

# Sermon

## Weapons of the Weak

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, August 27, 2023

13TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

CONNECTION SUNDAY

RECEPTION OF NEW MEMBERS

*Psa. 124:0 A Song of Ascents. Of David.*

1 *If it had not been the LORD who was on our side  
—let Israel now say—*

2 *if it had not been the LORD who was on our side,  
when our enemies attacked us,*

3 *then they would have swallowed us up alive,  
when their anger was kindled against us;*

4 *then the flood would have swept us away,  
the torrent would have gone over us;*

5 *then over us would have gone  
the raging waters.*

6 *Blessed be the LORD,  
who has not given us  
as prey to their teeth.*

7 *We have escaped like a bird  
from the snare of the fowlers;  
the snare is broken,  
and we have escaped.*

8 *Our help is in the name of the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth.*

*Ex. 1:8 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.*

*Ex. 1:15 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.”*

*Ex. 2:1 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.*

*Ex. 2:5 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.”*

- I. Nine years ago I preached one of the more memorable sermons of my tenure at First Presbyterian Church in Fargo.**
  - A. While I would love to think it was memorable because of its erudition or its lofty rhetoric . . . it lives on in the memory of my former congregation because of a little story I told.**
  - B. Kirkin’ O’ the Tartar service. One of two services each year with attendance between 800 and 1000 congregants. (the other being Easter)**
    - 1. A week when the preacher knows they need to be at the top of their form because it is not often you preach to so many.**
  - C. The little story I told came from a book entitled: *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* by James C. Scott**
    - 1. Scott is a sociologist who had studied the forms of resistance which happen between the weak and poor against the rich and powerful.**
    - 2. You *don’t get guns!* You’ll never win that way.**
    - 3. You find little ways to resist the will of the powerful which you enact daily.**
      - a. To sustain the narrative of hope you:**
        - † Gather**
        - † Tell stories**
        - † Sing**

**D. So, by now I know you are keen to hear the story that brought so much attention to the sermon in 2014.**

**1. It's a made up fiction about peasants in the middle ages who see the king and his entourage approaching.**

**a. they dutifully stop working**

**b. line up at edge of the field**

**c. as king passes by they all bow deeply**

**d. one older man farts!**

**2. The fart is a little acts of defiance.**

**“You do not own me!”**

**E. My congregation where so scandalized that I had said, “Fart” on Kirkin’ ‘O the Tartan Sunday that they never let me forget it!**

**II. The book of Genesis ends with Joseph saving the family from famine by settling them in Egypt (in the land of Goshen). They are fruitful & multiply!**

**A. As the curtain rises on this new chapter in Israel's life with God...**

**1. A fearful king — no surprises here!**

**2. Poor Israelites now outnumber the former majority demographic - the Egyptians.**

**3. Wealthy power brokers who live and the highest levels of the pyramid are concerned.**

**B. The poor are oppressed by the powerful**

**1. Twice in opening paragraph “ruthless.”**

**2. In a move eerily foreshadowing the “slaughtering of the innocents” in Matthew 2, Pharaoh orders that all the male babies be thrown into the Nile and drowned.**

**a. “Rock-a-bye sweet baby, mamma is here  
Rock-a-bye sweet angel there's nothing to  
fear**

**Rock-a-bye sweet darling, all through the  
night**

**Momma will hold you safe - till the  
morning light.”**

**Counter-point “Down through the ages, the wise men and sages have said there are dirty deeds that simply must be done. To keep society goin’ and the benefits flowin’ there’s the simple necessity of hurtin’ someone. It take risk and agility, takin’ responsibility, it’s the core of what leadership’s really about. When the red blood starts comin’ just think of it as plumbin’ - if you’ve got a problem we must flush it out.” (from “The Cotton Patch Gospel” by Clarence Jordan).**

**C. When we become fearful of one another and of the changes that the other will bring — we make it possible to justify the most brutal and ruthless sorts of behavior.**

