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Not Fake News: Who, What, When, Where, Why 4. When? When New Kings Arise

Exodus 1:8-20 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

"Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." I have always thought that this was one of the most poignant lines in all of the Bible. For it speaks of change and loss, of possibility and hope, of fearfulness and transformation all in one succinct line. We know those times in our lives when things change and everything that was once familiar no longer is. *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 [often] 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.”¹

We have seen that again and again of late, haven't we? Beautiful forests and majestic cloud-filled skies turn into raging death-dealing infernos or watery horror. A Hollywood producer whom we thought was one who gave us masterful cinematic diversion turns out to be a confessed criminal sexual predator. Or maybe the final child leaves home and your now empty nest echoes an acquaintance's words when she writes: "I am adjusting to my daughter having her own car and... and managing her own finances. But sometimes I just want to drive [to her college] and brush her hair."² Or perhaps a friend hurts or even betrays you with a thoughtless remark or cutting line and the ground just shakes out from under you. Perhaps you look with dismay at the state of politics in our country and wonder when compromise and civility became vices instead of virtues, as you shake your head at all those who have traded conversation for verbal abuse and objective standards of journalism for whatever you wish things would be. Maybe you wonder when science and evidence and reason seemed to have become dirty words, or you remember when Christians and country were proud of resettling refugees instead of seeing them as scary "others."

"Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph" And the question for our faith is this: what do we do with those melting, tilting moments when everything is uncertain and the routines are gone? What 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

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

²Posted by the Rev. Kate Penney Howard on Facebook.

strange, with what was all of a sudden no longer being what is. The story that opens the book of Exodus – and which closes our short sermon series on what is not fake news – is the story of the Hebrew people’s moment when everything became uncertain, when everything shifted. You may recall that the Book of Genesis closed with Joseph having become the honored second-in-command in Egypt, the one whose vision and leadership kept thousands of people alive, including his own family, during a time of terrible famine. But as our story picks up today, 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.”³

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? I see **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 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!

³<http://spirit-net.ca/sermons/a-or21-keeping.php>

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'!*⁴

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 and 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 shut off the pain by avoiding its reality for a few moments. But denial is a terrible **strategy** for conducting life over the long haul. 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.

What do we do when the king changes? 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, there are so many moving testimonies to the power

⁴<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/~ebarnes/python/dead-parrot.htm>

of that virtue, the sheer dignity of it. But one of the *problems* – that even many of those internees movingly admit – is that simply bearing, simply quietly suffering with dignity the changes that came when “a new king arose,” when the world shifted and everything changed is that that attitude of *shinata ga-nai* tends to isolate you. It tends to make you more and more alone. And the more and more alone you are the less able you are to **hope**. For hope is an attitude that can only flourish when it is watered and encouraged by others.

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. Life changed utterly; things shifted; what was solid now isn't. What do we do? We can **deny** it. We can simply **bear** it. But neither of these is what happened in the rest of today's story from Exodus. Those midwives who fooled Pharaoh didn't deny what was happening with 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 – to name our third possible response – to **subvert** it. *Subvert it.* Apparently, the story says, there are only two midwives for all the Hebrew women. They must have been busy women! 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 our Lamaze coach told Barbara and me that during labor Barbara would experience “*some moments of discomfort.*” “*Discomfort!*” But the midwives knew that Pharaoh wasn't particularly smart – after all, his death-edict shows that he wasn't a

particularly gifted thinker. It was, after all, 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 Pharaoh bought it. The midwives' 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, back-biting or bickering, our call is not to simply accept that judgment nor deny it, but to find new ways, subversive ways to reach out to that increasing number 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 need to continue to 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, and who expect "the church" to be bigoted, boring, banal, back-biting or bickering.

And because our faith is always about hope and hope cannot exist without justice, in our shared civic life 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 safety of the toys our children play with far more extensively than the guns⁵ that have shot three of those children in this country during the time we have been worshipping this morning⁶ then we need as people of faith to find ways to seek to subvert a culture where what is really a public health problem has been hijacked by the loudest and

⁵ Cf. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/13/opinion/13kristof.html>

⁶ <http://life.familyeducation.com/school-safety-month/violence/29712.html>

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? Ask Christ to help you make it so!

As I preached a few weeks ago, before the Hebrew people left Egypt, 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. There's an old, old Jewish tradition that says that the waters of that sea didn't actually begin to part until Moses put his foot into that water.⁷ 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."⁸ So, my friends, following Moses, following all those saints who would call us to never rest easy with hurting lives or unjust practices, let us do what our choir so beautifully sang about a few weeks ago: "*Wade in the water. Wade in the water, children.*" May it be so!

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

⁸ <http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=108>