

Someone said, "The true test of a person's character
is not how they handle failure; it is how they handle power.
And we have to think about where the place is
where we hold the most unchecked power?
It may not be at the office or in the community or church—
it might be behind the closed doors of our own homes.
To a five-year-old child, our voice as a parent
sounds like thunder whether we mean to or not.
To our spouse, a cold shoulder or words like I'm fine
when you are not feels like exile.

In Exodus 1, we see a terrifying picture of what
happens when leadership is driven by fear instead of love.
As we look at the clash between a cruel
dictator and two brave midwives,
we have to ask ourselves a hard question:
When people step inside our homes or at our work
or at school or church, or somewhere else in our lives
do they feel the heavy hand of Pharaoh,
or the life-giving protection of the midwives?"

This week our Moses Moment is about
a lot of different things, but a central issue is power—
power and identity.
In this passage in Exodus, we find a ruler who
governed out of fear and threats,
but was thwarted by the powerless who knew who they were.

8 Now a new king came to power in Egypt who didn't know Joseph.

9 He said to his people, "The Israelite people are now larger in number and stronger than we are."

Remember your Sunday School stories here.
Joseph had been sold into slavery
after his brothers got rid of him
and his amazing technicolor dream coat.
But he rose up through the ranks to
become Pharaoh's right-hand man.
And when a big famine hit,
he reunited with all his brothers (the twelve tribes of Israel type guys)

and brought them and his father Jacob to Egypt.

Where they lived happily ever after forever.

Not exactly.

13 So the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites. 14 They made their lives miserable with hard labor, making mortar and bricks, doing field work, and by forcing them to do all kinds of other cruel work.

Why? Because Pharaoh and his leaders were led by fear.

10 They will only grow in number. And if war breaks out, they will join our enemies, fight against us, and then escape from the land."

And when our decisions are informed

and led by fear alone as individuals,

or governments, or societies,

they are not logical or rational.

And they are often misguided, misaligned, and malignant.

We never make good decisions out of fear.

12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they grew and spread, so much so that the Egyptians started to look at the Israelites with disgust and dread.

The more cruel work the Egyptians put on the Hebrews,

the more they continued to grow and become stronger.

And the Egyptians' disgust and dread came to a boil.

The king of Egypt spoke to two Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah: 16 "When you are helping the Hebrew women give birth and you see the baby being born, if it's a boy, kill him. But if it's a girl, you can let her live."

And this passage made me ask this question.

How do we understand power for leadership?

Is it the ability for the leader to do what he or she wants to do?

That it's a boy becomes a death sentence.

Of course, historically in China and other places

it's a girl was more of a death sentence.

It seems incomprehensible that

a leader or a group of people, or let's call them a tribe

since tribalism dominates our life.

Team Vanilla and Chocolate, looking at you.

Would be so afraid of immigrants that

he would recommend killing boys at birth.
And something interesting here related to Jesus
It would be Herod who would do a similar thing,
killing all the baby boys of a certain age
in Bethlehem to stop the Messiah.

But let the girls live.
Why was that?
Let the girls live because they couldn't do much?
Because no one worries about girls?
Because, well, they are girls. Isn't that enough?
No one can be so mean as to kill baby girls, could they?
I doubt that sentiment was what
caused Pharaoh to spare the girls.
He probably didn't think they were
capable of causing him trouble.
Boy, or I mean girl, was he wrong because two women
got in the way of his first plan.
He messed with the wrong midwives.

**17 Now the two midwives respected God so they didn't obey the Egyptian king's order.
Instead, they let the baby boys live.**

**18 So the king of Egypt called the two midwives and said to them, "Why are you doing this?
Why are you letting the baby boys live?"**

**19 The two midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because Hebrew women aren't like Egyptian women.
They're much stronger and give birth before any midwives can get to them."**

But Pharaoh still has a lot of power,
and he is not going to be stopped by these two women.

**22 Then Pharaoh gave an order to all his people: "Throw every baby boy born to the Hebrews
into the Nile River, but you can let all the girls live."**

This was a general edict. Did you notice that?
He told all his people,
whenever you see a Hebrew baby boy,
throw him in the river.
Appealing to mob action,
he inflamed prejudice and suspicion,
stirring up the general public with fear-mongering and threats.

