

Terror Resistance

Exodus 1: 15-22 Matthew 2: 1-18

As the Christmas season has passed, so has the charming tale of joyful shepherds, singing angels, and the baby being adored and presumably being adorable in a pleasantly aromatic cattle stall. The passages today are grim, dark, and terrifying. It is like going from Mary Poppins at Christmas to Game of Thrones in Epiphany. No more Mister Nice Guy.

The attitudes and perceptions of the Powers-That-Be are on full display in today's scriptures. The powerful can become obsessed with maintaining their power, willing to go to seemingly absurd lengths to assure their future in power, to expand their power, or to deal with threats to their power whether real or imagined.

The Powers-That-Be are always assessing the situation unfolding around them to try control and to keep an upper hand toward any threat, against any possible usurper or challenger, and use whatever means are necessary. The goal is to crush and destroy your opposition before they can mount a serious challenge or continue their agenda which *appears* (at least) to undermine the ruler's power and authority.

The Powers target the vulnerabilities in their opponent or target, exploiting their weaknesses in a bid to control and manipulate them. The Powers may not want to take out an individual directly unless the threat is immediate and requires prompt action. Staying one step or more ahead, the Powers prefer to exploit weakness and vulnerability.

An individual's family is a great target. That's the movie plot when Mel Gibson's or Liam Neeson's child is kidnapped. Then they turn from mere father into death-defying super heroes. (Speaking of super heroes, remember super heroes never have any parents, family, siblings, and rarely any lovers because such people would make them highly vulnerable to the bad guys.) These relations are completely innocent and have no connection to any power issues, but they are close to the primary target and can be used to control and manipulate the primary target.

Among the choices, children are always preferred. The Powers can instill fear and terror by threatening or seizing their children. This is an excellent way to force submission – go after the children and the parent or parents will submit to the control of the Powers. We should have this strategy in mind as we come to today's scriptures.

In the passage from Exodus, the Hebrew midwives are confronted by Pharaoh, king of Egypt. First, those biblically called "Hebrews" were known throughout the Near East as *hapiru* or sojourners, wanderers. The *hapiru* are regarded in most societies as a bunch of no-goods. The *hapiru* are marginal people with no social standing who are disruptive of the "good" people and their society. They're outcasts, typically despised, excluded, and regarded as a threat. They may be, as in Egypt, state slaves. (NIBC) (Note

that it isn't until these people, the Hebrews, claim a land for themselves that they become "Israelites.")

The Hebrews have become a threat in Egypt because they have grown in number. Pharaoh decides that to deal with this implicit threat he would kill all of the male Hebrews at birth. This makes no sense whatsoever, but utter stupidity has been known to direct governing policy far more often than we'd care to admit. It may be a bizarre strategy, but it is designed to terrorize and thereby control a population with fear and intimidation. Pharaoh wants to target the weakest of the weak, not simply children, but babies.

Pharaoh goes directly to the source of babies, the two Hebrew midwives. Note that there are only two for the *entire* Hebrew community which according to Pharaoh is multiplying like rabbits. Two? It's a story; let's go with it.

If these Hebrew midwives would simply kill the male babies, then Pharaoh could restore peace, order, and security for the good people of Egypt. Actually it means ensuring continued power and wealth for himself and the elites who support him.

The Hebrew midwives likely realized several things. **One**, Pharaoh was, after all, a stupid *man*: how hard could it be to trick him about "*woman stuff*"? He already seems rather dim on this subject. And **two**, there was the whole matter of what *their* God – the true Sovereign – expected of them as midwives, commanded to engage in a sort of terrorism or even genocide of the innocents. The midwives figure out a plan to subvert Pharaoh's aims. They have now become the resistance against the Powers-That-Be.

When reports get back to Pharaoh that there are male babies continuing to be born, he summons and interrogates the midwives. The midwives claim, *Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they're vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive*. Apparently Pharaoh accepts this ridiculous excuse. On "*woman stuff*," they were spot-on: he **is** just another stupid *man* after all.

The Hebrew midwives, acting as subversive agents of the Kingdom of God, are blessed for their service to God's Kingdom.

Following his policy's failure, Pharaoh tries ordering all male babies be thrown into the Nile. God will subvert that scheme as well, as the resistance comes to include one of Pharaoh's own daughters who bring a male Hebrew baby into his own household!

