

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor  
First Christian Church  
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## Moses & His People & Their God The Promise Continues I. "Who Knew Him Not..."

(Exodus 1:8-22-2:10 NRSV) 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. 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." Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. 2 The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. 3 When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. 4 His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. 5 The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. 6 When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. 7 Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" 8 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. 9 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. 10 When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

Dateline, Washington DC "A recent survey shows that 2 out of 5 Americans now

think that marriage is ‘obsolete’ and that the marriage rate hit an all-time low in 2010.”  
*Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.*

Dateline, the United States of America. “A recent study shows that in the last decade the percentage of people who do not count themselves as a part of any religious tradition or community has jumped to 15%, by far the largest number in American history.” *Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.*

Dateline, Tens of thousands of households: “Mom and Dad, we’re not really planning on getting married, but I wanted you to know that we’re going to be living together.” *Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.*

Dateline, In too many marriages: “I don’t want to have to say this, but it’s true: I don’t really love you anymore and I want a divorce.” *Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.*

*Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.* Poet Wendell Berry describes those moments in every life when it is as if the world suddenly, quietly, falls away from us, leaving us standing in the air alone with our hearts hollowed out. And because every life indeed has and will have again those moments, that opening line from Exodus – “*Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph*” – says so very much, resonates so very clearly. As Rev. William Dols puts it, “A new king arises and everything that is firm becomes uncertain, what is taken for granted isn’t anymore. The ground melts, the world tilts, and nothing is ever the same again.”<sup>1</sup>

And the question is – the question for our faith is – what do we do with those melt-y, tilt-y moments when everything is uncertain and the routines are gone? What

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<sup>1</sup>Rev. William L. Dols. <http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=108> The Wendell Berry reference is also from Rev. Dol’s sermon.

do we do? Now, some of those moments are more cataclysmic than others, some are large and utterly life-altering, and some are smaller. But all such moments, whether large or small, share that experience of certainty being replaced with uncertainty, with the familiar becoming suddenly strange, with what was all of a sudden no longer being what is. The story that begins the book of Exodus is the story of the Hebrew people's moment when everything became uncertain, when everything shifted.

You may recall from our sermon series last summer on our "first families of faith" that the Book of Genesis closed with Joseph having become the honored second-in-command in Egypt, the one whose leadership vision and abilities kept tens of thousands of people alive, including his own family, during a time of terrible famine. But as our story picks up today, though, it is about 400 years later and instead of being honored guests in Egypt, with special privileges from the king, now a "new king is on the throne in Egypt, a king 'who did not know Joseph,' meaning a king who had no commitment to Joseph's people... and no... concern for their welfare."<sup>2</sup>

And so the ground for them has moved, shifted. What worked no longer works. Now Egypt is no longer a life-saving haven, it is just the opposite – a death-dealing trap where the men are enslaved and worked to death and the king has decreed that there will be no more Israelite men for all the boy babies are to be killed. Oh yes indeed, "*...a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.*" And what do they do? And what do **we** do when the king changes? What do we do? There are **three** possibilities.

The first possibility is **denial**. The human psyche is amazingly adept at denying the evidence in front of it. I don't know if any of you are fans of the British comedy troupe Monty Python but one of their most famous sketches concerned the man who bought a parrot which turned out to be dead. And when the man went back to the pet

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<sup>2</sup><http://spirit-net.ca/sermons/a-or21-keeping.php>

shop owner, the following conversation ensued:

*I wish to complain about this parrot that I purchased not half an hour ago from this very boutique.*

*Oh yes, the, uh, the Norwegian Blue...What's,uh...What's wrong with it?*

*I'll tell you what's wrong with it, my lad. 'E's dead, that's what's wrong with it!*

*No, no, 'e's uh,...he's resting.*

*Look, I know a dead parrot when I see one, & I'm looking at one right now.*

*No no he's not dead, he's, he's restin'!<sup>3</sup>*

And so on and so on it goes, with the pet shop owner claiming that the parrot is actually just stunned, that that breed of parrot actually prefers lying on its back, but finally admits that indeed the parrot was dead when he sold it and that he'd nailed the parrot to its perch to make it look like it was alive.

You and I do the same thing sometimes. In the face of situations that change our world, that make everything uncertain, in those times when a new king arises and all is different, we sometimes nail *our* feet to the floor of what we *wish* would be so that we won't have to face what in fact is. I understand that urge. I have sometimes said that there are times, there are moments, there are occasions in life when denial is a perfectly good tactic to get through the next hour, to get through this day. Denial in this sense is often part of the grief process and it's a blessing that it allows us to sort of shut off the pain by avoiding its reality for a few moments. But denial is a terrible **strategy** for conducting life. It may work for an hour, it may bring balm for a day, but it will shrivel our souls when it becomes a substitute for facing life's realities on **every** day. Yet that sort of denial is seductive; it tries to tell us that we can divorce what our mind knows from what our insides fear, slyly saying to us that we don't have to acknowledge **either** our insides or what we know.

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<sup>3</sup><http://www.mtholyoke.edu/~ebarnes/python/dead-parrot.htm>

What do we do when the king changes? What do we do? Well, a second possibility is that we simply **put up with it**. We adjust. We bear it. During five years of serving a Japanese ethnic congregation in Hawaii I came to have a tremendous appreciation for a traditional Japanese virtue called *shinata ga-nai* – meaning: to bear what must be borne with dignity, believing it can't be helped. It is a sort of Japanese version of stoicism. There were several members of that congregation whom the government had interned during World War II, an act for which President Reagan later apologized. Listening to those folks who had been interned, or going to the site of the now-restored internment camp in Manzanar, California, there are so many moving testimonies to the power of that virtue, the sheer dignity of it. But one of the *problems* – that even many of those internees who spoke so movingly in their memoirs themselves admit – is that simply bearing, simply quietly suffering with dignity the changes that came when “a new king arose,” when the world shifted, when turmoil changed everything is that that attitude tends to isolate you. It tends to make you more and more alone. And the more and more alone you are virtually always the less able you are to **hope**. For hope is an attitude that can only flourish when it is watered and encouraged by others. It is similar to that classic American virtue of “the self-made man [sic].” For while on the one hand, there is something intriguing about those who have made their way through life mostly on their own devices, a moment's thought about those whom you would identify that way would show that they also tend to be lonely and isolated people.

*Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.* Life changed utterly; things shifted; what was solid now isn't it. What do we do? We can **deny** it. We can simply **bear** it. But neither of these is what happened in the rest of our story

today. Those midwives who fooled Pharaoh didn't deny what was happening and the awful order they had been given by Pharaoh to kill the boy babies. Nor did they simply stoically bear it. No, what the midwives did, in the face of turmoil and change and awfulness, was not to deny it, not to simply bear it, but – to name our third possible response – to **subvert** it. *Subvert it*. Did you hear the story of the midwives as Jack read it? I admire their resourcefulness in subverting Pharaoh's awful edict. Apparently there are only two midwives for all the Hebrew women. They must have been busy ladies! And Pharaoh tells them that when they are attending a birth that if it's a boy baby about to be born, they are to kill him before he's born. Now, if the midwives had simply said to Pharaoh, "No, we won't do that" it's very likely that the midwives themselves would have been killed. But the midwives are more cunning than Pharaoh and they use his gullibility to subvert his wishes. Did you hear what they said when he asked why his orders weren't being carried out? "Uh, sir, those Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; for they all are way too vigorous and give birth before we can get there!" Now, this is about as unlikely an explanation as when the Lamaze coach said, when Barbara and I were attending our Lamaze classes before our youngest was born, that during labor Barbara would experience "*some moments of discomfort*." "*Discomfort*"! Bill Cosby's description seems more apt when he tells men how to imagine what childbirth feels like when he suggests attempting to pull your upper lip back over your head to touch the back of your neck. And in the same way, to say that Hebrew women – *all* of them – just had faster, easier births was just as silly as saying that there will be some "discomfort" during labor. But the midwives knew that Pharaoh wasn't particularly smart – after all, his very death-edict for baby boys shows that he wasn't a particularly gifted thinker when you realize that by then it was the Hebrew men who were building all those incredible but monstrously labor intensive pyramids, and without boys, well – duh! – there would soon be no men. But he bought it. Their

explanation worked. The midwives didn't **deny** the awfulness, they didn't simply just **bear** it; no, they used their creativity to **subvert** it.

My friends, our call today as Christ's church is to be subversive. In the midst of a culture that indeed has become deeply suspicious of the church, believing that church too often means banal, bigoted, boring, or back-biting and bickering, our call is not to simply accept that judgment nor deny it, but to find new ways, subversive ways, if you will, to reach out to that 15% of Americans who yearn for something deeper in their lives but think that the last place they'll find it is in "church." It means that we covenant together to continue to repudiate any back-biting or bickering that would divert us from our call to be people of radical hospitality and outrageous generosity. It means that we can't expect those folks around us to think the best of us if we fall into the habit of thinking the worst of each other. It means that we need to together use our best insights and imaginations and passions to find ways to continue to reach out to those who have been hurt by life and even religion, subverting their expectations that religion is about judgment, not joy. We will subvert their expectations of being bigoted, boring, banal, back-biting or bickering, won't we? *Won't we?*

And in our national life, and in the spirit of the one whom we honor this weekend, there are things that we simply cannot, as people of faith, either accept or deny – but **must** subvert. When one in five children in this country go to bed hungry at night, it is time to be subversive with all our resources and imagination we can muster. When we as a society carefully and wisely and rightly regulate the toys our children play with far more extensively than the guns<sup>4</sup> that have shot three of those children in this country during the time we have been worshipping this morning<sup>5</sup> – and will shoot three more in

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/13/opinion/13kristof.html?\\_r=2&ref=us](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/13/opinion/13kristof.html?_r=2&ref=us)

<sup>5</sup> <http://life.familyeducation.com/school-safety-month/violence/29712.html>

the next hour and the hour after that and on and on – then we need as people of faith, I believe, to find ways to seek to subvert a culture where what is really a public health problem has been hijacked by the loudest and shrillest voices on both the left and the right – for each day that that happens seventy-two more children will be shot, and fifteen of them will die.

Or maybe it's something in your life that needs subverting. Maybe there is some habit, some trait, some bigoted or boring or banal or bickering attitude that you are no longer either able to accept or deny, that is sapping and shriveling your soul. Wouldn't you like to subvert it? Wouldn't you? Ask Christ to help you make it so!

As you likely know, Moses became the leader of the Hebrew people and finally was able to lead them out of Egypt. But before they left, Pharaoh tried one last time to bring them back, sending his armies to where the Hebrew people were poised on the banks of the Red Sea. And an old, old Jewish tradition says that the waters of that sea didn't begin to part until Moses put his foot into that water.<sup>6</sup> In other words, sometimes what you have to do in order to subvert what can no longer be accepted or denied, to subvert what no longer **should** be accepted or denied, is to step forth in faith. As one preacher puts it: "The ultimate challenge to us... [is] finally to step into the deep water... rather than cursing the shadows [or] clinging sadly to what was."<sup>7</sup> So, my friends, following Moses, following Dr. King, following the all those saints who would call us to never rest easy with hurting lives or unjust practices, let us do what our anthem this morning said: "*Wade in the water. Wade in the water, children.*"

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. <http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=108>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=108>