

## **WHOM DO YOU FEAR?**

**Exodus 1:8-2:10**

**Psalm 124**

**Romans 12:1-8**

**Matthew 16:13-20**

It makes a difference where you are how things are perceived. Context is everything. Consider this summer's blockbuster movie, *Barbie*. In America, girls and young women have dressed themselves in Barbie pink and stood in line to see this much anticipated film. In America, it provides a fun diversion while offering some thoughtful commentary on the roles of women and men in society. In Saudi Arabia, girls and young women have also dressed themselves in Barbie pink, but then have had to cover all that pink with their black hijabs. When you live in a country where women's lives—what they can wear in public, what work they can do, who they can be with in public—are strictly controlled by men, what must it be like to watch Barbie and her friends in Barbieland, where women run everything and men, like Ken, are just an afterthought? *Barbie's* day-glo feminist celebration must be, not simply fun, but revolutionary. It makes a difference where you are.

Or consider this. In the spring, I look forward to driving by Irwin Park and seeing the field of jonquils. I don't know who was responsible for planting them in the first place, but I suspect the intent was simply to provide New Canaan with some added beauty. In Chicago, however, the artist/activist Amanda Williams organized and implemented the planting of 100,000 red tulips on vacant lots on the south side of that city. I'm certain they were beautiful and lifted people's hearts with their blaze of color, just as Irwin Park jonquils do for me. However, those tulips were planted to mark the now vacant spaces once occupied by residential buildings there were redlined out of the neighborhood. Those flowers stood as a flashy, bold critique and reminder of a past practice that made it extremely difficult for Black people to buy homes and build equity.<sup>1</sup> How a swath of spring flowers is seen, is different where you are.

Or again, consider our story from Exodus, which takes place some 400 years after Joseph, the great grandson of Abraham, had ensured the survival of Egypt during a seven-year famine. Because of his leadership, the then-pharaoh graciously invited Joseph's extended family to live in a section of Egypt known as Goshen. There they lived in peace and flourished, until a new pharaoh, who did not remember Joseph, came to the throne. From the perspective of the palace, the growth and prosperity of the Hebrews was a cause for anxiety—maybe they would grow to outnumber the Egyptians, maybe they would join with Egypt's enemies and try to overthrow the government, maybe they would try to gain control of the two major trade routes that passed through Goshen. Pharaoh was afraid. From the perspective of the Hebrews, however, life was good. They prospered, formed a coherent society and preserved their identity as people with a covenant relationship with God. It makes a difference where you are.

No matter where you are, though, fear changes your perspective and can cause you to act in terrible ways. So it was in the palace. Pharaoh's fear drove him to employ oppression to try to control the perceived Hebrew threat. Using increasingly severe tactics against the people, pharaoh first enslaved them, then increased their workload, then ordered the secret murder of baby boys and

finally ordered the entire populace to openly drown Hebrew boy babies. When the leader of a people is frightened, everyone has reason to be afraid.

The midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, had practiced their skills of assisting laboring mothers and delivering new life into the world. In the ancient world, midwives were considered spiritual healers and co-creators of new life.<sup>ii</sup> That was their job and their vocation, always had been and, they thought, it always would be.

Then their world changed. They were summoned before the embodiment of empire, and told to kill the boy babies that they delivered, to snuff out those tiny lives before having a chance to live. They were ordered to be death-dealers instead of life-givers. Their calling hadn't changed, but the world around them had. It makes difference where you are.

