

***Religion in an Age of Fear***  
**A Sermon on Exodus 1:1-14**  
**Proper 16**  
**August 26, 2017**

**Introduction**

Today we begin nine weeks on Exodus. This is a foundational text for Jewish people. It is as important to them as the Gospels are to Christians. It is the story of how they became a people.

Christians refer to this book as Exodus because that is the theme of the book: the exodus from Egypt. Jews refer to this book as Shemot because that is the first distinctive word in the book: names. “These are the names [of the sons of Israel].” Jews refer to each of the books in the Hebrew by the first few words in the first verse of each book. We do something similar with hymns; the title of hymns in Christian hymnals is nearly always the first line of the hymn.

I am not going to try to analyze every verse that Judy read today. It is too much. I would like to focus instead on the first 14 verses. The key verse is, “The new king over Egypt did not know Joseph.” The new king feared the Hebrews. I would like to discuss fear of a whole group of people and how religious people respond to that fear.

**First Move: The New King Fears the Sons of Israel**

The first few verses are a transition. Chapters 12 through 50 of Genesis are stories about the Patriarchs and their families. The Patriarchs are Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God is often referred to as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Exodus 1 begins the story of a people.

“These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob; man and his house they came.” Sons of Israel is a transitional phrase. After Jacob wrestles all night with the stranger in Genesis 32, God gives Jacob a new name: Israel, which means “you have striven with God.” Sons of Israel is used four times in today’s text. The first time it refers to the 12 sons of Jacob, but after that it means a new nation. The family has grown so large that it has become a people.

Four verbs emphasize the new creation: the sons of Israel bore fruit, they swarmed, they multiplied, and they grew mighty in number. The verbs of fecundity are reinforced by a double adverb: very, very or exceedingly, exceedingly. The land was filled with them. These are allusions to the creation story. Bear fruit and multiply

were part of God's original command in Genesis 1:22 and 1:28. The waters swarmed with living creatures of each kind in Genesis 1:20-21. God promised Abraham in Genesis 18:18 that he would become a mighty nation.

God blesses Jacob in Gen 35:9-15 after Jacob builds an altar at Bethel, the site of the wrestling match. God commands Jacob: "Be fruitful and multiply." God promises Jacob: "A host of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come forth from your thigh." Exodus or Shemot begins with God's faithfulness to the promise made to Jacob/Israel.

There is a constantly perilous struggle for procreation in the stories of the patriarchs in Genesis. The sons of Israel now exhibit the teeming fecundity of the natural world. They swarm as the waters swarmed with creatures of every kind.

Exodus begins with original blessing. The new king feels threatened by it. The power of God is seen as a threat to those who want all power for themselves.

The new king does not know Joseph. To know in the Old Testament is not about the intellect or mental activity. To know means to be in relationship with. It is to be intimately acquainted with someone. It is based on experience.

The new king does not know how Egypt benefitted from Joseph's wisdom and managerial skill. The Pharaoh in Joseph's day trusted him and put him in charge of preparing for the seven years of famine. He relied upon Joseph to preserve the people of Egypt.

Joseph's family has prospered in Egypt, but the new king does not make any effort to know Joseph's people. He fears them.

The king addresses the people of Egypt: "Look, the people of the sons of Israel are mightier in number than we." This is a further transition to nationhood for Israel. Now they are referred to as people of the sons of Israel.

"If there is a war, they will join our enemies and fight against us and go up from the land." The king is worried more about escape than conquest. The people will leave Egypt; they will go up from the land. A war of liberation is intolerable to the king.

The king feared the sons of Israel, but he wanted to profit from their labor. The economic system in Egypt is referred to by social scientists as the Asian mode of production. The state owned all the land. The rural poor worked the land but they were not the personal property of the king. They owed their labor to the state whenever the king demanded it. The state collected part of the harvest as tribute. There is nothing new about this economic system. Joseph instituted a similar system when he stored up the surplus grain. When the Egyptian people came to Joseph for food, he asked for their livestock. When they came back later and asked for more

food, he asked for their horses. When they came back yet, again, he asked for their land. Joseph acquired all the land in Egypt for the Pharaoh.

The king persuades the people of Egypt to join him in his plan. “Come, let *us* deal shrewdly with them.” So *they* set taskmasters over them. *They* afflicted them with forced labor. *They* repeated Joseph’s plan of building cities to store grain. *They* embittered their lives, which anticipates the Passover story, when the people of Israel will take bitter herbs to remember their afflictions in Egypt. All the people of Egypt, not just the king, are oppressing the Israelites.

This is state slavery of men. They worked in large work gangs; they became an anonymous mass. They lost all marks of individuality in the eyes of their oppressors. There is no evidence that the women were enslaved or that family units were dissolved.

