

“What If We’re Wrong?”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
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- Exodus 1:8-2:10 “But the more the Egyptians oppressed the Israelites, the more they increased in number and the farther they spread through the land. The Egyptians came to fear the Israelites and made their lives miserable by forcing them into cruel slavery. They made them work on their building projects and in their fields, and they had no pity on them” (vv. 12-14).
- Romans 12:1-8 “Do not think of yourself more highly than you should. Instead, be modest in your thinking, and judge yourself according to the amount of faith that God has given you” (v. 3b-c).
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: The story of the Egyptian oppression of the Israelites inspires us to adopt Christ-like humility.

We get fooled.

It could be something as simple as an episode of a TV show like NCIS or Law & Order, where in the last two minutes you realize that you’ve been suspecting the wrong person for most of the hour and the villain turns out to be not the rude, brutish tow truck driver but rather the sweet innocent waitress from the coffee shop.

Or it could be a story line as complex and intricate as the one from the 1999 movie “The Sixth Sense.” If you’ve not seen this thoughtful suspense movie and you like a little mix of thrill and mystery, I recommend it. I’ll just say that at the end of the film, you realize that some very basic automatic assumptions you’ve made – assumptions you’ve used to follow the story – those assumptions turn out to be dead wrong.

Every so often we engage ourselves in a story that fools us. We think we know where we are in the story, but something causes us to realize that we were wrong. And I wonder if this familiar story from Exodus – the story of Baby Moses floating among the bulrushes – isn’t one of those kinds of story.

Naturally, we know we’re represented in the story by the Israelites, the ancestors of the Jews who were our ancestors way back at the beginning of the Christian family tree. The Israelites were enslaved by the Egyptians, only to be led out of slavery into freedom by Moses many years later. Like the Israelites, we see ourselves as triumphing over incredible adversity because we, too, trust in God. We see ourselves as the righteous minority triumphing over the oppressive dominant culture of the Egyptians. We identify with the Israelites in this story because our story is so much like theirs.

But what if we were to read the story in another way? What might we learn if we imagined ourselves not among the Israelites who were striving (with God’s help) to overcome tremendous adversity? What if we pictured ourselves in the role of the Egyptians in this story? What if we were the powerful, dominant, ruling class who believed that we were more deserving, believed that we were righteous, believed that we knew God’s will and no one else did – especially not those “miserable minorities?”

¹ Adapted from my sermon originally preached 8/21/2005

Is that too much of a stretch for us? Is it just so implausible that it's almost impossible to picture ourselves not as the struggling Israelites who have God's favor, but as the oppressive Egyptians who ignore God's call and instead feed their self-serving appetite for power and wealth?

It's not like our ancestors have never played that role. Let me remind you of just four snapshots from history.

Snapshot #1: Think of the way European settlers — the ancestors of many of us — treated the slaves who were forcibly relocated from the African continent to this continent. For more than 100 years there were Presbyterians in the southern colonies and states who owned slaves. Those Presbyterians had no problem with it.

Think of them reading their King James Version Bibles, reading Exodus Chapters 1 and 2, hearing sermons preached about how God had rescued their spiritual ancestors — the Israelites — from oppressive domination at the hands of the Egyptians. And there in their log cabin churches (from which their fellow Christian slaves were excluded, of course!), there those slave-owning Presbyterians would say to themselves, "Thank God I'm not like those Egyptians!"

Or they'd hear the parable about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke Chapter 18, where the Pharisee stands in front of everyone in the temple and prays loudly, "Thank you, God, that I am not a rotten person, especially like that crooked tax collector over there." And those Presbyterian slave owners would think to themselves, "You horrible Pharisee, thinking you're so superior just because you've got money and power and position. Can't you see how you're mistreating that humble tax collector?"

And then those Presbyterian slave owners would head home in their slave-chauffeured carriages to their slave-built homes where they would be waited on by their slaves. And out back, outside the hot kitchen, as the master's family would clasp their hands to thank God for the meal, the slaves would gather to share their meal, thanking the same God for the blessings they could find in the midst of their enslavement.

You see, we are not immune from accusations of being party to oppression.

Snapshot #2: In the late 1860s Americans settling in the western territories convinced President Ulysses S. Grant that there was an "Indian problem." President Grant created a system of land reserves or reservations with the idea that Native Americans would be relocated to these reservations, leaving behind their traditional hunting and burial grounds. They would be taught the rudiments of agriculture, even though many of the reservations were in arid lands that were unsuitable for growing crops. That was about 150 years ago. Still today there are about 300 reservations for 500 ancestral tribes. We're all aware of the problems of reservation life: pervasive alcoholism, substandard living conditions, poor education systems, inadequate water access, unemployment, not to mention the trauma of their ancestors having been forcibly relocated from the places those Native Americans had called "home" ... which leads us to....

Snapshot #3: "The big secret everyone knew about." That's how my father described the Amache internment camp in Granada, Colorado during World War II. It was about 75 miles from the tiny town he grew up in. Everybody knew it was there.

