

TO FEAR GOD

Sunday 27th August 2017

Exodus 1:8-2:10

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One of my favourite television dramas is back as Series Seven of Game of Thrones hits the airways. In many ways this saga is all about heroes, both good and evil. There is Daenerys Targaryen, the dragon queen who returns to Westeros to retake the iron throne. There is Cersei Lannister, the self-proclaimed monarch who eliminates her competition with a sinister brutality. There is Tyrion Lannister who schemes with the opposition to bring down his estranged sister and there is Jon Snow, the hero of Winterfell and unrivalled good guy who offers a glimmer of hope in what is mostly a forbidding sea of darkness.

But the bloke who really gets to me, the fellow who is bound to give me nightmares, is the one who is portrayed as the menacing “other”. He is the Night King from the mysterious reaches of the frozen north. With his glowing blue eyes, his pale, gaunt, mummified appearance, the Night King is seen to go in for the kill as he leads a mass of terrifying zombie-like humanoids called white walkers. In response to these constant threats, locals build a massive wall to stop such nasties. But it’s all looking rather forbidding as the Night King appears on the horizon with his battalion of icy creatures at his helm!

The Night King represents what most people fear. This guy concerns the “other”, the foreigner, the person from unknown places whose presence can only be explained in terms of danger and threat. Here it’s interesting to note that early accounts of indigenous communities in Africa and the Pacific often portrayed people as monsters and savages while, even today, science-fiction representations of aliens from outer space are almost exclusively presented as unsightly, menacing and hostile.

This is not a new phenomenon. Some 3,500 years ago in ancient Egypt, the absolute monarch of the day cast the community of Hebrews in the same light. These foreigners were a poor, marginal lot as they were put to work as slaves. And Pharaoh’s fear of these people bordered on paranoia, especially as they increased in numbers. The Biblical text tells us they “multiplied and spread”. The harder they were forced to work, the more they reproduced! And Pharaoh was terrified.

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So, Pharaoh reacts. He becomes ruthless. He imposes impossible tasks and he makes the lives of the Hebrews bitter. The scriptures tell us the Egyptians came to “dread” them. But this is not enough. Pharaoh goes on to decree that every new born Hebrew boy is to be killed. Indeed, whatever happens, whatever it takes, these people must be stopped!

Now, while Pharaoh and his Egyptian colleagues dreaded the Hebrews, while they despised and were terrified of these people, the story goes on to tell us about a particular group who came to the Hebrew’s defence.

The text goes on to indicate that while Pharaoh decreed every Hebrew new born boy must die, the midwives who attended the Hebrew mothers defied such an order. They refused to obey the dictates of the king as they allowed the boys to live. And the crucial factor here is that these amazing midwives, whose names are given as Shiphrah and Puah, did so because they feared God. Note here – they feared God!

Now this is important. Fear is not always a negative thing. In the Egyptian’s case fear came in the form of a reaction. It came as an expression of loathing, alarm and hatred towards other people. But in the midwives’ case, fear, which was a fear of God, comes in the form of reverence, awe, amazement and wonder towards the one who is all-powerful and all-loving.

And this kind of fear defies, indeed it subverts the loathing, the alarm and the hatred of the Egyptians. The midwives’ fear of God, their reverence, their awe, their amazement and their wonder for the God who created them and gave them life saves the Hebrew people. It guarantees the Hebrew people a future as the baby Moses is rescued, nurtured and grows to become a mighty leader of his people.



Friends, there are some important things to note here as the midwives’ fear of God is the key matter, it’s the crucial response that opens the way to Israel’s salvation. It’s the driving force that leads to Israel’s liberation.

Proverbs 9:10 states that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Meanwhile the law that undergirded the very fabric of Hebrew society emphatically decrees that right and proper living requires people “fear the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 10:12). Moreover, in the New Testament context Mary, in her song of praise (commonly known as the Magnificat) declares God’s mercy is offered to those “who fear him”.

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The midwives' fear the Lord contrasts starkly with the fear, the loathing and the paranoia of Pharaoh. Here, one kind of fear enhances life. It nurtures, encourages, supports and empowers. Meanwhile, the other kind of fear extinguishes life. It espouses hatred and promotes a culture of death and destruction.

The epic story of Moses in the bull rushes is one many of us remember from our Sunday School days. It's a story that presents a powerful message as a defiant group of midwives flout the cruel intentions of a super-power.



It's a story that highlights two midwives who take a risk and make a decision that ultimately assigns the fierce Pharaoh to the dustbin of history. Meanwhile this story opens the way for a poor, enslaved, marginalized people to go on, through their leader Moses, to change the world!

All this takes place because these two midwives feared God. All this happens because these ordinary women, in the process of carrying out their daily tasks, stood in awe of God. They revered God. They wondered at, and deeply respected the glory and the majesty of God. They honored God above everything else.

And, friends, this fear of God opened possibilities. This fear of God ran against the grain. This fear of God literally snatched victory from the clutches of defeat. This fear of God defied the greatest super power of the time as the nation of Israel emerged against the odds to bring us remarkable teaching like "to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

The midwives' fear of God created a path forward that saw the rise of prophetic voices, the declaration of universal justice and peace, and the gift of salvation for all in the coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of God!

Friends, over the past three weeks we have reflected and we have been challenged to think about what it means to be the church today. Fie Marino spoke to us about the multicultural church and the need to transverse boundaries. Emma Parr challenged us to consider what it means to do "church" differently. Stuart McMillan and Ray Minniecon shared with us the story of our First People and the priority of truth-telling and reconciliation.

Today I pray we will all carefully consider these matters. And as we do, let us step back for a moment and ask the question – why?

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Why do we work to cross boundaries? Why do we strive to be an authentically inclusive church that creates a space for people of all cultures, classes and social identities?

Why do we seek to be the church in new, innovative and effective ways?

Why do we open ourselves to uncomfortable truths concerning our own history? Why do we endeavour to right the wrongs of the past, reach out to our indigenous brothers and sisters and place the issue of reconciliation high on the list of priorities?

Surely those midwives of old have something to say here!

For you see, the starting point is fear, the fear of God. And by this, I do not mean we have to be frightened of God. We should never be in dread of God or think we are never good enough for God.

Rather, to fear God is to enter into the majesty, the joy and the mystery of God. To fear God is to embrace the one who gives us life, it is to honour the one who is all loving, it is to demonstrate profound reverence for the one whose very being is mercy and grace.

This stands in stark contrast to the fear of Pharaoh, a fear that bred suspicion, a fear that perceived threats, a fear that excluded others, a fear that went on to justify and sanction such cruel responses and vile actions. And, significantly, it was this fear that left Pharaoh bereft of any dignity, integrity and life as his legacy is now confined to the texts of ancient history or the museum of archaeology.

Friends, as Discipleship Month concludes and as we wrestle with God's call to be the church today, learn what it means to fear God. Discover what it means to live in relationship with the One who loves you and gives you life. Celebrate the wonder and joy of knowing this is a fear that nurtures, sustains, enriches and empowers as we all journey through life.

And remember, that in discovering this "knowing" and in embracing this "living in relationship with", the ultimate encounter comes to us in Jesus. For Jesus Christ is the true and the fullest revelation of God, a revelation that is gifted to free and equip you and me for whatever God places before us today and in the future.

Friends, fear God and live, fear God and grow, fear God and know that the One who loves and gives us life is ultimately what it's all about. For, there is nothing more important - I repeat - there nothing is more important than this - and there never be will be!

Amen