The Siege (1998): abducts a Middle Eastern leader. terrorists attack a bus in Brooklyn, a Broadway theater, and FBI headquarters; martial law is declared. US citizens of Middle Eastern descent are rounded up in internment camps at stadiums. 3 years before Sept 11.

So what happens after this?

Well, I want to encourage you to flash forward

to Chapter 2 and read the rest of the story.

And see where all this fits into Moses ' mother's story,
his sister Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter.

And how two women the King of Egypt discounted,
one from his own household,
caused his ultimate downfall. Power can be a fickle thing.

Back when I was in school,
we had to read Animal Farm. Anybody else do that?
And the one lesson on power that has stuck with me
from that book as I grew up is this
which is actually a quote from another writer.

Power Corrupts, Absolute power corrupts absolutely.

This whole story forces us to ask a question...

How do we understand power for leadership?

Is it the ability for the leader to do what he or she wants to do?

"Throw them in the river."

It seems incomprehensible that a leader would be
so afraid of immigrants that he would recommend
throwing them in the river.

But many things are done and have
been done in the wake of our fear.

All we have to do is look at our own history in America.

German immigrants in World War I in Cincinnati.

Japanese immigrants in internment camps

like at Minidoka in Idaho where we went in 2024 when we were out west.

Vietnamese and Laotians after the Vietnam War.

Or just go back further to the Italian

and Irish immigrants coming to America in the 1800s.

Pharaoh in his absolute power was off base from the beginning.

He wanted the women,
the midwives who are bringers of life,
to be instruments of death, and it didn't work.

He wanted to turn the river, a source of life,
into a place of death, and his plan didn't work.
Later, the little girls he didn't think were worth
his consideration stood sentinel over a baby
to be named Moses in a basket,
floating on the river of life, a river of hope,
who would later free his people from Pharaoh's power.
But not his power, but really God's power.
That is the power that is active here.
It is a power that is greater than the power of Pharaoh,
the King of Egypt, even though it doesn't look like it.

Midwives. A post-partum mother. A pre-teen girl. Pharaoh's daughter.

Not quite the people we expect
to lead a leadership seminar on power.
But in this Moses moment,
these are precisely the people who use the power
available to them to act for life
and goodness in the face of oppression.
Some acted on faith.
Others acted in compassion but without
knowledge of how God would use their actions.
Shiphrah, Puah, Moses's mother, and Miriam
all chose to defy the orders of a death-dealing Pharaoh.
And Pharaoh's daughter dealt the death-dealing blow
to his power when she rescued Moses in Chapter 2.

And do you know what the lesson on power here is?

It is this: in a society where one man or political entity
sought to hoard all power, these leaders
recognized the power they still had and acted.
The lesson for us is that we all have power.
We have a hard time deciding in our society today
whether power is good or bad.

On the one hand, we want to empower people to live
and act in ways that create a just and flourishing community for all.
On the other hand, we talk about "the powers that be"
in less than flattering terms, and we lament the
actions of the powerful that harm the powerless.

There's a proverb that says, "the dose makes the poison,"
and I think that's precisely the case with power.
Too much, and it becomes a poison to ourselves and others.
But if we shun it altogether, we find ourselves tossed about
by people who would gladly use their power to control others.
The key is moderation, recognizing that power itself is not bad.
How we use it makes all the difference.
And who we use it for.

Superheroes???

We as followers of Christ have to take time
to pray for wisdom and humility to use our power well.
Confess the misuses of power
we allow in our lives and communities.
And stand up when there is an abuse of power happening around us.

Shiphrah and Puah did.
They trusted in God's power and presence
more than in Pharaoh's power and presence.
And that their power can work to foil
those who would misuse the blessings of God.
That if they were willing to take the risk;
if they were willing to work for life and not for death,
then God's power would deliver them, which it did.

20 So God treated the midwives well, and the people kept on multiplying and became very strong. 21 And because the midwives respected God, God gave them households of their own.

Are there other girls who follow in their footsteps
to protect the innocent when they, too, are still quite young?
What of mothers who do everything they can
to make a way when there seems to be no way
so that their kids can have hope for a future?
Who will be the truth tellers when the lies of the too
powerful seem too loud to drown out?

And did you notice something else about power?

Pharaoh used power for harm.
The women all used it to bring life.
The gospel empowers us to use our power
for God's purposes in communities where leaders seek

to hold up their own power to the detriment of everyone else
So what are you doing with the power that God gives you for good?