

By What Authority?

Exodus 1: 8-21

Matthew 16: 13-20

There were two guys named Babe at a baseball game long ago: Babe Ruth, legendary slugger, and Babe Pinelli, former player and respected umpire. Babe the umpire called Ruth out on a called third strike. Babe Ruth was furious and said, “There are 40,000 people here who know that last one was a ball, tomato head.” (Somehow, I imagine Babe Ruth used a bit more florid language than “tomato head,” but whatever.) To this, Umpire Babe Pirelli said, “Maybe so, but mine is the only opinion that counts.”

That’s pretty much what authority is all about – it answers the question: whose opinion counts? A baseball player may be entitled to his opinion, and may be allowed to express it, with a certain respect hopefully. Even the manager scrambling out of the dugout to protest the ump’s call is entitled to his opinion, often not respectfully because half of his gambit is to make a big show. As long as the opinion doesn’t get too nasty, there’s no harm. Cross the line, and the ump has authority to throw your big mouth out of the game. On a bad day for his team, it seems like this is exactly what the manager wants anyway.

Authority is whose view really counts among all views that might get expressed. That may seem old fashioned in today’s society where non-scientists proudly claim a lack of knowledge and then assert their unscientific view, expecting its acceptance as authoritative. What’s amazing is that today, people actually accept the unscientific viewpoint and argue passionately for *its* authority. It’s an aberration, but a very popular one today.

This brings us to the category of questioning authority. This is something that’s enabled society to make progress. When authority gets too great and too powerful, then it becomes corrupting. Then the corruption of authority invites challenges, resistance, and rejection. The corruption of the Roman Catholic church led to the Protestant Reformation. The corruption of British rule over the American colonies led to the war of independence. There are plenty of examples of how questioning authority leads to the evolution of new forms and perspectives, typically advancing society with new directions.

Authority is critical in religious faith since it is often the case that the religious or faithful view is claiming transcendent or divine authority. This quickly gets problematic because, unlike a scientist who may have earned a degree or two, published peer-reviewed academic papers, and done other noteworthy things, to claim divine authority requires some basis that is less clear. It will involve the faith of the believer rather than demonstrable proofs. It’s an issue that is at the core of every church fight.

We have standards for what bears authority, but often it’s kind of like Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart when asked to define pornography that’s obscene – “I know it when I see it.” The person of faith who has reflected for themselves on matters of scripture, tradition, and theology can discern that sacred authority. You don’t need a

seminary, but you do need to make use of those lenses that scripture, tradition, and theology provide as tools for discernment. It's an informal process for most people, but paying attention and thinking things through yield a sort of faithful intuition.

In the first story from the beginning of Exodus, we enter the story of God's people who are headed into a new covenant. The era of Joseph who became a powerful figure in Pharaoh's Egypt is long gone. He has drifted into the recesses of Pharaoh's memory.

In this time, those ancestral people of Joseph – the Israelites – have grown in population. The time passage also allowed *the Israelite people to become more numerous and more powerful than* the Egyptians. The fear of having so many people who might turn against his regime posed a threat. A threat to authority is put down with force and constrained by a cordon of power. So, Pharaoh created concentration camps or ghettos near construction sites, and made the Israelite slaves' labor as difficult as possible. No more "cushy" jobs.

Interesting, the text says that the oppression simply made the Israelites multiply even more. You can imagine what the good people of Egyptian society were saying about those Israelites always being barefoot and pregnant. Yet no matter how the Egyptians oppressed God's people, they kept increasing in number, exacerbating the fears that the Israelites were going to take over the whole place. It's pretty irrational, but we've heard the same thing about undocumented Hispanics who are going to take over the USA, or locally that our children are being indoctrinated into Islam. Really? That's rather silly. Well, the Egyptians had the same paranoid mindset toward the Israelites.

Pharaoh has the authority – he thinks divine authority – to deal with this growing nuisance population. He hatches a new plan to do something to control the Israelite population, as if putting them in concentration camps wasn't enough. Like I said, it's rather paranoid. But this brainiac on the throne isn't satisfied. How to deal with births? Kill the babies. We will hear this again in the New Testament from another shrewd royal. It worked about as well.

Pharaoh calls the Israelite midwives. Despite this prolific birthing, the Israelites have only two midwives. Two? Okay, maybe there were more; maybe this was just a representative pair. Anyway, they listen to Pharaoh's plan for them to kill the male children upon their birth.

In his presence, they bow and scrape, "Yes, your majesty, great and wondrous Pharaoh." Outside going down the hallway, they're saying, "What a schmuck! Did you hear him? Oh my God, clueless or what? Yeah, yeah, we'll kill the male babies; yeah, yeah, and no one will ever figure out what's going wrong, right? Israelites, they're so stupid, right? No one will ask any questions, right? Oh, what a schmuck! Get real, bozo. Great for business, too. Can ya hear it now: 'Oh, here come the midwives; get ready for a burial, not a bris.' Hey, girls gotta work, Pharaoh – you jerk!"

