

Blinded by fear

Exodus 1:1-22

September 11, 2005

Then God said, "And now we will make human beings; they will be like us and resemble us. They will have power over the fish, the birds, and all animals, domestic and wild, large and small." So God created human beings, making them to be like himself. God created them male and female, and blessed them ... God looked at what he had made, and God saw that it was very good.

It was very good. Human beings, male and female, young and old, dark-skinned and light-skinned, large-boned and small-boned, all made to be like God. It is very good!

But sometimes we forget that. Sometimes we look at another human being and we are blinded by fear. Blinded by fear, we fail to see the human being made in God's own image, just like us. Blinded by fear, we see a stranger, someone not like us, someone who looks differently and talks differently and acts differently. Who knows how they think or what they might do? You can't trust them. We'll have to watch our backs!

Blinded by fear, we do not see another human being, we do not see a neighbor ... we see a threat. A threat to our security, a threat to our well-being, a threat to our way of life.

That's what the people of Egypt saw when they looked at the Israelites living among them ... a threat. At the beginning, the Israelites had received a warm and generous welcome from the Egyptians. They had arrived some four hundred years earlier, refugees dislocated by a great natural disaster, in their case, a severe and prolonged famine. Jacob and the members of his family, the ancestors of the Hebrew people, settled in Goshen, a good and fertile region in Egypt, at the invitation of the Egyptian king.

And they stayed. They stayed for many generations. They had children and their children had children. They did well and grew strong, their numbers multiplied and they spread themselves throughout the land. Maybe that was the problem. Maybe they made themselves too much at home. It was OK when they were still a little band of hungry refugees tucked into one small corner of Egypt, but now they are everywhere! They might take our jobs! They might take over our cities! They might find sympathy with our enemies and turn against us! Who knows what they might do?

The people of Egypt were blinded by fear, an irrational fear certainly because the Israelites had done nothing to injure them or threaten them, but real enough to them. And blinded by fear, they did their best to contain the perceived threat through a reign of terror. When you no longer see a human being before you, you allow yourself to do some very inhuman things ... forced labor, cruel slavery, harsh treatment, and the final solution -- infanticide. They decided that in order to protect their own interests it had become necessary to kill babies!

And so the descendants of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob suffered. They suffered under the cruel yoke of slavery. They suffered the scorn and prejudice of their neighbors. They suffered the murder of their children. This was the plight of the Hebrew people in Egypt: *We were slaves in Egypt, but God ...*

But God! This is the story we have to tell! The story of a God who sees the suffering of his people and hears their cries! The story of a God who always takes the side of the oppressed! God sees, God hears, and God saves! God brought his people out of Egypt and made them his own. God brought them out of the land of slavery into a land of freedom, out of the land of oppression into the land of promise.

But I am getting way ahead of the story! At this point in the story, the Israelites are still in Egypt, still suffering unthinkable horrors at the hands of the Egyptians. But God! Even from the very beginning -- before Moses, before Aaron, before the great plagues, before the night of Passover -- signs of God's grace are already in evidence, signs of grace manifested in the lives of two God-fearing women, Shiphrah and Puah.

Shiphrah and Puah ... we don't even know if they were Egyptian or Hebrew. We do know they were midwives by profession, assisting Hebrew women in the birthing process, and we do know they feared God. They didn't fear people, they feared God. They didn't fear the king of Egypt, they feared God.

And because they feared God, they were not blinded, they could see. Because they feared God, they obeyed God and did not obey the king of Egypt. When the king ordered them to kill the male babies birthed by Hebrew women, they let them live.

The king was upset: *Why are you doing this? Why are you letting the boys live?*

Well ... The Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they give birth easily, and their babies pop out before either of us get there!

The laughable thing, the laughable and most tragic thing, is that the Egyptian king believes them!

The Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women ...

Yes, of course. How true! How true!

Blinded by fear, he cannot see the Hebrew women as they truly are. Of course, they are not like Egyptian women ... But Shiphrah and Puah -- they could see!

Signs of God's grace are already in evidence, signs of grace manifested in the lives of six God-fearing men and women! Abram Hosford, Joseph White, Cynthia White, Mary Worcester, Levi Worcester, John Leavitt. Let me tell you their story ... because it is your story, too!

Our nation had a promising but troubled birth. The newly united states were deeply divided over the issue of slavery. Slavery was imbedded in the economy of the South, but the northern states would not condone slavery. There was a uneasy truce between them that spilled over into open conflict with westward expansion and the petition of new territories for statehood.