The “relocation center” (as it was euphemistically called) was constructed hastily to house 7,318 men, women, and children of Japanese ancestry who had lived along the West Coast. After Pearl Harbor, political and civic leaders in California, Oregon, and Washington feared another Japanese attack on the West Coast mainland. They urged Franklin Delano Roosevelt to remove these potential sympathizers from their midst. On February 19, 1942 President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 “which resulted in the forcible internment of 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry. More than two-thirds of those interned under the Executive Order were citizens of the United States, and none had ever shown any disloyalty.”² In fact, about 1,200 Japanese-American detainees actually enlisted in the U.S. armed forces.

The U.S. internment camps were overcrowded and provided poor living conditions. According to a 1943 report published by the War Relocation Authority, Japanese Americans were housed in “tarpaper-covered barracks of simple frame construction without plumbing or cooking facilities of any kind. Coal [for cooking and heating] was hard to come by, and internees slept under as many blankets as they were allotted.”³

After the war, less than half of the detainees chose to return to their pre-war homes, such was the trauma of having been displaced by their own – our own! – government. ...But we wonder how we might identify with the Egyptians in the story of baby Moses?

Snapshot #4: Six weeks after 9/11, I had to fly to Los Angeles. In those early days post-9/11, airport security screening was heightened, but it wasn’t systematic or refined. Many people were still staying away from airline travel, but even among those who were returning to the skies, most were still just a little nervous. And oh, if you happened to have the tan skin tone or dark hair or facial hair characteristic of many Middle Easterners, or were speaking Arabic, or wore a *kaffiyeh* or *hijab* on your head, people watched you out of the corner of their eyes. They hoped you weren’t going on their flight. They hoped you wouldn’t be sitting in their row.

After all, we who are Caucasian in appearance are mighty in numbers, and we want to keep an eye on those who look different from us. We want them to know that we know where they are, that we’re watching what they’re doing, that we’re guessing what they’re thinking, because *we* know that *we* stand for freedom and fairness and peace, but who knows about “those other people...”? The assumptions we use unconsciously to evaluate other people reveal our prejudices that are a result of the inherited power we have merely from being part of the majority population. Because we’re part of the majority population in this country, we have political and social and economic power. But the assumptions we use unconsciously to evaluate other people reveal our prejudices – prejudices we’ve created in order to hold onto that power.

I think we’ve seen enough of the Oppression Photo Gallery to know that when we read the story of Baby Moses in the bulrushes, we could identify with the oppressive

² <http://www.lib.utah.edu/spc/photo/9066/9066.htm>

³ <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/internment1.html>

self-serving Egyptians at least as easily as we could with the oppressed God-fearing Israelites.

But we are not hopeless. We are not beyond hope. We are not without hope.

In life and in death, our hope is in our Lord Jesus Christ, because in his life — completely devoted to God — he showed us how to rise above our base tendencies to crave and abuse power. The apostle Paul summarized Jesus' prescription in the twelfth chapter of his Letter to the Romans. Paul wrote, "*Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God...*" (v. 1b). What did he mean by "living sacrifice?"

Read on: "*[that is,] dedicated to God's service and pleasing to God. This is the true worship that you should offer*" (v. 1c). So that's what God hopes to receive from us. But how on earth are we going to be able to do that?

Read on: "*Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world*" (v. 2a). By "standards" Paul means beliefs such as "being powerful means you're right" or "having money means you can do whatever you want to do regardless of the rights or needs of anyone else." Well, if we're not supposed to behave the way people instinctively tend to behave, what are we supposed to do?

Read on: "*...But let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will know the will of God — what is good and is pleasing to God and is perfect*" (v. 2b). The New Testament Greek word that's translated in English as "perfect" often means "completely devoted." So Paul's telling us that God will let us know how we can be good and pleasing and perfectly devoted to God.

And one more thing — it's a big thing. Because of our track record of self-righteous, self-important, oppressive behavior (remember the "Four Snapshots of Oppression"?) we need to do one more thing. Paul wrote, "*Do not think of yourself more highly than you should. Instead, be modest in your thinking...*" (v. 3b). Another word for that is "humility." We are to be humble.

We have to work at having a humble approach to life — not "appearing to be humble," but actually living with humility. Being Christ-like doesn't come naturally. You have to practice it like you practice a new recipe you want to try out on your family at Thanksgiving, like you practice your putting stroke. We need a humble orientation, acknowledging, "I may not have the best idea. I may not have the right answer. I may not have done that correctly. I need to listen, to hear, to consider, to sympathize, to give, to apologize, to surrender, to sacrifice." That's what it takes for us to 'not think of ourselves more highly than we should, but instead be modest in our thinking.'

The story of Baby Moses in the bulrushes tells of the Israelites' faith that God would help them survive their enslavement, and that is inspirational. But we can be just as inspired if we identify with the oppressive Egyptians. It reminds us not to be conformed to the base urges of this world, but to let God transform us by a complete change of our minds, adopting a Christ-like, humble approach to life.