The scripture tells us that they feared God, not Pharaoh, as in: they believed God had the highest authority, not Pharaoh. Rather than fearing Pharaoh, they mock him.

As it becomes clear the boy babies are living, Pharaoh summons them again and asks why these boy babies are living? The midwives know by now that Pharaoh is a complete jerk, and I guess his royal administration is also populated with total morons. Getting a stunningly lame excuse past these guys shouldn't be too tricky. Playing on the stereotypes of Israelites already running amok in Pharaoh's bigoted brain, the midwives complain that the Hebrew women are dropping these babies like candy from a vending machine – boom-there it is. They have no chance to do anything with the babies.

Pharaoh and his people nod their heads, oblivious to the **absurdity** of what the midwives were saying. Pharaoh and his people will have to come up with Plan B.

Meanwhile, God is pleased with the faithfulness and devotion of the midwives, blessing them and continuing to bless the Israelites as they kept cranking out the babies.

This may seem rather obvious, but acting in a way that is **not** murderous hardly seems noteworthy. On the other hand, the midwives risked **their** lives in disobeying Pharaoh. Their refusal to cooperate amounted to **resistance** against his authority. That is not merely disobedience; it's **treasonous** – an act that seeks to undermine state authority, typically dealt with by torture, imprisonment, or death, or all of the above.

The question of whose authority matters meant discernment by the midwives. They knew what God wanted, and killing newly-born male babies wasn't any part of what God is about. So what is God about then? How do we recognize the sacred and transcendent from amidst our surroundings in the secular and commonplace world?

Just because Jesus is in front of you doesn't make it any easier as we'll see.

Listen to the dialogue in our passage from Matthew as Jesus gives the disciples a lesson in pushing aside the status quo order of authority to reach the truth of God's word and way in the Kingdom. Jesus' question is like a check-in with his disciples to see where their heads are. Jesus asks: *Who do people say that [I] am?* Notice how Matthew has Jesus asking the question **complete with the answer built-in**; *Who do people say that the **Son of Man** is?* It is a question that requires "kingdom vision," a faithful spirit that sees where the kingdom lies *and* where it is not.

The disciples respond with what they've heard: *Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, some Jeremiah, some mention other prophets.* In my (sick) mind, it's like one of those Monty Python skits where the answer is obvious but a group of nitwits blabber about stupid possibilities.

Seriously, there are risky names here, people who experienced conflict as divine authority clashed with worldly authority. John the Baptist has been executed for his resistance. Elijah was a resister against the king and queen in his day and was hunted as a treasonous fugitive. Jeremiah spoke truth to power and got thrown in prison. But these are dead heroes, great names of the past. Yes, they're important and powerful names, but there is one more question as Jesus pushes them a step further.

*Who do **you** say that I am?* While the rest of the disciples look at one another, Peter alone responds: *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.* Ah, the Christ, the messiah; this is a title that epitomizes the resistance, the overthrow of the oppressor, the authority of heaven come to earth. And this one is called *Son of the living God.* That title escapes all bounds and opens to the Power and Author of creation itself. It is a title unbounded by experience, time, or worldly power; it bears transcendent, divine authority. It names the one God who reshapes and recreates, whose Kingdom is the most powerful and absolute threat to the status quo, to the empire of all that these people have ever known and believed.

For such a declaration, Peter (for a change) gets praised by Jesus for seeing through and beyond the definitions and names and limitations of the world's perceptions and distractions. He reaches beyond what he's heard and been told with a faithful spiritual vision that perceives the kingdom of God and recognizes Jesus as Lord.

The remainder of the paragraph is given to the discussion of the kingdom; that on this "rock" – Peter = *petros* or rock; Rocky – on him will the church be built, the kingdom of God on earth. The keys to the kingdom – sacred authority – will be given to the church so that whatever is bound or loosed on earth shall be bound or loosed in heaven. Peter has clarity from a faithful spirit that enables him to see the authority of the divine in Jesus.

In every age, the claim of authority is exercised on both sacred and worldly levels. But in every age, the claim of authority finds itself challenged in one way or another.

In every age, people of faith are pushed to discern what is sacred and what is not; what is of the Kingdom and what is of the Empire; what is of ultimate value, and what is trite and common. Our age is no different. Pretenders abound, but there remains the promise of what is sacred and holy, and the unique quality of what is transcendent and reaches beyond us to new life or all.

The final piece of this question of authority bears upon all disciples of the Lord. That question is whether we will respond faithfully to the one true authority above all other pretenders, particularly when a pretender lays its claim upon us. Will we respond with the audacity of the Hebrew midwives in the face of Pharaoh's illegitimate authority? Or will we utter when confronted the stunning clarity of Peter's audacious claim that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, that there is no other, and no greater authority to lay claim to our attentions, our energies, our lives?

May we bear witness as these stalwarts in our readings today, letting faith in that which has scared authority define our directions and actions and attitudes as we aim to serve the Lord alone, and his Kingdom of new life for all.