**III. Except that . . . did you notice? The child-to-be-savior escapes *every time!***

**A. In Matthews Gospel, Jesus escapes to Egypt (of all places) and grows up an illegal immigrant of that super-power, only returning the Galilee as an older child.**

**B. In Exodus, Moses (and many of the other Hebrew boy-babies) escape because the women refuse to follow orders.**

**IV. In fact, the story offers a powerful irony that hints at the ways of God**

**A. Pharaoh is the most powerful man in the then-known world — atop the great and mighty Egypt**

- 1. With economic monopoly**
- 2. With powerful armies**

- B. And yet — with *no name!* Exodus simply says, “a new king.”**
- 1. The mighty dictators may come and inhabit their throws for a little while, but they will all go down in dust — and *some* will not even be remembered by name.**
  - 2. This king does not remember Joseph — how Joseph saved the empire and preserved Egypt’s power. He does not remember that Joseph was made second in command of all of Egypt. He does not remember that these peasants - these Hebrews - are Joseph’s descendants and that they are privileged guests of the empire.**
  - 3. And the narrator — and thus all of history — chose not to “remember” his name as the story is told.**
    - a. He’s just some schmuck king in a long and undistinguished line of schmuck kings who should be ignored.**

**V. And there is *more* irony!**

- A. The king is nameless — but the midwives are *named*.**
- 1. Shiphrah and Puah are remembered *by name!***
  - 2. He tells them to kill the babies**
  - 3. They work out plausible deniability in the survival of the babies.**
- B. The King, realizing that he cannot manage these Hebrew mid-wives, takes a new tack.**

1. He commands those he imagines are as afraid of the Hebrew servants as he is to throw the boy children into the Nile. Surely his own citizens - who also stand to gain from this will obey.
- C. But, while *some* probably did obey . . . baby boys are slipping through the system.
- D. How stunningly ironic it is that Moses — who will facilitate the escape from Egypt of the Israelites, is saved from death by Pharaoh’s own daughter!
  1. And why would she defy her father? She had *pity*. Instead of ruthlessness toward the stranger — she shows compassion.

**VI. The story which seems at first to be about the powerful elite — turns out to be a story about the weak who deploy misdirection, and passive non-compliance, and creative obedience (Moses *was* technically thrown into the Nile after all) to undermine the decrees of the powerful and to remain faithful to the values and purposes of God.**

**VII. When I think of analogs for us to consider to our own circumstance — two come to my mind:**

- A. In truth, many American Presbyterians will find ourselves from a socio-economic view not among the Hebrews - but among the Egyptians.



1. **We too have voices among us (and perhaps within us) who want to enflame our anxiety about the changing demographics of our nation — to convince us that “those” people are having too many babies and we should fear the day when they become politically and economically powerful.**
  2. **I think that we would do well to ignore those voices and the ruthlessness they will inevitably want to justify in “dealing with the problem.”**
- B. Secondly, it seems likely to me that we will all, at some time in our lives, will be asked to do things that we know run counter to the values and vision of the Kingdom of Heaven — and we may be asked to do those things by our superiors at work or in society, or perhaps even in our families.**
1. **I’m thinking of an acquaintance who recently told me how he was being pressured to do something he knows is unethical (maybe illegal) by his corporate bosses.**
  2. **When we find ourselves in that dilemma - perhaps we can take a page from the playbook of the women of Egypt and manage to act in ways that undermine the unjust powers even as we appear to comply.**

**VIII. I have not forgotten that we are receiving new members today.**

- A. As Moses was put into the water and then was brought up out of the water to a new life that would have a profound impact on the world.**
- B. So today, we receive new members here at the font, and as we affirm our faith using the Apostle’s creed (the baptismal creed)**
- C. ...May we *remember our own baptism* and leave this place firmly convinced that before we are anything else:
  - 1. We are children of God**
  - 2. We are citizens of the kingdom of God**
  - 3. All other loyalties fall in line behind those two****

***Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* by James C. Scott**

**Charge —**

**1Cor. 1:26 Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: a not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one might boast in the presence of God. 30 He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”**