

Prayer: Almighty God, you stun us to silence with the works of your hand. Silence in us now any voice, but your own...Transform us by the hearing of your Word to be your faithful witnesses in this world. Amen.

Exodus 1:8-2:10

1:8 Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.

1:9 He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we.

1:10 Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land."

1:11 Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh.

1:12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.

1:13 The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites,

1:14 and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

1:15 The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah,

1:16 "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live."

1:17 But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.

1:18 So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?"

1:19 The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them."

1:20 So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong.

1:21 And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.

1:22 Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

2:1 Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman.

2:2 The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months.

2:3 When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river.

2:4 His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

2:5 The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the

river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it.

2:6 When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said.

2:7 Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?"

2:8 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother.

2:9 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it.

2:10 When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

Matthew 16:13-20

16:13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

16:14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

16:15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

16:16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

16:17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

16:18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

16:19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

16:20 Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Proclamation of the Word

I was in a conversation with some childhood friends recently, the Spratt girls. We went to church and school together. The Spratts sat on the pew in front of me each Sunday morning. With many crises going on around us, I was reminded that there are so many good, faithful people seeking to do the right thing. Catherine remembered this story from the 1970's.¹ In her words...

I am remembering when I was very little and there was strife in our small town of York, SC, over school desegregation issues. I always heard it described as "the black students rioting" but I am not sure exactly what happened. The KKK was planning a rally. My father (a lawyer) represented the town on the school board..., and he and other male officials somehow figured out a legal way to prevent KKK demonstrations within town limits...But then they heard that someone who lived just outside the city limits had agreed for the rally to take place in his front yard.

Meanwhile, my dad's rock star legal secretary Elizabeth Hall said, "I know how to handle this" and promptly called the wife of the man who agreed to host the rally in his front yard.

"Oh dear, I just wanted to call and make sure you knew what was going on because I just LOVE your yard so much. Your yard is so pretty you could win, Yard of the Month. Did you hear that some men roped your husband in to agreeing to hold a KKK rally on that beautiful property of yours? Oh, I would just HATE to see those men tear up your (lovely) yard. And such pretty trees- what if they accidentally set fire to all those tall, old trees? I cannot imagine you would want those men tearing up your beautiful lawn."

KKK rally cancelled.

It was then moved to another location, and Elizabeth Hall worked her magic again. KKK rallies didn't happen thanks to Ms. Hall and the wives of the KKK members.

Mr. Spratt also made sure to remind us that Ms. Hall clearly spoke about the wrongheadedness and hateful actions of the Klan to these women, not just the preservation of their yards. Catherine's sister, Sarah, commented that she wondered why that Yard of the month kept showing up in the oddest, unlikeliest yards. Now we all understand what really happened!

Oh, don't you just love those sweet Southern subversive women? Ms. Hall was a member of my church. She and her husband Willie sat behind us on the right side every Sunday. I admit, Ms. Hall looked like the quintessential church lady. She was meek and mild, and always in worship on Sunday. I was shocked to learn this about my older church lady friend Elizabeth Hall.

It sounds like she knew something about the ways of the midwives in today's scripture reading from Exodus. I am sure she knew her Bible.

It is all in who you know. Ms. Hall knew to call the wives of the KKK members to get things done.

Ms. Hall was a midwife, like Shiprah and Puah, who even in their position were able to subvert and resist Pharaoh. But it wasn't just the midwives who resisted Pharaoh's genocide edict, Moses' mother, Jochabed, and sister Miriam hatched a plan to hide and protect Moses. And then even Pharaoh's daughter joined in. In essence they helped undermine the tyrant who irrationally determined to kill all males. Think about it. He was shooting himself in the foot. The children of the slaves, and males in particular were the source of his work force, undermining his own production and profit agenda. Pharaoh was so afraid and insecure because the Hebrew people were multiplying, the writer tells us. As their numbers grew, Pharaoh was afraid they were getting too much power. Is that not the way of the world? Pharaohs, tyrants, kings, and those in positions of power can have an irrational fear of others, if they grow in number. Fear leads to dread and dread leads to hate.

And the key fact- This Pharaoh did not know Joseph. It's all in who you know.

Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers, had risen in position and influence under the prior Pharaoh. He was a respected Hebrew. But this new king did not know Joseph. Isn't that how it goes in the "Who you Know" system?

Maybe you and I have benefitted from the who you know system. I know I have- earned or not. I know friends who got the job because of who they know. I know folks who got the teacher they wanted because of who they know. Ms. Elizabeth Hall prevented KKK rallies because of who she knew. I remember my brother Rob upon graduating from Clemson showed me his ring. He was very proud of that. He said, "This ring will open doors. It connects me to a network of Clemson alumni." It's all in who you know. Even though he lived and worked in Columbia surrounded by Carolina grads, it probably helped.

