



**Westminster**  
**Presbyterian Church**  
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

## **Yet the Church Prevails**

### **Exodus 1**

Today, I am beginning a series of sermons on the Book of Exodus. Of course, I will not cover the entire book in six weeks, but I will focus on the events in the life of Moses that were particularly pivotal in making him the leader who, in obedience to God, took a band of Hebrew slaves and turned them into the nation of Israel.

When studying Exodus, we should remember that it is a continuation of the story that began in Genesis. You remember, Genesis ends with a series of stories about Joseph. You recall that Joseph was a dreamer, but he had an ability to interpret dreams. And when he interpreted Pharaoh's dream, Joseph was taken out of prison and put in charge of the distribution of grain for the entire nation. Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream of seven fat cows and seven lean cows saved Egypt from starvation.

Because of Joseph's interpretation and his ability to manage the affairs of Pharaoh, Joseph enjoyed celebrity status in Egypt. He married Pharaoh's daughter. And Joseph's father and brothers and their families were brought to Egypt and given the best of the land upon which to live.

Genesis ends with the story of Joseph's death, and after his death his family, or the Hebrews, lived a good life in Egypt. They prospered. But how quickly things changed with the turn of a page, that is, the page that ended Genesis and Exodus begins. Hear the word as I read the first chapter of Exodus.

**These are the names of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob, each with his family: Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun and Benjamin; Dan and Naphtali; Gad and Asher. The descendants of Jacob numbered seventy in all; Joseph was already in Egypt.**

**Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them.**

**Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. "Look," he said to his people, "the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country."**

**So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.**

**The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, "When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live." The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, "Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?"**

**The midwives answered Pharaoh, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive."**

**So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.**

**Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: "Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."**

**A new king was crowned in Egypt who knew nothing of Joseph. He had no knowledge of how Joseph saved Egypt from a seven year famine. The text**

says, "Joseph meant nothing to him." All he knew was that those Hebrews living in Goshen had become a substantial minority in his land.

If I were not a preacher, I think I would be a history teacher. Maybe it is a symptom of getting older, but the older I get, the better I understand the importance of knowing one's history, and the new Pharaoh did not know his history.

If the new Pharaoh knew about Joseph, how he saved Egypt, how his great-great-grandfather had invited Joseph's family to live in Egypt, maybe he would not have been suspicious of a growing minority of folks. There no indication these Hebrews were violent. There is no indication they were disloyal. All we know is that they were a growing minority.

And what happened to the Hebrews is the same thing that has happened over and over again when those in power are ignorant of a minority in their midst.

Pharaoh became suspicious, mistrust grew, and he became uneasy at how this growing minority would alter their way of life. Look at our own history. Look at what happened to Native Americans. Some of you may be old enough to remember the growing suspicions of Japanese Americans and German Americans during World War Two. You have read about the internment camps. And the book is still being written about Mexican Americans and illegal aliens today.

It happened in Egypt. The Pharaoh who did not know his history, who did not know Joseph, observed the foreign population in the land. And as fear often does, the problems and prejudices are exaggerated. Pharaoh said, "Look, the Hebrews are more numerous and more powerful than we." But in truth, they were not numerous or powerful. You see how fear exaggerates prejudice. If the Hebrews were so numerous, then why did it only take two mid-wives to cover all the births? If they were so powerful, why was it so easy for the Egyptians to put them in bondage?

Pharaoh's imagination, controlled by his fears, went so far as to say, "They will increase, and in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us." There is no evidence of this. The Hebrews prospered in Egypt. Why would they fight against their hosts? Yet this is what happens when we become afraid of a minority; our imaginations run rampant and our fears increase.

David Kalas wrote, "What could conceivably happen morphs in our minds into what will certainly happen, and something has to be done to stop it. And so, in effect, the dog that has never bitten anyone is put down simply because he has the teeth to do it."

What happened in Egypt is a prime example of racism born out of insecurity. And we hear Pharaoh say, "Come, let us deal shrewdly with them."

Fear is not always a bad thing; it can save our lives. It has often kept me from getting too close to the edge of a cliff. And a desire to maintain a status quo that gives us sense of security is not necessarily evil. But as with Pharaoh, when our fears exaggerate our prejudices, then we stand upon a shaky foundation.

Well, the solution in Egypt was to enslave the Hebrews; maybe a hard life building cities for Pharaoh would keep them from being so prolific. But, as is often the case, what we think we can control through violence will continue to haunt us. And the more the Hebrews were oppressed the more they multiplied.

Do you see the pattern, not only in Egypt, but in places all over the world, even here in Texas? Fear turns into prejudice, and prejudice turns into hatred and cruelty. And as Pharaoh's fears grew, the more he dreaded the Hebrews, and since the remedy of enslavement was not working, his cruelty escalated to murder.

Pharaoh called in the mid-wives. "When you are assisting in the birth of a Hebrew child, if it is a girl, let her live, but if it is a boy, kill him." As the saying goes, "maggots turn into flies."

To the praise of the mid-wives they did not obey Pharaoh, but they give us an example of telling an untruth in order to achieve a good purpose. The mid-wives lied to Pharaoh. They said that the Hebrew women are a tough breed, and they deliver their children before we arrive.

