

Racism – Are my Hands Clean? Exodus 1: 1-22

Title and Outline inspired by "Persecution ..." by Saeed Richardson @ SermonCentral.Com

A young girl asked her father, "Do all fairy tales begin with 'Once Upon A Time?'"
"No," he replied, "A whole lot of them begin with 'If elected I promise...'"

'Once upon a time' is a classic phrase that has long been used in storytelling. There are also a couple of modern variations of the phrase; such as the Star Wars films which all begin with, '*A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...*'

While most of these stories end with "...*and they all lived happily ever after,*" not all of them do. Don McLean's 1971 hit song '**American Pie**' begins with the phrase "A long, long time ago..." but it ends with.... "*So bye-bye, Miss American pie. Drove my Chevy to the levee, but the levee was dry.*" The ending of such stories are often dependent upon what the hero or heroine decided to do – to resist evil or to bow beneath it.

Today, we begin moving through the stories of God and His people during the time of Moses. Unlike most fairy tales, these stories are true. All of the people, places and events were real; none of the names have been changed to protect the less than innocent.

In Moses we will find a very real-world reluctant hero who had to be forced into his destined roll. I hope that we will learn as much from his failures as we learn from his victories. And while these stories do have a mostly "happily ever after" ending, the beginning was very dark, which is where we must start today. Because there is a very important lesson we need to consider before even bringing Moses onto the scene.

The heroes of this dark opening story are two ordinary Egyptian midwives, who in resisting Pharaoh's murderous schemes, were both blessed by God and remembered by name in Scripture. I believe that God is still looking for ordinary men, women and children who will believe in Him and with clean hands, do what they must to resist the tyrannies, the persecutions, the injustices of our day. So let's begin.

Almost 400 years have passed since the days of Joseph. The sons of Jacob have enjoyed a prosperous life and have grown to become a very numerous but different people living in the land of Egypt, which is what prompts racism and fear of the Israelites to grow among their former hosts.

⁸*Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰Come, 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." ¹¹Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor.*

By definition, 'racism' is the artificial privileging of one unique class of people, ethnic group, or language over others. What comes to your mind when you think of racism? What are some of the thoughts and images? What are some of the actions and deeds?

Whatever form it takes, racism begins whenever we **FORGET** our history, or **FEAR** others, or **FORCE** them to bend to our will.

Today our country continues in social turmoil, with black versus white racial issues once again flaring up, often violently, in our major cities. Most of these modern problems, having their roots in questions of racism or racial equality which have remained unresolved since our nation's slave-holding days. No matter their current status or privileged rank in life, all African Americans and many other ethnic minorities in this country are only too familiar with both racism and racial persecution, both historically as well as currently.

We all know the sordid facts of African American history, how their ancestors were taken captive and sold into slavery; how they were locked in chains and forced to make a most horrific journey, first through African slave camps and then in crossing the Atlantic Ocean. It is estimated that only half of the captured slaves ever made it to American shores alive. Their life after that was little better or worse, depending upon the masters who purchased them, but freedom for most was an impossible dream.

Which is why African Americans have historically identified so closely with the experience of the Israelites in Egypt. This is also why today's portion of scripture must help us face the matter of racism as it has once again come to a boiling point in our nation.

It remains a sad truth that in America blacks and whites continue to live under different unwritten standards of equality or justice. Nationally, our hands are not clean. **Systemic racism** both subtle and not-so-subtle, is a very real problem that plagues every aspect of our culture from employment, to college admissions, even to law enforcement as evidenced by the fact that in northern cities – all other things being equal - black drivers are three to five times more likely to be stopped by police than white drivers.

So what can we do individually to live fairly, justly, lovingly, with our neighbors either of color or having some other difference from us ... and to also work for a day when in our churches and in our world there really is no distinction between black or white, Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free; *the same Lord being Lord of all and generous to all who call on him?*

To answer that question, let's reflect upon the roots of racism and prejudice as they first impacted the Israelites in Egypt. Our story begins with *a new king who arose*

over Egypt, who **did not know** Joseph. Like that new king, **our hands are not clean when we FORGET our history.**

The Israelites were first invited to move to Egypt out of Pharaoh's gratitude for the miraculous work Joseph had done in not only saving the entire nation from a devastating famine, but also in expanding and enriching the Egyptian empire by purchasing all the land for Pharaoh. Joseph had become such a powerful presence in Egypt, that when he asked Pharaoh for permission to bury his father in Canaan, "*All Pharaoh's officials accompanied him—the dignitaries of his court and all the dignitaries of Egypt* on what would be a 5 to 6 week journey into the wilderness and back again (Gen. 50:8). But with the passing of years, eventually all that Joseph had accomplished was forgotten when a new pharaoh came to power.

As it did in Egypt, racism and persecution begins **when we forget.** Not just African Americans but most all of our American ancestors – German, English, Irish, Russian, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, began life in America with hardship, struggle and to a certain extent, their own personal battles against the racism that greeted them in this new land. Our forefathers and mothers came to a raw and untamed land willing to work for a chance to thrive; most arrived with very few possessions, many even indenturing themselves into a form of slavery just to pay for the trip. **America was the great experiment to see if a nation could be formed not out of one particular ethnic group, or language, or religion, but around the idea that all people could recognize each other's right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.** It remains a blight on our national history that we forgot to extend the same rights, privileges and hopes to those who did not come voluntarily but were brought here by force.

Forgetting both our mutual equality and answerability before God is the first step towards racism and persecution of others. Only when we remember that just as it should be within the family of God, so also all Americans should be considered brothers and sisters having an equal share in making the American Dream a reality.