The text refers to two types of labor: in brick and mortar and in the fields. The king embarked on huge building projects that required the men of Israel to haul stones from quarries and manufacture bricks in ovens. Agriculture in Egypt was not sustained by rainfall but by irrigation from the Nile. The men of Israel were forced to build a unified network of ditches and canals to bring water from the Nile to the fields.

What the king means by dealing shrewdly with the sons of Israel is working them to death. He hopes that they will be too tired to resist or to procreate. They will come home from work and collapse from exhaustion instead of mating with their wives.

Coercing people does not work. The more the Egyptians oppressed the sons of Israel, the more they multiplied and spread. The Egyptians came to fear the Israelites even more.

So the king ratcheted up the violence. He tells the midwives of the Hebrews to kill the boy babies. When that doesn’t work, he commands all his people to fling every boy that is born to the Hebrews into the Nile.

Increasing levels of violence do not work. They only build up resistance that will lead to the Exodus.

## **Second Move: A Culture of Fear**

My sermon title is taken from a new book, *The Witness of Religion in an Age of Fear*, by Michael Kinnamon, a Disciples ecumenical leader. He gave us a preview of the book at the annual dinner for the Oklahoma Conference of Churches four years ago. Several of us were there: Anne, John, James Bussell, Mary and me.

Kinnamon distinguishes between fear and anxiety. Fear is an emotional response to a specific, immediate threat; anxiety is a response to threats that are more generalized than specific, more anticipated than immediate. The theologian Paul Tillich writes in *The Courage to Be* that “anxiety strives to become fear, because fear can be met with courage.” It is difficult for people to live with unspecified anxiety, so they look for a definite object for their fear—a person or a group of people—that they can attack or avoid. Anxiety over the changing demographics of American society is expressed in a fear of immigrants and refugees, Latinos and Muslims.

We see the same anxiety in the king of Egypt. He refers to the people of Israel as Hebrews. Hebrews was a term used throughout the ancient Near East to describe a group of marginal people without land or social standing. They were resident aliens.

Evolutionary psychologists believe that fear of strangers is an emotion that is born in us. Humans are born with the same instinct that animals have to set territorial boundaries to protect a food supply. Strangers were a threat to take your food. You were afraid of strangers until you knew their intentions. Fear of strangers is still born in us. We are too young as a species to have evolved beyond this instinct.

Robert McMasters, a positive psychologist, writes in *Emotional Intimacy* that fear creates tremendous energy. He says: “Fear is basically just excitement in endarkened disguise.” Pay attention next time you are excited and notice how similar excitement feels to fear. We get a sudden rush of fear when we step too close to the edge of a cliff or come across a wild animal. Fear mobilizes us for immediate action, either stepping back or fleeing. Fear bypasses any thinking processes that could cause us to hesitate. Fear causes a biochemical reaction that sends blood rushing into our legs. It sends blood rushing to other places, too. McMasters says that fear can bring heightened sexuality. Think twice before you allow your teenager to go to vampire movies.

That energy can be freed for life-giving purposes if we face our fears instead of repressing them. There is no point in saying to ourselves that we should not be afraid. Fear is not the problem. Our challenge is what to do with our fear, how we relate to it, how we choose to view it, how thoroughly we explore our personal history with it.

McMasters says that our fear often points to wound from our childhood or in past relationship that need to be healed. When we have a disproportionate, fearful response to someone or something, we are in the grip of an unresolved issue from our past, an issue that will direct how we respond until we face and work through our fearfulness.

The energy that fear generates can also be redirected into anger. Research shows that fear and anger are biochemically similar emotions. Same adrenaline, different directionality: fear retreats, anger moves forward. Same adrenaline, different intentions: fear avoids, anger engages.

Kinnamon addresses the culture of fear that has gripped contemporary America. The mood of our nation historically has been a self-confidence that borders on arrogance. Now it is fear.

Our fear of crime is out of sync with reality. FBI reports show that violent crime is down 15% from a decade ago. The overall crime rate is down 50% from 25 years ago. Americans are far safer than at any other time in our history. Yet polls show that more than half of the people believe that the nation's crime problem is very serious and that two thirds think it is getting worse.

That fear is often projected by white people onto African Americans. Many white people are afraid of African American men. Jesse Jackson, pastor of East Sixth Street Christian Church in Oklahoma City, came to our Wednesday night group when we were studying *The New Jim Crow* and told us that he did not know how many times he had encountered white people in a parking lot at the mall or the grocery store and they crossed to the other side of the road.