It's who you know. It helps connect you to power and influence and position, right?

Except that when it doesn't. Because if who you know falls from grace, there goes your chance. There is no guarantee that connections will always get your foot in the door, or an acceptance letter from college, or an initial interview. The danger in the who-you-know system, is that it puts the power in the hands of others who might forget. You can get put aside. Ignored. Replaced. You are vulnerable. In the who-you-know system, people are dispensable commodities, and no longer people that matter.

Exodus 1:8 reads, "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph."

The Hebrews were no longer human to the new king. They were just a means of production and profit. This new king did not know them or care. He didn't respect and love Joseph, and therefore, could care less about his nieces and nephews, his people, the Hebrews. That's what happens in a who-you-know system. Then it was easy to oppress the slaves and kill the boy babies. They were no longer human beings. They were not neighbors to be loved, but a group to be feared.

Pharaoh begins his reign of terror. The descendants of the Hebrews the Jews have lived with horror and tragedy for many generations. We cannot forget the Holocaust and other atrocities. Nor can we forget the horrors of slavery, genocide, or terror because we believe in a God who stands on the side of life, not death. And through Christ, stands on the side of redemption and new life. That is why we need to know the power of Shiprah and Puah who used their position to stand on the side of life and would not be party to the King's extermination of babies. We need to remember the Elizabeth Halls, the Jochobeds, Miriams, and daughters of Pharaoh who support life-giving ways- using the power and means they have. Pushing our baskets off with courage, prayer, and hope in a God who is bigger than any king.

In the Exodus, we know it gets worse before it gets better. Moses will be the one to lead them, the one whose mother cast him out upon the waters with no guarantee of his safety or life, but only the hope that it might get better.

The who-you-know economy is alive and well for those of us who benefit from it or are disadvantaged by it. As Christians we know though that Jesus trades in a whole different currency.ⁱⁱ Jesus says it's not who you know, it is I who know you. I know my sheep and my sheep know me. Our worth, identity, and value lie in the fact that we belong, body and soul, to the One who claims us and names us.

You and I are sons and daughters of the King- not the new king, but the true king.

We are no longer an expendable commodity or cog in the wheel, we are human beings created in the image of God. And so are all our neighbors if we believe that God is Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all living things. Our worth is not based on who we know in positions of power or influence. Which leads to Jesus' poignant and profound question to Peter,

Who do you say that I am? In other words the, “Do you know me, Jesus?” Is the more important question.

When we know and are known by the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, we act and speak with more respect for God than any authority or persons who rejects God's purposes. The power of Peter's confession was not Peter himself, but his witness. We can witness to God who does not trade in the currency of hate, irrational fear, or institutes systems of oppression. True power comes from God's sacrificial love which builds up the body of Christ-even hands us the keys to the kingdom and puts us in the driver seat.

Any of us parents know the fear of placing the keys in the hands of a 15 year old and praying for safety and good decisions. Imagine how Jesus felt handing Peter the keys to the kingdom. But Jesus empowers us, his church, his people, to use power for good.

- So if you will, open your hands and look at them a minute. Picture Jesus placing in your hands the keys and the responsibility for being his hands and feet on earth.
- How will you use that power?
- How will you in your workplace, or at school, your family, or in this town, your neighborhood be a witness for the life-giving ways of God?

Remember Shiprah and Puah- women without much position of power who feared God more than Pharaoh, and stood on the right side of history.

With keys in hand, consider your role as midwife for good.

Remember Elizabeth Hall a woman of faith and the legal secretary who called up the ladies in her bridge club and in her Presbyterian Women’s Circle, to stand on the side of respect, decency, and to stand against white supremacy.

Consider how you can work within the who-you-know system to influence and work for love.

Remember her boss, John Spratt, a member of the York School Board, a Presbyterian elder, who used his intellect, even his connections, to promote the well-being of his community.

Consider your talents, skills, and position, and dedicate yourself to work for the greater good.

Remember Peter and the first disciples, who were not perfect people, even Peter denied Jesus three times, but who got it right most of the time seeking to follow Jesus. **Remember we have** been handed the keys to the kingdom and are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Remember all those faithful midwives working to bring life, healing, goodness, and peace into the world.

And when Jesus asks us who we say he is?

May we be brave witnesses like Peter to the God who creates, redeems, restores, and sustains all life in our actions and words.

May all glory, honor, and power be to God. Amen

ⁱ Catherine Spratt grew up in York at the First Presbyterian Church until her family moved to Washington, DC upon the election of her father to the US Congress in the House of Representatives. She is an attorney in D.C.

ⁱⁱ Grateful to Jill Duffield for her commentary and framing of these texts in her Presbyterian Outlook “Looking at the Lectionary” August 21, 2017.