



Remembering Who We Are

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn for St. John the Baptist Episcopal Church
February 16, 2020, the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany: Exodus 1:8-22*

Recently I was listening to Krista Tippet's *On Being* Podcast. She was interviewing journalist Ezra Klein¹, who has written a book called *Why We're Polarized*.² In this podcast, they talk about how today's political tumult is bigger than this moment in time. They talk about how it didn't happen to us; rather, Republicans and Democrats alike walked into it, which might mean that we, together, can also walk out of it. Mr. Klein said that in the past, Democrat didn't necessarily mean liberal and Republican didn't necessarily mean conservative; for example, a greater proportion of Republicans voted to pass the 1964 Civil Rights Act than Democrats did.³ But, he said, the way people define themselves is changing, and now differences in religion, geography, ethnicity and the conservative-liberal divide line up by political party in a way they never used to. The Republican party is increasingly responding to the interests and needs of white, rural, conservative, and evangelical Christian people, and the Democratic party is increasingly responding to the needs of urban, less religious, liberal, people of different ethnicities. The story we are telling ourselves about who we are has really changed. And according to

¹ Krista Tippet interviewing Ezra Klein, "How We Walked Into This and How We Can Walk Out," *On Being* podcast, February 6, 2020, at <https://onbeing.org/programs/ezra-klein-how-we-walked-into-this-and-how-we-can-walk-out/>, accessed February 16, 2020.

² Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (Avid Reader Press, 2020).

³ *Ibid.* at 29.

Klein, this kind of identity, because of the way our political systems and media operate, is driving our exponentially increasing polarization in this country.

Don't worry, this sermon is not going to be mostly about politics. But I mention Ezra Klein's book because we've already been talking about identity at St. John's. The story that we tell ourselves about who we are utterly matters. Last week we explored Jesus telling us that we are the light of the world, and imagined approaching life's questions not by asking what we should do but by asking and remembering who we are in any given situation.

Remembering who we are starts with knowing our real stories. It starts with telling the truth. And our stories go beyond our individual backgrounds. My ancestors on my father's side were German Mennonite farmers who moved from Russia to Nebraska at the end of the 19th century, and on my mother's side were Swedes who moved to Chicago and became part of the working class. You, or your ancestors, came here from many different parts of the world for many reasons. Our country also has a story to tell—a story that includes both great democratic principles and also horrifying violence against people of color and indigenous people. But deeper even than these stories are the complicated, messy, at times contradictory, and radically transformative stories of our spiritual ancestors in scripture.

Beginning today and continuing throughout lent we are going to explore one of the most important stories in all of scripture, which is the story of God's liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt contained in the book Exodus. And sort of like how we are in our country today, the story in Exodus starts with amnesia. It starts with

people who had forgotten their history. In the first chapter of Exodus from today's reading, there came a king in Egypt who "did not know Joseph."⁴ Joseph had been an Israelite slave in Egypt who because of his ability to interpret dreams predicted a worldwide famine far enough in advance that Egypt saved enough grain to provide food for the whole country and for much of the world. So Joseph was made second in command of all Egypt, and the Egyptian Pharaoh invited Joseph's family to come live in Egypt. But the years passed and a new Pharaoh arose who did not remember that Joseph had saved his country. And because the Israelites, who were an ethnic minority, were increasing in Egypt, the Egyptians grew to fear and dread them. Does that sound familiar? So the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites and were ruthless in their violence against them, so much so that by the end of today's reading, what amounted to ethnic cleansing began. Pharaoh ordered the murder of all Israelite baby boys. In our foundational story is the memory of genocide.

And in this critical story from the spiritual heritage shared by Christians and Jews, alongside the story of oppression is the story of resistance. There were two Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah, who incidentally are among my favorite characters in the Bible. Pharaoh ordered them to kill Hebrew baby boys. It sounds like he was so afraid of the Hebrew men he was willing to kill them off even though they were his slaves. But the story says that the midwives did not obey, and why? Because they feared God. Now by this time, we have no idea if Shiphrah and Puah knew the stories of their ancestors or of the God of their ancestors. We don't know if they knew that their

⁴ Exodus 1:8.

ancestor Joseph had also been a slave in Egypt but had saved the whole country. We don't know if they knew the story of how God called their ancestors Abraham and Sarah to leave everything they knew to a land that God would show them. What they did know is that an order to kill newborn babies defied all that is holy, and that whoever God might be, even Pharaoh could not change the rules so much that this would be acceptable in the eyes of God. So they resisted. And they used Pharaoh's own prejudice to throw a smokescreen about why they were doing what they were doing. "The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women," they said, which of course was not true: women giving birth are the same everywhere.

Pharaoh had forgotten that even though Israelites and Egyptians were ethnically, religiously and culturally different, that they shared a common story of help and welcome and goodness. In fact Joseph's children were half Egyptian, from his Egyptian wife. But the instinct to fear that which is different is as old as time. The Israelites were multiplying in Egypt, and so the king of Egypt feared and oppressed them. In today's world, a few years ago for the first time in this country, there were more babies born to people of color than to white people, and white supremacy is on the rise. And as ancient and relevant as prejudice is the reality of God's work, then and now, to empower people to resist prejudice, to refuse to cooperate with violence, and to see a reality beyond that which is being told in the culture around us.

In today's world, it's hard to know what stories to believe. In today's world of religion, maybe it's hard to know who God is, or what it is to be a Christian, or if it's even good to be a Christian. In today's

world, which so much likes to believe that this moment is the only one that matters, it's easy to think that the stories of the past have no relevance. But in times of deep distress, it's critical to be able to rise above what is happening and take the long view. The long view tells us that our God is one who sees injustice and cares about it more even than we do. The long view tells us that as soon as there is oppression, God also invites us to resist. And although you and I can't do everything, we can do our part. When we are given opportunities to participate in the culture's violence as the midwives Shiphrah and Puah were, we can say no, because there is a God in heaven who is greater than the political upheaval in our country. And even if we didn't go to Sunday school every week and don't completely know the stories in our tradition or don't understand the ones we do know, we do know in our hearts that hating people who are different from us, including the 50% of the country who voted differently in the last political election, is just wrong, because God made each one of us.

In the stories of our tradition, we are each character in the story. We are the people of God, the people of Israel, called to be a blessing in the life of the world, and often at odds with the culture around us. We who have privilege in this country are also the people of Egypt, who benefit from the oppression of others even if we don't want to. We who have power as the world measures power are sometimes also Pharaoh, called to remember that we are inseparably connected with all others, even people who are different, and so we have a choice: we can adopt a posture of welcome and gratitude or a policy of fear and the ruthlessness that always comes from fear. And, we are the midwives Shiphrah and Puah, given a choice about whether to

cooperate with policies that are monstrously violent, or to respect what is holy and affirm life even if by doing so we risk our own standing in the world as it is.

For this week, I invite you to consider the stories being told around you, and to step back from them. You might even find a Bible or go online and read the first two chapters of the book of Exodus. Since Episcopalians use scripture, tradition AND reason to understand God and the world, we get to think critically. Who are the players in the story that is being enacted around you? Who are you in this story? Who does God call you to be? What does God call you to do? And most important of all, who and where is God? What does the truth of God's love and God's justice mean for today's world?

We do not have to have amnesia. We do not have to accept the stories being told around us at face value, even and especially the stories of people we generally agree with. We can recognize that we stand in a long line of people who were given grace by God to experience kinship across lines of difference, to resist hate not with hate or violence, but with love. We can remember God, and we can remember who we are, and who we are called to be. Amen.