The Missouri Compromise crafted by Henry Clay in 1820 defused the tension for a time, allowing Missouri to enter the union as a slave state balanced by the addition of Maine as a free state, and drawing an imaginary east/west line setting a northern limit to the expansion of slavery. That kept things quiet for a time until the acquisition and settlement of lands in the southwest and far west raised the issue again.

Henry Clay once again authored a compromise, the Compromise of 1850. It permitted the entry of California to the union as a free state, upsetting the even balance between free states and slave states, but appeasing the pro-slavery group by passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. The Fugitive Slave Act mandated the cooperation of all citizens in the return of fugitive slaves to their "rightful" owners and denied any fugitive's right to a jury trial ... which meant that any black person, slave or free, was liable to be snatched any without any legal protections.

In 1853 a senator from Iowa proposed organizing the Nebraska territory, including what is now the states of Nebraska and Kansas. Stephen Douglas got a bill passed that allowed the new territories to choose for themselves whether they would be slave or free, but that proved a recipe for disaster: both sides sent armed groups to Kansas to insure the outcome they desired. One Missouri senator characterized northerners as "negro thieves" and "abolitionist tyrants" and called on his fellow Missourians to defend slavery "with the bayonet and with blood."

Which they did. Armed Missourians, called "Border Ruffians" crossed the border into Kansas, stuffing ballot boxes and terrorizing the citizens. On May 21, 1856, they came to Lawrence, Kansas, burning buildings, destroying printing presses, and ransacking homes and businesses. A few days later when Charles Sumner delivered a speech on the floor of the United States Senate entitled "The Crime Against Kansas," he was physically beaten into unconsciousness with a cane by a congressman from South Carolina.

This was the state of the world into which our church, the First Congregational Church of Waterloo, was born. In June 1856, shortly after the events I just described, the Iowa Association of Congregational Churches gathered in Grinnell and passed this resolution:

- 1. That we have heard with profound sorrow and indignation, of the outrages and wrongs that have been inflicted upon our fellow citizens of Kansas -- some of whom were formerly members of our churches and communities -- by hordes of armed men from Missouri, for the purpose of crushing out Liberty there; and of the cowardly and murderous assault upon Hon. Charles Sumner, a senator of the United States ...*
- 2. That every sentiment of justice, liberty and religion, demands of the government of this nation, the protection of the people of Kansas, in the full and peaceable enjoyment of all their rights as American citizens.*
- 3. That we sympathize most deeply with our Brethren in Kansas, and pledge ourselves to aid them in every constitutional way to maintain their rights and defend the institution of freedom, and would urge the friends of Liberty in our state, to devote themselves as well as their means to this work.*

Which they did! Just three months later, on September 24, 1856, six God-fearing men and women, friends of liberty, became the founding members of this church, echoing the sentiments of the statewide body in choosing to form their own congregation rather than unite with the local Presbyterian congregation:

We object to uniting with the church referred to, because, while the Slave Power is daily becoming more violent and atrocious in its usurpations, it seems to us that the General Assembly of that church is becoming more and more determined to maintain a complicity with it.

These six men and women feared God, not public opinion, and because they feared God, they would not compromise. Because they feared God, they took God's side, the side of the oppressed, and they would not be silent. Because they feared God, they were not blinded, they could see. They looked at their African-American brothers and sisters and saw just that -- brothers and sisters!

Friends! You who are now members of First Congregational United Church of Christ! This is the spirit in which our church was born! This is the spirit in which we must live! Fearing God, taking the side of the oppressed, refusing to be silent, serving as signs of God's grace in our own time and place. Our church was founded by brave men and women determined to listen to the voice of God and to obey ... and so must we!

This fall as we begin the celebration of our church's 150th anniversary, we will tell the story of the exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt, because their story is our story.

It is the story of a God who listens and a God who speaks, the story of a God who sees and a God who saves.

It is the story of a God who spoke to two midwives, telling them, *Stand up for my people ...*

It is the story of a God who spoke to a young Hebrew raised as an Egyptian prince, telling him, *Stand up for my people ...*

It is the story of the same God who spoke too to six early settlers of Waterloo, Iowa, telling them, *Stand up for my people ...*

And now, in this very place, *After 150 years, God is still speaking!* God is telling us, *Stand up for my people!* God is still speaking ... are you listening?