

*“They are lazy. ...Make the work harder for the people so that they keep working and pay no attention to lies.” - Pharaoh*

In the text we just heard, Pharaoh ratchets up his cruelty to the Hebrew slaves by making them gather their own straw for bricks. This part of the story of Exodus points to a basic human reality that psychologists have identified: having power makes us less empathetic, and less compassionate, to those without power. Unless we intentionally work to counter that dynamic, having power makes us less empathetic. This issue is at the heart of the conversations and trials in response to the #metoo movement, and it goes to the heart of the history of racism and slavery in this country.

Here's how I've heard psychologists talk about this dynamic. On an individual level, let's say, in a workplace, when we have power over others, and we let ourselves stop the flow of empathy toward them, we stop seeing them as our equals. We want to believe that our position of power is something we've earned, that we deserve it, maybe even that we are doing righteous and brave work. So then, when we make decisions that impact others negatively, we want to preserve our own positive self-image. It's painful to own that we are responsible for someone else's suffering. So we are tempted to tell stories about them, whoever they are, that justify their discomfort and preserve our own sense of rightness. That's exactly what Pharaoh does in this story, isn't it. Pharaoh says, *They are lazy. They are easily led astray. Make the work harder for them so they stop listening to those lies.*

The stories we tell can easily fall, inch by inch, into dehumanizing those we perceive as below us. And once you've stopped seeing someone to be just as human as you are, just as deserving of compassion, then, well, it doesn't matter how you treat them, does it?

This dynamic is the human capacity to be more interested in my own narrative than in yours, and that dynamic can add up in tiny decisions and big ones to the kind of corruption that leads us away from basic ethical interactions, not just on an individual level, but on a societal level too.

One example from US history: In 1831 an enslaved man named Nat Turner led a rebellion against slavery. The rebellion was put down after two days. In response, the following winter, “undercover abolitionists, powerful colonizationists, and hysterical legislators raised their voices against slavery. In the end, proslavery

legislators batted away every single antislavery measure, and ended up pushing through an even more harrowing slave code than the one that had been in place.” (Stamped from the Beginning by Ibram X Kendi, pp.173-174) There's that bricks without straw thing again.

The narrative that justified slavery repeated over and over again the idea that slaveholders were simply helping to civilize and Christianize these docile and intellectually stunted people. That narrative preserved the self-image of slaveholders. The actual motivation for slavery was profit, and the system was held together by extraordinary violence and cruelty. But this narrative allowed slaveholders to see themselves, if their consciences were troubled, as kindly and loving people trying to help these lesser beings. Kendi writes that under the new and harsher slave code, after Nat Turner's rebellion, “Proslavery legislators repressed the very captives they said were docile, and restricted the education of the very people they argued could not be educated.”

The new slave codes ratcheted up their cruelty and control. The fact that the justifying logic was contrary to the logic they had been using didn't matter much. Humans have the capacity to lie to themselves to preserve their interests. There's a great quote from Upton Sinclair that goes like this: “It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it.”

This is part of the human condition. It shows up in our parenting and our relationships with partners and friends. It shows up in our workplaces every darn day. It shows up in our economy and our government at the highest level. It's baked into all the -isms that are so prevalent in our society. One of the great gifts of the Hebrew Bible is that this story is preserved. All through the Hebrew Bible, when God is given a voice, God says, “I am the one who brought you out of Egypt.” Every time we hear that, it's a reminder of two things: Remember what it was like to be at the mercy of a cruel dictator. And remember that God delivered you. There's an implicit ethical imperative there: do not subject others to that kind of cruelty.

So when we read this story about God, we have to ask: how do we show up in this story now? Are we living in alignment with Pharaoh's empire, or with God's vision of shalom?

That's one way you might frame your prayers this Lent. How am I living in alignment with Pharaoh's empire? How am I living in alignment with God's vision of shalom, wholeness, justice, the vision we hear in the prophets where the lion lays down with the lamb and the lamb doesn't get eaten? It's a good question to consider about the ways we relate to others in our personal lives, our friends and partners, at work and school. And more broadly, in our shared civic and global life.

How am I living in alignment with Pharaoh's empire? How am I living in alignment with God's vision of shalom, wholeness?

One good resource for this kind of self-examination is a book by Walter Brueggeman called *An Other Kingdom: Departing the Consumer Culture*.

This book names that the way we work and the way we buy things, and therefore the way we treat ourselves and each other, is all part of the scheme of a different Pharaoh: the pharaoh of relentless consumer capitalism. The mindset that more is always better, that we are what we buy, that the market will rise and rise and rise endlessly – here we are, friends, making bricks. Making more bricks. Going into debt to get straw. Working more hours, more weekends, so that we can buy more, and pay off more debt, in competition with our neighbors. This mindset is an empire with a ruthless Pharaoh who doesn't care what it costs you as long as the pyramid rises a little more every day. And of course, one truly tragic aspect of this system is that we are both Hebrew and Egyptian. We are run ragged and dehumanized by the way we support the mindset of consumerism. And in the process of literally buying into this system, we dehumanize our neighbors around the world and right here at home. We destroy the habitability of our planet for ourselves and for countless other species.

Brueggeman offers the reminder that Jesus calls us into an other kind of kingdom: one of neighborliness, abundance, and wholeness for all. A life in which we turn toward our neighbors, create off-market economies of sharing and care and interaction.

This is what the seven practices of the Way of Love invite us to do. Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, Rest. Those practices turn us toward God, who turns us toward each other. This way of love, the way we see in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, is one in which power gets turned toward listening, care, service, and

courage. The Way of Love, the way of Jesus, doesn't take a break during a global pandemic. It steps up. And by that I mean, we may stop worshipping in the same building together for a while because we want to care for our most vulnerable and for those who work in our medical system. But we aren't shutting down the body of Christ, the community of the way. This moment, right now, is where we get to figure out how we can turn toward blessing each other. An economy of care and connection and instead of competition. An economy of grace and neighborliness instead of fear.

There's so much that is strange and terrifying about this pandemic moment. And, I want to believe that in moments of great shared stress, we see glimpses of the Holy Spirit turning us toward our best selves and turning us toward each other.

So there are two questions I want to leave you with, for your Lenten contemplation and/or social distancing time.

The first one is: How does your life align with Pharaoh's empire, or with God's vision of shalom?

And the second one is: In this moment of disruption and fear, how are you seeing people following the Holy Spirit into actions that are beautiful and courageous? And how are you called to join in?