

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend Anne H.K. Apple  
Sunday, August 23, 2020

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### **Exodus 1:8-21**

**8** Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. **9** He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. **10** 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.” **11** Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. **12** But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. **13** The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, **14** and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them. **15** The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, **16** “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” **17** But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. **18** So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” **19** 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.” **20** So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. **21** And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.

This is the Word of the Lord, **Thanks be to God.**

The outhouse door on the Y2K compound was made with a life-sized tomb for a mummy, a plaster of paris sarcophagus, pulled out of the local theatre's trash pile. Anyone could draw laughter by announcing to those sitting by the fire, “I’m going out to Egypt.”

I call it a Y2K compound. On a brisk weekend in November, a stew would cook all day over the fire, and later we’d fry biscuit dough in hot oil. The camp was the top of a mountain in East Tennessee where our family could get away from the crazy noise in the city. And, if indeed, Y2K brought the end of the world as we knew it, we had our Egypt. We had storehouses of what was rightfully ours. It was, in fact, a place developed from a sense of fear.

There was a new king in ancient Egypt. He didn’t know Joseph and the children of Israel. But, he was quick to recognize the threat of a changing demographic.

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“Those people” the new king says, “are a risk.”

“Those people” he continues “will rally.”

“Those people will turn against us.”

There was a new king in Egypt and to his task masters he'd say, “Work those people to the bone. Until the skin of their flesh knows, “I. I am the new King of Egypt.” In field and factory, the Israelites labored.

**Anger unmetabolized can erode the character of a generation(s).**

The task masters were ruthless. And yet, the Children of Israel, the 12 tribes, who came - each man and his household - they grew and spread out all over Egypt. In direct defiance of the King, the midwives saw to it that the people multiplied - boys and girls.

The text today does not give us the final verse of Chapter One. Listen to verse 22. “Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, ‘Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile. But you shall let every girl live.’” So what was fear in the early verses has morphed into anger and a vindictive response.

The book *Leadership in Turbulent Times* by the historian, Doris Kearns Goodwin, showed up on our front porch this summer. It really was for a Poli-Sci class at Loyola but when I peeled back the tape, opened the box and saw the title, I was convinced, “there’s no time like the present to read this - Leadership in turbulent times.” The book reviews the lives of four American Presidents, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson and explores their leadership qualities.

*How will we give ourselves to help make possible the life and the freedom of another?*

That’s a God question.

A God question asked by a contemporary theologian and yet fitting to imagine the 16th President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, wrestling with as he led the country through the Civil War. *How will we give of ourselves to help make possible the life and the freedom of another?*

As President, Lincoln endeavored to heal a gravely wounded and divided nation. He modeled the strength of mutual respect and dignity particularly with his ability to control his anger. When he was angry, he would pen what he called a “hot” letter and then set it aside to a time when he could tend to it with more perspective. When Lincoln’s papers were recovered there were many such letters penned with these words, “*Never sent. Never signed.*” Maybe Lincoln had drawn from James, Chapter 1, “Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.”

Shiprah and Puah revered God, far more than they feared Pharaoh. And, I’m pretty certain that reverence for God, in appreciation and gratitude for God’s beauty and blessings, produces God’s righteousness.

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Do you wonder if the midwives sat by the fire asking one another, “How will we give ourselves to help make possible the life and the freedom of another?”

Midwives are not afraid to move and serve in the presence of pain.

Midwives massage life into this world easing shoulders out of dark womb spaces into the light of day.

Midwives wipe sweat from mother’s brows of pain and are the first to see the wonder of new life.

Midwives are agents of God’s good beauty and blessing.

Once you have seen God’s beauty in life, and received such a blessing, you’ll fight for it. God’s beauty and blessing. When you know God’s beauty and blessing, you will work to repair beauty where it has been shattered.

“How will we give of ourselves to help make possible the life and freedom of another?”<sup>1</sup>

So long as our fear is of losing our power, money, influence, we are inevitably enslaving ourselves and others. Only by letting go of this and living into God’s righteousness, into God’s beauty and blessing are we truly providing freedom.

With inward looking, with God.

With looking forward, with God.

With God, freedom is coming.

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Richardson, The Painted Prayerbook.