And yet one more instance to consider. In Matthew's telling of Peter making his breathtaking confession of who Jesus was, he begins by telling us where Jesus and his followers were—the district of Caesarea Philippi. Now that may not mean much to you and me, but it meant a great deal to Matthew's first readers. Caesarea Philippi was an imperial stronghold, a city named for a Caesar and filled with monuments and buildings attesting to the Roman power. It would be like standing on the National Mall in Washington, DC, surrounded by historical landmarks, memorials to past presidents and monuments to America's war campaigns, the capitol building at one end and the Lincoln Memorial at the other. It is a place that speaks of power and empire. It was in such a place that Jesus asked his disciples who they believed him to be. When Peter declared Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, he did so in the face of all the power of Rome. In a place that declared that Caesar was divine, the son of god, an agent of gods' will, Peter's confession takes on additional potency. His was a seditious statement, a declaration made over against the established order. It makes a difference where you are.

So I ask us to consider what it means to be a follower of Christ, not only in this sanctuary, but in our everyday world. When we gather on Sunday mornings, in our spoken responses, in our songs, in our prayers, we join Peter in declaring Jesus to be the Christ. When you were confirmed, when you joined this congregation, when you had your child baptized, you were asked, "Who is your Lord and Savior?" In a few minutes, Serena Gillespie will be standing in front of you to be ordained to the office of elder, and the first question she will be asked begins, "Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all . . .?" Week by week, in this safe place we make our confession to remind ourselves of and renew our commitment to Jesus Christ. But consider, what it means to make that same confession, like the midwives and Peter, when confronted with the powers of society and empire.

There was a picture in the paper this week of a man, terror written on his face, running from the oncoming blaze of a wildfire in Greece. Clutched to his chest was an icon from his church, a picture of Mary and the child Jesus.<sup>iii</sup> When faced with difficulty or ethical or moral dilemmas or tragedy, what do we cling to? In the office, the classroom, the boardroom, the polling place, how do we answer Jesus' question whispered in our ear, "Who do you say that I am?" Whom do we fear?

Those cunning midwives made a decision and took a chance, because they feared God, not the shaking-in-your-boots kind of fear, but the awe and wonder that comes with the knowledge and experience of God's love. It is the kind of wonder that fills the spirit, the reverence that acknowledges God as Creator of all that is, the submission that recognizes human frailty set before the might of the Divine. The midwives feared God because they knew that God's power to give life was greater than Pharaoh's power to order death.

Peter saw that same power in Jesus, when Jesus spoke words of challenge and comfort, when he healed the sick, when he fed the crowds, when he drove out evil spirits, when he created a new community of love. He recognized in Jesus the unique power of love to change lives and the world. He had discovered in Jesus glimpses of the living God, the source of all life. Peter saw in Jesus one who was more worthy of his loyalty and love than Rome with all its claims of sovereignty and authority. Though at this point, Peter and his fellow disciples only understood in part what that meant, still he claimed what he could, lived out that claim, as best he could.

The midwives and Peter lay a challenge before us. They remind us that in the small workings of our daily lives, we can make our confessions of faith through our words and our deeds. Those clever women and that inconstant disciple encourage us to try to be loyal followers of the living God and God's Son, here and out there. Sometimes our actions may seem too insignificant to matter. Sometimes our words may not seem to make a difference. Sometimes, we fail in our faithfulness. Sometimes it may look like Pharaoh and Caesar are stronger than God. But Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit who, in turn, "...gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace."<sup>iv</sup> And Jesus has also given us one another to be encouragers, to remind each other of our calling, to say "I believe," when we can't do it for ourselves.

May we fear the living God and claim God's Son as Lord and Savior, here and in the world. In the small, yet significant, and sometimes even miraculous workings of our daily lives may we be bold enough to be God's people, for, my friends, that is how God can change the world.

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<sup>i</sup> Richard A. Rosengarten, "Redefining Redlining on Chicago's Southside," *Sightings*, June 15, 2023, <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/articles/redefining-redlining-chicagos-southside>.

<sup>ii</sup> Kat Armas, "Mocking Empire," *Christian Century*, June 30, 2021, p. 26.

<sup>iii</sup> *The New York Times*, August 24, 2023, p. A1.

<sup>iv</sup> *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I: The Book of Confessions*, (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly), A Brief Statement of Faith, lines 66-71.