The gift of new life, these babies being born to the Hebrews, should be seen as blessings, even for Pharaoh. Ultimately, they represent future workers on the huge building projects. However, it is fear that transforms blessing into threat. The fear that the Hebrew slave population had become too big to manage brought about these failed attempts to control it. These wandering immigrant slaves could be terrorized by targeting their children. However, the Powers inadvertently empowered the resistance among those who were faithful servants of their God.

We find that God is relentless in a strategy of subverting the Powers and their reign of fear and terror, engaging one special agent after another to undermine Pharaoh, including the fugitive prince, Moses.

By the way, if anyone should ever be so foolish as to suggest that God isn't political, please cite these two passages of scripture. God is very political and doesn't treat favorably those who are so arrogant with their power, who would stoop to targeting children.

Our second reading from Matthew is about the three gift-bearing magi from the east, following the star and seeking the Promised One of God, the ***new King of the Jews***. Coming into Judea, these foreigners head for Jerusalem and start asking around, *Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?* For paranoid Herod the Great, the utterance that an upstart king is loose in Judea provokes a **total freak out** in him and throughout the capital city.

Herod calls together his top religious advisers, demanding to know about the prophecy of the Promised One of God. A passage from Micah is cited. Herod decides to let the magi be the dupes who discover the child. Herod tells them to report back when they've found what they're seeking. It may have seemed clever to use the magi like this. Herod sends them off to Bethlehem, confident he is once again in control, having subverted the prospective usurper to his throne, even if it is just an infant in diapers.

Herod's fear – quite paranoid – turns the gift of God into a threat. In Herod's deep insecurity, anything that so much as appeared to challenge his authority needed to be summarily destroyed. The gift from God was seen as no gift for Herod, but a vivid, immediate threat to his continued existence ... from an infant in diapers.

Frankly, Herod was right. The Promised One from God really was a threat, not so much to him but for all worldly powers who bore an attitude that they were sovereign *apart* from God, that they were the gods in their worldly power, commanding life and death, for instance, and to exploit and oppress God's people to serve their own interests. Yes, this infant Jesus was truly an existential threat to all Powers-That-Be in *every* era.

"Warned in a dream," the magi were tipped off to shut up and sneak back to their home country avoiding Jerusalem. The magi had been recruited into the resistance by their direct disobedience toward Herod and obedience to the counsel from above.

That was also the cue for child and parents to flee to Egypt.

With that, Herod's plan to subvert God's plan gets subverted by God and the witness of faithful resistance by those who served God.

Herod doesn't react well to his plans going awry, sending in death squads to kill all male children under 2 years old anywhere near Bethlehem. The Powers-That-Be show their truth when their power is threatened. They become ugly and violent, capable

of exacting a toll of fear and terror in a population. Children, women, and the innocent are often the victims due to their vulnerability.

Is it odd that we have the gifts of God celebrated and praised on the one hand, and then on the other hand, acts of fear and violence from the Powers because God has acted to fulfill God's promise and will? It's a reminder that when God acts, things change. The people who least want things to change are the ones who are most vested in keeping things the way they are. When God acts, things change, and the worldly powers actually have good reason to be concerned. Faithful servants who act in resistance to the injustice and exploitation of the weak and vulnerable are the heroes in God's story.

As we remember the Lord's last supper in a moment, sharing in the cup and the loaf, we're reminded of God's great gift to humanity which inspired spiritual pilgrims from the East to sojourn to give thanks, praise, and reflect the preciousness and mystery by the gifts given. It has also inspired the precious gifts of service and witness to the ways of the Kingdom, to acting in faithful resistance.

But we're also reminded that God doesn't act in an arena without gaining a reaction from those who stand to be affected. Those who have attained and acquired power have learned to maintain power by preserving their interest, and doing so by whatever means it takes. If that means viciousness and violence, then those are the tools employed. God knows that worldly power is not relinquished without a struggle, and it is the worldly powers that stand against God's will for love, peace, and justice.

We celebrate Epiphany, when the Messiah is acknowledged by faithful servants of God, and gifts of honor and celebration are presented. But we also celebrate communion, recognizing the threats that God's good actions present. As the gift of life is revealed and known in the season of Epiphany, this same gift is recognized as a threat that *should* inspire fear among the powerful and elite.

In communion, we celebrate the power of God and God's gift over the worldly powers to bring about new life, even out of death itself. We share in that gift and that promise as we come to the Lord's table. We celebrate the gift, even as we acknowledge the threat it presents. Over all of it stands the cross, the resurrection symbol of new life, the gift of God overcoming and triumphant once and for all.