

We Cannot Forget Joseph

Ken Wilson, 3/17/19

Lent series on how we make meaning of life, death, rising of Jesus. Emily began by saying Jesus is part of God's project to unmask the largely unconscious scapegoat mechanism that plagues us. We are highly imitative, more so than any other mammal or primate. We don't just learn amazing things like language, just by imitating those around, but we also imitate desire. Without even knowing it.

We want what others because they want it. This tendency to imitate desire intensifies our rivalries, fueling violence.

From earliest time, human stumbled on a **mechanism we carry out in ignorance** to contain these escalating conflicts. Someone accuses a vulnerable person or minority group. Through our highly imitative nature those accusations spread, until a majority mistreats/expels the demonized group. This leads to a temporary peace until cycle repeats.

Normally scapegoats are silenced, their stories told by the mobs that expelled them. Naturally they are portrayed as deserving of their fate. But in Bible, opposite happens. One story after another reveals excluded/mistreated ones are not guilty ... it through stories like this that we even understand that such a thing as scapegoating takes place.

Jesus died as a classic scapegoat—falsely charged with taboo crimes, as scapegoats are—but God vindicated him, by raising him from the dead. And now Jesus, once a victim of scapegoating, has a voice. And calls us to abandon our scapegoating ways.

Today, see how this plays out in the opening chapter of Exodus.

Exodus is an important book in the **African American church** because it is an examination of slavery.

Especially important for us who are followers of Jesus in this country. The evil we have not understood/confronted is **White Supremacy**. Produced scapegoating at a massive scale—genocide of native people, massive suffering of slavery. Evil didn't end with emancipation proclamation. White Supremacy fueled era of

lynching (1860-1930) thousands of black men strung up on trees by white mobs, to terrorize the entire population of black people. A movie romanticizing lynching as justified shown in Woodrow Wilson White House, wildly popular film. White Supremacy fueled by Jim Crow laws (legally enforced discrimination) ...ongoing mistreatment of African Americans in myriad ways today

Exodus 1: 6-2:14 (Robert Alter)

Exodus is sequel to Genesis. Genesis ends with story of **Joseph**—a scapegoat vindicated by God who saved his people, by providing a home for them in Egypt when land of Israel was hit by a famine.

By the end of Genesis, the sons of Israel and their father have moved to Egypt, fleeing famine. Egypt, to their credits welcomes them with open arms, and they prosper in Egypt.

But Exodus opens with ominous verse: **A new king rose to power who did not know Joseph.** Joseph, the man who was scapegoated by his own brothers, sold to Egyptian slave traders, rose to prominence as right-hand man of Pharaoh's chief of staff Potiphar. He was scapegoated again, by Potiphar's wife—who falsely accused him of rape. (James Cone: thousands of black men lynched, many were falsely accused of raping white women.)

This Joseph, who set a pattern fulfilled in the life, death and rising of Jesus, centuries later—**was vindicated by God**, raised up to a position of favor. As a result, Joseph provided refuge for his brothers in Egypt. **Egypt became an immigrant-friendly** nation because Pharaoh/Egyptians knew that God with Joseph.

Exodus 1 is the period when Israel is just beginning to coalesce as a distinct entity, an identifiable group.

Ever wondered how three terms--Israelites, Jews, Hebrews—are related? People of Israel are descendants of 12 sons/tribes of Jacob. Most of these tribes wiped out, lost their distinct identity through war, exile. Leaving one tribe: Judah (and much smaller folded into it, Benjamin) The term "**Jews**" refers to this group; Judah-ites, Jews. Term the Jewish people uses today.

But earliest term is Hebrews, a group not defined by ethnicity so much as by misfortune. We see this term Exodus ... *“the Hebrew midwives, Hebrew women, Hebrew women”*

Hebrew is a term that goes way back in history. The word is **Hapiru** (also **Habiru**). **“A loosely defined, inferior social class, composed of shifting population elements without secure ties to settled communities. They are referred to as outlaws, mercenaries, and slaves”** (Carol Redmount, *Bitter Lives: Israel in and Out of Egypt*)

Fertile Crescent where all this took place was in a state of constant, shifting warfare. Major **empires** from the North, South or the East would sweep over this territory. There were also **city-states, local power centers** that would either ally with the empire or resist it.

The people caught in middle would become displaced people, people without a country—some would become mercenaries (fighters for hire); some would be considered “outlaws” because they were outside the law (illegal aliens); generally harassed, oppressed, displaced people. **Hapirus, Habirus, Hebrews.**

God of Bible is first, God of this people, the Hebrews. The God of the displaced, immigrant, marginalized, unlucky, **outside-the-protection of the law** people. **Our gay members** live outside the protection of the law in MI, still legal to fire someone for being gay. **People of color** live outside protection of the law inasmuch as they often don’t get fair treatment under law. White defendants get lighter sentences, better outcomes—rate of crime no dif.