In Exodus we see racist propaganda at its worst; we are warned about what "they" are like; what "they" can do; and what "they" could become. Their physical prowess, their financial shrewdness, their conspiratorial connectedness, their duplicitous character; even their quiet, workmanlike ambition: Whatever their broad-brush characteristics may be, we can paint it as a suspicious and treacherous trait.

In Exodus, Pharaoh's mind was haunted by thoughts that the Hebrews had become dangerously prolific, and mysteriously strong. In his mind these loyal subjects were not so loyal, so he turned to this drastic measure: "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile."

I can only imagine the horror of mothers and fathers looking at the floating corpses of their children. But the unreasonableness of fear, blown out of proportion, can cause some human beings to become so callous that the unimaginable becomes possible. Remember Herod and the boy babies in Bethlehem. And both in Egypt and in Bethlehem, the one the king was after, by the providence of God, escaped.

The first chapter of Exodus exposes the evil of what happens when fear and prejudice escalate. And I am certain, that we are not so evil that we would ever allow our fear to become so irrational as to join in or even approve of Pharaoh's actions. But again, when you look at the history of the world, we have a plethora of examples of the horrors caused when fear, prejudice, power, and propaganda are combined.

However, from behind the dark cloud, is a heartbroken God, who so loved the world that he gave his only Son. And Almighty God, though his plan allows room for human free will, His providence cannot be thwarted. As it happened, an infant named Moses survived the death sentence. Ironically the Nile River, which was used as an instrument of execution, in fact was the source of Moses' salvation. Moses was found by the daughter of Pharaoh, and she unsuspectingly hired Moses' own mother to serve as a wet nurse, and the boy was reared as a prince in Egypt. And, of course, God used Moses to work for the freedom of God's people.

There are many lessons to be learned from this first chapter of Exodus. One is that when we as individuals or as a nation allow our fears to feed our prejudice and use the power at our disposal to keep others down so they cannot be a threat to us, God will battle against us. Just ask Pharaoh.

And a second lesson that has been proven over and over again is that though God's people may for a time suffer at the hands of those who are in power, God is in control and by his providence will see his people through to the Promised Land.

In both the Old and New Testaments, there is story after story of how Almighty God kept His promises and saw his people through.

God began with Abraham and Sarah, an old childless couple, who gave up what they had to follow wherever God led. And now 4,000 years later, this wandering Aramean is the Father of a people who trace their lineage back to him.

Likewise, in the New Testament, the Lord began with a handful of Galilean nobodies. By human standards, they had no power, no importance, and no influence. In short, they were, by any ordinary standard, insignificant. And yet, taken as a group, Jesus' twelve disciples are arguably the most famous group of men in history. They are portrayed in more paintings, windows, and statues than any other collection of human beings. Around the globe, hospitals, churches, cities, and countless people are named after them.

How feeble did Judah look as Assyria was bearing down on it? Jerusalem figured to be just one more notch in Sennacherib's cruel belt. Yet to this day, Jerusalem and her inhabitants still stand. For centuries, most of what we knew about the once mighty (and long gone) Assyrian nation was the record of them preserved in the books of those seemingly feeble people whom they sought to conquer.

How puny and vulnerable did those early disciples look when the local potentate, Herod, beheaded John the Baptist, killed James, and imprisoned Peter? Yet now, two millennia later, Herod's only real legacy is at the points where he crossed paths with these seeming nobodies within his jurisdiction.

The same leaders who had conspired to have Jesus arrested and crucified endeavored to silence his earliest followers. Then a few years later, the Roman emperors began to set their aim against the church. Employing the considerable resources, cruelty, and coercion at its disposal, Rome sought to crush the followers of Jesus. Yet the Sanhedrin is gone; the Roman Empire is gone; and the Church of Jesus Christ lives on in every corner of the globe.

Within the relatively narrow confines of the twentieth century, the Soviet Union came and went. The God it sought to outlaw continued to be worshiped. The gospel it sought to silence continued to be shared. And the church that was there for centuries before the Soviet Union existed continues now for decades after its demise.

Turn the page, and the story is always the same. Small-minded and frightened antagonists endeavor to snuff out God's word and God's people. Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar, Sennacherib and Haman, Nero and Trajan,

Hitler and Stalin, and more today, and more tomorrow - the tyrants come and go. Their plots prevail for a moment. But God's purpose endures - and therefore God's people endure. So Samuel Stone sang:

The Church shall never perish!  
Her dear Lord to defend,  
To guide, sustain, and cherish,  
Is with her to the end:  
Though there be those who hate her,  
And false sons in her pale,  
Against both foe or traitor  
She ever shall prevail.

When the Sanhedrin was weighing their options against the early followers of Christ, old Gamaliel cautioned them: **"I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them - in that case you may even be found fighting against God!"** (Acts 5:38-39).

The pharaoh did not have Gamaliel's wisdom whispered in his ear. And so, as he tried to crush the people of God who lived in his midst, he became the first in a long line of fools: tyrants in every age who have endeavored to fight against God. Yet the Church prevails, and we are part of this heritage; so stand firm, do what is right, suffer for the sake of Christ, and know that you are forever in God's hands. Amen.