The next step towards racism and eventually persecution is **FEAR.** Like the Egyptians, **our hands aren't clean when we fear those who are different from us.**

Pharaoh said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. 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

The Egyptians feared the Israelites because their numbers were growing dramatically and because they were a 'different' people who might either join with outside forces to attack the Egyptians, or to escape from what had now become their servant status in the land.

Why did the Egyptians fear the Israelites' difference? Sadly, due to our fallen human nature there is almost always an instinctual fear of anyone outside of our clan, of strangers, or anyone who is any way different.

But if we are by faith reborn 'in Christ' that should remove all basis of fear; *because perfect love casts out all fears* (1 John 4:18). Christians now live with not only with the surety of God's love and care over our lives here but also our hopes for life everlasting. As Paul would joyously proclaim, *if God is for us, who can be against us* (Rom. 8:28). So we now live here as God's ambassadors, His messengers, charged with the responsibility to be hospitable to strangers, *for God has given us not a spirit of fear but of power and love and self control* (2 Tim. 1:7 cf: Hebrews 13:2).

Martin Luther King often talked about "fear" in his struggles for black equality. He once replied to another black man who had declared a dislike for Jews

It is very unfortunate that you dislike Jews. This is a problem which you need to solve immediately, because it is no different from the attitude that many Whites have concerning the whole Negro race. In order to deal with this problem, you must get to the roots of your dislike for the Jews. Most hate is rooted in fear, suspicion, ignorance and pride. You must be sure that all of these factors are removed from your personality where the Jews are concerned. The word prejudice means literally to prejudge, that is, to pass judgment before you have all the facts. You have probably prejudged the Jewish community and distorted ideas that you have heard circulated concerning Jews. You can only remove this by knowing the truth and realizing that no one shortcoming can characterize a whole race. I would suggest that you seek real personal fellowship with Jews and you will discover that some of the finest persons in our nation are members of the Jewish community. Through this type of personal fellowship, you will come to know them and love them and thereby transcend...bigotry. Men hate each other because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they are so often separated from each other. ("Advice for Living" - Nov 1990 - Page 136).

The Egyptians FORGOT God's special relationship with the Israelites. Then they began to FEAR these people who were now both different and numerous. Which led to them FORCING the Israelites into slavery

Therefore [the Egyptians] set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor....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.

So out of fear, Pharaoh **forces** the Israelites into slavery. He intentionally tries both to break them as a people while benefitting from their destruction. But he forgot to figure in that God was still blessing these Israelites, even in slavery so that even in slavery their numbers and strength continued to increase, which only increased his own fear.

Like those ancient Egyptians, our hands aren't clean when we forget our history and begin to fear and force others to do our will.

So maybe we won't capture and force someone into slavery, but maybe ... we try to coerce a coworker into doing things that will bring us personal gain, or to do that stuff we don't want to do.

Maybe, for whatever reason, we try to make things more difficult than they ought to be for someone; to try to get a coworker fired, or to insure that they are not hired.

When we force others there is Imprisonment; unjust imprisonment is slavery. When we force others there is Exile; exile is a form of punishment. It means to be forced away from one's home.

There should be no force, no imprisonment, no exile, for those striving to live together in the family of God. All this talk of "God loves you where you are at," "come as you are" and "drink freely of the water of life" should make the Church a very revolutionary place within our culture ... if only we don't forget who we are, what we have been left here to accomplish and descend into fear.

Are there any heroes in this story that is occurring some 80 years before Moses comes on the scene? Yes. There are two mid-wives who had **not forgotten** the God of the Israelites, who **did not fear** either the Israelites or Pharaoh and who thus **refused to be forced** to do evil.

¹⁵The 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." ¹⁷But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ¹⁸So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" ¹⁹The 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." ²⁰So 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.

Who were these mid-wives? Just ordinary people, probably themselves Egyptian. In that time and culture, many of the women who became midwives did so because they had no children of their own. So they gladly helped other women bring new life into the world. Scripture says that these two midwives feared God. Whether they knew Him as the God of the Israelites or by another Egyptian name, they knew that murder was a sin against God. So they refused to kill the baby boys.

Scripture also notes that God took notice of these midwives' bravery and in return, He blessed them with families of their own. But the blessings God bestowed upon them didn't affect only them. Scripture also records "*...and the people multiplied and grew very strong...*"

Some of those men born during this time would be able to look back and say, "I'm alive now thanks to those 2 brave women, Shiphrah and Puah." Moses wasn't born yet, but his older brother Aaron – who became Moses' spokesman and would later become the High Priest – was probably saved by these two women. That's speculation of course, but it's interesting to think about how many of those babies saved by these midwives grew up and became faithful servants of God, following Moses in the Exodus and faithfully doing God's Work in the wilderness?

Sadly the story of Shiphrah and Puah is the only bright spot in this tale. Being thwarted by the midwives refusal to kill the baby boys, Pharaoh ordered his soldiers to throw the babies into the Nile. How many Israelite children died this way was not recorded.

As has now happened in several of our cities, racism in Egypt has escalated from fear to force to murder. Racism almost always leads to murder. Jesus warned us that there is more than one way to murder another person: we can do so either physically or spiritually – killing them in our hearts.

As Christians what we now see happening around us – the fear, the enslavement, the murders – should break our hearts. Let us pray fervently that God will never let us forget not only who we are in Christ, but the tasks He has left for us to accomplish along with God's all encompassing love for all his wandering children of every color, race, and language around this world. And let us also pointedly ask God to show us what we can do to be part of the solution to the racism and hate that is once again running rampant in our nation.

Let us pray about this.