will set the agenda for us: will it be love or fear? I wonder what would have happened to this church if Jeremiah Bell Jeter had put another option before his congregation in 1838. Instead of suggesting that they build a new building for the white members and leave the old one to the black members, what if he had said, “We are not going to let Nat Turner’s rebellion make us afraid of each other. We are not going to let fear set the agenda. In Christ there is neither slave nor free, and in obedience to his command we are going to love one another.” I wonder what would have happened if the church hadn’t divided along racial lines. I wonder how we would have experienced the Civil War together as a congregation. I wonder how it would be now if there weren’t one church on this side of Broad Street and another church on the other side.

But even more than that I wonder how we might go forward.

Recently Courtney Allen, Pastor of Grace Baptist Church in this city and a member of my Tuesday morning Preacher’s Club, wrote an article for Baptist News Global in which she said, “Fifty years ago Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a speech
titled, ‘Where Do We Go from Here?’ It is in this speech that Dr. King [renewed his commitment to nonviolence, saying it was ‘the most potent weapon available to the Negro in his struggle for justice.’ But then he] said, famously, ‘I have also decided to stick with love, for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to [our] problems. And I’m going to talk about it everywhere I go…. I’ve seen too much hate. [I’ve seen it on the faces of too many sheriffs in the South. I’ve seen it on the faces of too many Ku Klux Klansmen and too many White Citizen’s Councilors to want to hate, myself, because every time I see it I see what it does to their faces and to their personalities] and I know that hate is too great a burden to bear. I have decided to love.”

What about us, friends? Are we going to be like Pharaoh, and let fear set the agenda, or are we going to be like Shiphrah and Puah, who feared God more than any man, and boldly walked in the way of love?

—Jim Somerville © 2017

---

1 Much of the material in this section of the sermon was gathered from the pages of The Open Door: a History of First Baptist Church, Richmond, by Blanche Sydnor White and Fred Anderson (2006), copies of which are available through the church office. This information was found on page 57.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., pp. 62-63. Baptisms, that had been hovering around 100 per year, fell off to 10 the year after the white members moved into their new building at 12th and Broad, 8 the next year, 6 the next year, and 4 the year after that.

4 The Rev. Courtney Allen, “Love is Loudest Even When Hate Has the Bullhorn,” Baptist News Global, August 17, 2017. I’ve added some context from Martin Luther King, Jr.’s speech, “Where do We Go from Here?”