The way we align with God is by aligning with the people that God aligns with.

Egyptians who knew Joseph, made a place for the displaced Hebrews. They came to Egypt as an **immigration wave**, fleeing famine in Canaan. (As climate change advances, seeing more of these immigrations waves.) They prosper in Egypt.

But then a leader arose who did not know Joseph.

Slaves are mentioned in Genesis. But it’s not until **Exodus** that slavery is examined.

It starts with a leader who doesn't understand, who doesn't know, or who chooses to forget, Joseph. That God is on the side of the Hebrews, displaced, marginalized people.

This leader, the new king of Egypt, stirs up fear of the immigrant population that has been flourishing in their midst.

What was the wrap against the Hebrews, the displaced people, fueled by this leader who didn't know Joseph? It is oh so familiar!

The script is laid out in Exodus 1-2

Multiplying like rabbits! Soon they will overwhelm us! Our borders are being overrun by criminals! It's an invasion! We will lose our culture! Bi-lingual road signs and Taco trucks on every corner. These people could join future enemies to harm us. We are all in danger!

None of this is true. None of it has happened. **All fear!** And its fear from people who should be least afraid, because they have the most power! (Which means they have the most to lose.)

People trying to hold onto all power, not willing to share it, must govern by fear. Patriarchy, White Supremacy, produce fear-based leadership! Why all male leadership in a church dangerous: always fear based (Have to keep power from half the population.)

Powerful leaders, inflaming fear in a population is always bad news for "the Hebrews," in any society—the displaced, marginalized people. Increasing burdens are placed on these people, crushing burdens. It's where slavery comes from.

What does it mean for us, 2019, to know Joseph? 2 applications.

We have to resist when leaders arise who don't know Joseph, and stoke fear toward immigrant populations...it will lead to abuse and mistreatment.

Scapegoating mobs form by imitative behavior. Nothing spreads faster through herd animals than fear. (Like electric current) We are herd animals. We have to *resist the fear.*

What did Jesus say to his disciples more than anything? **Don't be afraid.** It's standard greeting after the resurrection—they are huddled in fear, he comes into the room, "**Don't be afraid!**"

If we have family or friends who are catching this fear and trying to pass it on, we have to speak up. I'm not talking about trying to win an argument—though if so inclined for it. Recommending something else, a simple act of self-defining.

Example: Oceana at Nick's EMU orientation; parents behind her spouting off about how dangerous immigrants are, something needs be done about brown people invading. She turned around, "What about me?" They, "You're white, you're fine!" I was born in China!

She didn't try to win an argument. She did a simple act of **self-defining.** *What about me? I was born in China.* **Broke fear current** flowing through them...moved on to other topics.

We could resolve to do this, a simple act of self-defining, when family or co-workers imitating rising tide of fear about immigrants.

Simple thing: *I am not afraid of immigrants. I don't see an invasion.*

The God I serve is the God of displaced persons, when we welcome them, like Joseph and the Egyptians did, we are welcoming God. That's how I see it. I am not afraid of immigrants.

Mobs form by people mirroring each other. **Fear runs like an electric current through groups.** So you don't have to convince your family members affected by this fear-mongering—just have to clearly disagree. Say, *that's not how I see it. I am not afraid.*

Even a few people saying, "Wait, I'm not afraid. We don't have to be afraid" can break circuit. That's first application.

My second application doesn't apply to everyone, just some of us.

You might know immediately if this idea is for you: "Wow, what a great idea. I could do that!"

As Americans, we have to reckon with the reality of slavery and its aftermath. Slavery is putting people to work and not paying them. Keeping the wealth they generate. (Pharaoh's store cities—Pithim & Ramses, stored wealth generated by slaves)

In *The Half of It Has Never Been Told*, historian Edward Baptist reports that of wealth generated in American in 1860 was generated by slave labor. That wealth created other wealth that continues to flow almost exclusively along racial lines—to white people.

The economic injustice of that has never been addressed. What could we do? Here's simple things. Those of us who have benefitted from the extra money available to white people, could include a descendant of slaves in our will. So when we die, all the wealth doesn't go to our family, part of it goes to the descendants of slaves, whose labor filled the white storehouses available to, owned by white people. An act of decency, not charity.

Suggestion: **Lenten intention card.** If you heard that and thought, **"I'd like to do that,"** just write that on a card, "I'd like to do that."

Silent Reflection:

Most of the fear we experience is caught from others in subtle and not subtle ways. Think about fear like something runs through groups, not something inside of you.

Picture yourself in an easy chair, that has a plug-in feature. When it's plugged in, send little jolts of electricity. Electricity is fear. And the outlet its plugged into is fear that runs through groups.

Pick one of three:

Don't be afraid. I am with you.

Don't be afraid. I can help you.

Don't be afraid. You will be fine.