Anxious misperceptions about the prevalence of crime have negative consequences for society. One of those is mass incarceration. The United States has 5% of the world's population but 25% of the world's prisoners. Oklahoma is second only to Louisiana in prison population per capita. Eighteen states spend more on jails and prisons than on colleges and universities.

Fear of crime also manifests itself in increased gun ownership by private citizens. Americans own 50% more guns per capita than the next most heavily armed country, Yemen. When asked why they own a gun, 60 percent of Americans say it is for personal safety and protection. Yet the rate of violent crimes committed against strangers has fallen 75% percent in the last 25 years. Do people in Edmond really have any reason to fear violent crime? Why can't we trust the police to handle it?

Again, our collective fears create negative consequences for society. I led a panel discussion two years ago on the relationship between the police and African Americans in Oklahoma City. Police chief Bill Citty said that the biggest difference from working the streets 25 years ago is that there are so many more guns on the street now. Officers come across guns every night. It makes officers anxious and quicker to resort to force. Chief Citty said that police chiefs across the country would support gun laws that would get guns off the street.

### **Third Move: What Do We Do with Our Fear?**

Kinnamon believes that churches and world religions can have a word of comfort for those who are afraid. The message ringing from both testaments in the Bible is, “Fear not!” Moses tells Joshua, “The Lord goes before you. Fear not.” The prophets tell Israel in exile, “Fear not, for I am with you.” Fear is a major theme in the Psalms: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” The angel Gabriel announces the virgin birth to Mary, telling her, “Fear not, for you have found favor with God.” Jesus tells the disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.”

The novelist, Marilyn Robinson, writes, “Fear is not a Christian habit of mind.”

Fear in the Bible is an expression of unbelief, a sign that one does not trust God. Jews and Christians overcome their fear of danger by fearing God. The word for fear in Hebrew and in Greek can also mean awe or reverence. We fear God not because God is cruel but because God is holy. When we stand before God, we are filled with awe and wonder at the glory and splendor of creation. The witness of both testaments is that this awesome God loves and accepts each of us. This love frees us from fear.

Fear of others is a symptom of a constricted life; fear of God opens us up to appreciate life. Bernard Steinberg, a longtime director of Harvard Hillel, said: “Awe is what happens to fear when it stops being about me.” Fear is self-centered. I am worried about that. I am afraid of them. Our fear dissipates when we look beyond ourselves, with reverence toward God.

Scripture also teaches that anxiety comes from trusting the wrong things to protect us. If we put our ultimate trust in our bank accounts or in guns and home security systems, we will never have enough. Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool. A rich man wants to build bigger barns to store his grain and his goods so that he will have ample provisions laid up for many years. God says to him, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

Paul Tillich writes in *The Courage to Be* that Christian faith gives us the courage to confront our fears instead of being driven by them. Courage is the strength to affirm one’s life in spite of the anxiety of despair and meaninglessness.

Kinnamon closes his book with ten recommendations for religious communities. Here are what I believe are the four most important.

First, teach what our own traditions have to say about fear and how to diminish it. 1 John 4:18-19: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” This is quickly followed by, “We love because God first loved us.” On the other hand, fear can also cast out love. Our churches live with our own fears of losing members, losing revenue, losing our identity and losing influence in the culture. This fear is self-centered. If we let this fear control us, it will accelerate the downward spiral. Instead, turn toward God and turn toward our neighbor.

Second, see our congregations as places where fears can be shared and discussed. Giving voice to fear is one way of keeping fear from controlling us. Church should be a place where we are not embarrassed to hear the fears of others or to share our own.

Next, engage in dialogue in our own communities with people we disagree with. Instead of ranting on FaceBook, try talking to people you disagree with. Understand where they are coming from before you contradict them with your own opinion.

Finally, make welcoming the stranger a key part of the identity of our church. Deepening our spirituality helps us see the connections between all people and all things.

Cynthia Bourgeault encourages us to welcome our fear. When we are afraid, take a moment and give your mind a chance to recognize the fear. Say, “welcome fear.” This is consistent with what McMasters as a psychologist advocates. Get inside your fear. Reflect on your history with a particular fear when it arises. What triggers it? McMasters suggests that we personify our fears and the fears of other people. Look at fear as a scared child who longs to be touched and just held for a while.

## **Conclusion**

The blessings that God poured out on the sons of Israel inspired fear in the king of Egypt. It led to an escalating cycle of oppression and violence.

Americans, especially white, middle-class Americans, live in an age of fear. We are driven by fear of the other. Especially if the other has darker skin. We are fearful of changing demographics.

Both testaments bring us a word of comfort: Fear not! If we have the courage to confront our fears instead of letting them control us, we may just find that God is working to enrich our lives through diversity and interdependence. God is offering us a blessing if only we will accept it.