

## **SPR | August 23, 2020 | Barnabas Pusnur**

Fortunes change. Even the most cursory reading of history shows that no one, no people group, no ethnicity, no nation, no empire, has enjoyed perpetual good times. We ended the book of Genesis on a high note. Joseph, who had been sold to slavery in Egypt, rose up the ranks to eventually become one of the most powerful political figures in the empire. There was a huge immigration of his people into the empire. They were no longer wandering Arameans but had settled successfully and were prospering in Egypt. Surely, this meant God had shown favor on the descendents of Abraham. Surely God's promise to the ancestors was now being fulfilled.

But political winds are always very unsteady. The challenge with these winds is that it's very hard to know precisely when, how and why these major shifts happen. While it becomes more possible to make sense of these when separated by a distance of time, but when one is living through such periods, one feels like one is caught unaware and is engulfed with a sense of anxiety.

The story of Exodus begins with noting "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He 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." No actual actions that Israel might have committed to show that they were a threat to Egypt are mentioned. But such actions are not really needed. A perception of threat is enough to rouse a people against another. History has repeatedly shown that the outsider, the different looking person, the worshipper of a foreign god, the one with a different lifestyle, the minority, is always scapegoated whenever a nation is facing some challenge. We do not know what challenge

prompted this new king's disdain of these 'foreign' people. It's not even clear what the fear is: "that they will fight against us and escape from the land."

Whatever the specifics of the social and political situation, the times had changed for the Israelites. Their life in Egypt became harder and harder. While their forefathers may have prospered in Egypt, this was no longer true for them. Policies were decreed where this people group were singled out and life made harsher for them.

However, the initial policies don't seem to have worked, or what may be more closer to the case, the challenge the empire was facing had not ended. The scapegoating had not been deep enough. More was needed. More drastic measures were needed. Their population was to be controlled by extreme measures. Every baby boy that was born needed to be killed.

I remember reading about the Holocaust as a teenager and wondering how could a nation become so evil. That seemed so impossible, so unnatural. But evil has a way of working in human beings. Its poison spreads slowly, without much noise, and even with its own public justification. But by the time it has taken over a society or even a person, the impossible looks normal. It becomes normal to senselessly harm and destroy others.

Where was God during all this? Where is God when it looks like God has either abandoned his people or is actively working against them? These are very hard questions, which no one can answer with complete satisfaction. But as Christians, we believe God is still there. Even in darkness God is there. Even in silence God is there. God is somewhere. He might be in the most unexpected of places. He might be doing something that was not thought of.

In the Exodus story God was in the Israelite midwives. He was not in an Israelite warrior or a rebel who could help Israel out during this predicament. He was in the Israelite midwives. The story narrates that an order was passed that the midwives were supposed to perform this execution of the baby boy during birth. But for some reason, God's courage and strength grows in the most unexpected places. The midwives mustered strength and courage to risk their lives and cleverly defy the orders. Unbeknownst to themselves, not only were the midwives saving these babies, but one crucial day they helped give birth to a boy who would lead the Israelites out of this suffering. The new orders had failed to produce the intended results.

During times of crisis, we ask where is hope. I believe hope is waiting to be born. It is waiting to be born in our small, simple actions. It is waiting to be born when we muster courage and take a stance for life, for life as God intended. It is in believing that we can do something. That we are not paralyzed. God is already here, we may just need to open ourselves up and act.

A couple had a baby boy during these times. They must have loved and adored this child. The child's older sister must have played and kissed with this child numerous times. But the draconian orders were still in place and were being implemented with more force. What must a mother do to save her child? Under normal circumstances, while she would have proudly shown her child to everyone, played with her child in public, during these extraordinary times, she had to hide him in her house, not letting the authorities and their spies know of his existence. She hid him three months, but then could hide him no longer.

I tried to recall what changes my daughter went through when she was three months old. But children grow so fast during this period. So I had to google how children grow during this stage. One of the things that some children do at three months is that they begin to laugh. They respond to the world around them. Both in their cries, and now in their laughter they proclaim

their presence in the world. This mother could no longer hide her child because his boisterous presence was no longer something that gave her joy, but caused her panic and fear. It is painful to imagine what the family must have been going through. The days and nights they must have pondered what to do. Their broken hearts and their sorrow.

But hope finds birth in their hearts. This family did what they could. Not knowing the results, risking everything, the mother decided to lead the baby right into the hands of the imperial authorities. With that glimmer of hope she must have thought that maybe just maybe her plan would work and her child would live. I have tried to picture what the mother must have felt as she put her child in the basket and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. What would the father, what the daughter might have been going through. In their place I know I would have felt my heart stop beating. But sometimes hope takes the ultimate risk. It musters courage that defies logic. It makes the desperate leap into the tiniest possibility of something good.

Where was God in all this? I think he was in their hearts. He was in that child in that basket. He was in the favor that daughter of Pharaoh showed when she saw that basket and saw that sweet child crying. Who would have imagined that the child would live. But God intended more than what was imagined. In the courage of her sister's offer to Pharaoh's daughter, the child was given back to the mother to be nursed and taken care of and she now raised a royal's child.

Fortunes change. Sometimes too unexpectedly. This child, Moses was to lead Israelites out of Egyptian bondage. For the next two months, we will be hearing more about this person Moses, his own conflicts, challenges and leadership. In Christian Liberation theology, the exodus event when Israelites walked out of Egypt with God's powerful and mighty hand is seen as pivotal. True as that may be, I believe the beginnings of that liberation were much more humble but

extremely crucial. Liberation began in the hearts of ordinary people, who mustered up courage and hope a little at a time. Ordinary midwives, and ordinary families. May God give us the strength to play our part in that liberation. Fortunes will always change, but may God always enable us to take the stance for hope and life. God bless you. Amen.