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Pentecost 2 and Juneteenth

If any of you pay close attention to the lectionary cycle of readings, which I doubt any of you do. But IF you do, you may have been surprised this morning by our Old Testament reading, as it is not assigned by the Lectionary. We're going to be a bit rebellious this summer, and instead of following one of the lectionary tracks for the Old Testament, we're going to cover the major stories and themes of the book of Exodus.

We did this a few summers ago with the book of Genesis. Doing these summer long plunges into Old Testament stories in the order they are told in our Bible, allows us to see the richness of these tales that shape our understanding of God and the Israelite people and their relationship with each other. It is impossible to understand who we are as Christians, or who Jesus was and what shaped him, without wrestling with these stories.

I think it's appropriate that it is on this day that we begin our deep dive into the Book of Exodus. Because today is the celebration of Juneteenth.

Just as Exodus is a story of liberation, Juneteenth marks the date of liberation for enslaved blacks at the end of the Civil War. On June 19, 1865, Union soldiers entered Galveston, Texas and announced that the war had ended and that all slaves were free. If you remember your history dates, you may wonder why there were still slaves in Texas at that time, as President Lincoln had declared an end to slavery in the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863.

Apparently, in some states, including Texas, without the presence of Union troops to ensure that slaveowners released their slaves, these men, women and children remained in bondage—a full two and a half years after they had been freed by the U.S. government.

Slavery and liberation, the struggles for freedom, the powers that challenge and are threatened by freedom, these are all stories that we grapple with today in America. They are not new stories. Oppression is as old as our human story.

So for the next eight or nine weeks, we'll explore this story of oppression and freedom, and seeking a just way to live in a community, as told in Exodus.

Let's start at the beginning. Actually, we have to go back to the end of Genesis. Because our opening line from Exodus this morning, was "Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph." Let's remind ourselves of who Joseph was and why it would matter to the Israelites if the king knew of him.

If you're a fan of musicals, you might know Joseph's story from "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" better than you know it from the Book of Genesis. Sold off into slavery by his jealous older brothers, he ends up being an advisor to Pharaoh because he proves himself useful with his ability to interpret dreams. Joseph and his brothers and his father, Jacob, are reunited years later when there is great famine in the land, and they come to Egypt begging for food, which under Joseph's shrewd leadership, has been able to store up reserves.

As is typical in the Hebrew scriptures, our heroes are never perfect. They have flaws. Their heads are turned by wealth, power, and privilege. And so it is with Joseph. He saves his family from starvation. But the economic system that he sets up for Egypt and the Pharaoh is cruel.

In the first year, peasants, including those of Israel...the tribe of Jacob, Joseph's family, bring money to buy food from the great siloes of Egypt which are hoarding the extras, even as people around them starve.

In the second year of the famine, the peasants still need food, but they have no money. So Joseph takes their cattle in exchange for food. This means that they now have no means of producing their own food and are completely reliant on Egypt.

And so in the third year of the famine, they have no money, or cattle or tradeable goods. But they are hungry. And so they trade away their bodies and their land.

In the 47th chapter of Genesis, we hear the Israelites proclaim, "Buy us and our land in exchange for food. Just give us seed, so that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become desolate." (47:19)

Thus, Pharaoh's craving to accumulate at all costs to others, a system he placed in the hands of Joseph, becomes a monopoly that leads to enslavement. (Brueggemann, *Preaching from the Old Testament*, 43)

While Joseph and the Pharaoh are on friendly terms, we can assume there were certain promises made and privileges given to the Israelite people that were the family of Joseph. But once time passed...once Joseph died and a king came to power without any of the previous loyalty, the Israelites came to know the full effect of being totally under the control of and reliant upon another.

We heard in our reading this morning, "The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all their tasks that they imposed on them. (Exodus 1:13-14)

In this opening chapter of Exodus, it seems that the Israelites are silent in the face of their oppression. There are no voices raised in protest. And yet, there comes the whisper of a challenge to the authority of Pharaoh.

Pharaoh has begun to fear the growing number of Israelites. After all, what if they realize that they have power in their numbers and join with his enemies in an uprising? So he goes to the Hebrew midwives, Shiprah and Puah, (who curiously are named in this story while Pharaoh remains nameless) and demands that they kill any Israelite baby boys that they help to deliver.

But Shiprah and Puah resist the orders of Pharaoh. When questioned by Pharaoh about why they have allowed the boys to live, they tell him that the vigorous Hebrew women give birth before the midwives ever arrive. At great risk to their lives, we may imagine, they lie. They defy the orders of the king.

For the most part, the Israelites may still imagine that there is no alternative to Pharaoh and slavery. They have not yet heard Moses' challenge to the king to set their people free. And yet, we begin Exodus with this resistance movement of the Hebrew midwives. As we know, women often remain unnamed in our scriptures. And yet, these two midwives have been memorialized forever. They appear to be the first voices that rise up against Pharaoh to challenge his power and to demand a different way.

In the coming weeks, we will hear how God responds when the Israelite voices are lifted and they cry out for help. We will hear the story of how God remembers the covenant that was made with them and leads them out of their oppression.

But today, let us hear and remember and even emulate the story of the midwives, Shiprah and Puah. The great Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, calls them the first interrupters. Pharaoh's world, the order of things which he has set in motion to be able to completely control and dominate, is placed in jeopardy by the defiance of these two women. May we, like the midwives, find the courage to be interrupters of empire and domination and the powers that oppress our fellow humans. Particularly as we remember the history of this Juneteenth celebration—a reminder that slavery and domination and cries for liberation are a part of our story, too. Amen.