

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Exodus 1:1-22, “The Villain”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 9/17/2023**

Darth Vader.  
Dracula.  
The Joker.  
Lord Voldemort.  
Sauron.

Every epic tale needs a villain.

The villain carries the load for the opposition to our main character.  
If there isn't a bad guy (or girl), we aren't going to have much of a story.

Many of our favorite stories have memorable villains  
but we also encounter such people in real life.

There are the architects of evil who loom large in history:

Stalin, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot,

Slobodan Milosevic, Osama Bin Laden,

and of course, when grasping for an example

of a historical villain, there's always Hitler.

These villains really have shaped our world. What about in your day to day life?

Who have you personally had to struggle against?

Who (or what) stands between you and your hopes and dreams?

Who (or what) draws you off the good path and into tragedy  
or heartache or emptiness?

In the book of Genesis the villain is ... the serpent.

Crafty and shrewd, the Serpent in Genesis 3 is a deceiver who  
tempts Adam and Eve away from their devotion to  
their loving and powerful Creator.

In Exodus we have the King of Egypt known by the title Pharaoh (Great House).

Pharaoh is unspeakably evil at a level that seems hard to believe.

Exodus paints Pharaoh as the personification of everything  
that is against God and what God desires.

Pharaoh is evil in concentrated form, personally and nationally.

Pharaoh is a person who engages directly with others but he also represents the oppressive power of a global superpower seeking to extract as much out of foreigners on its land as possible.

We see forces at work in our own world which clearly move against the vitality and renewal of God's gracious Kingdom in Christ.

And so a passage like this connects us both to wickedness running loose in the world as well as our personal experience of hardship and injustice.

When an evil villain raises its head, we must look for signs of our Creator, we must look for signs of hope.

The first 7 verses of this chapter were studied in last week's sermon.

They bear the bad news of all the characters worth naming dying off.

***But*** verse seven interjects, the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied, and they filled the land ... just as God intended for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Verses 8 and 9, however, return to an ominous tone.

**“Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. “Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become far too numerous for us.”**

The multiplication which is God's intention for humanity, the filling of the land which is a sign of the Creator's blessing does not escape this new king's vision.

But what God describes as very good,

Pharaoh describes as a threat:

The sons and daughters of Israel have multiplied *too much*.

We see the goodness of God's creation all around us, but it's often considered a constraint to economic growth, or a hindrance to extracting more oil.

We see the goodness of flourishing and creative neighbors  
from different cultural backgrounds – much as the Israelites were in Egypt.  
And yet the response is often to see them as a threat to our schools,  
our jobs, our neighborhoods.

When we see someone or something that God is blessing  
and then we hear people telling us to be afraid,  
we should take note. This is a pattern that goes back a long, long way.

Here's Pharaoh's pitch in v. 10:

**“Come, we must deal shrewdly with them  
or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out,  
will join our enemies,  
fight against us and leave the country.”**

There are two concerns that Pharaoh highlights:

First, national security. Because these people are slaves, they don't like us,  
and one day they might fight us.

Second, national economy. If they fight us they will *leave the country*.  
Pharaoh is terrified that Israel will leave because as slaves they  
are boosting the economic engine of Egypt.  
Sounds like a love-hate relationship to me.

Pharaoh says, “we must deal *shrewdly* with them.”

This is the same language used to describe the serpent in Genesis 3:1,  
**“Now the serpent was more *crafty* than any animal of the field.”**

When descriptions like this are repeated and reused, they are like hyperlinks  
which connect one story to another.

Just as the Hebrew people are linked with the multiplication mandate of Genesis 1,  
Pharaoh's villain character is linked with the serpent of Genesis 3.

We then read about the harsh labor imposed on the Hebrew people in that time.  
They are oppressed with burdens as they are forced to build storage cities  
for Pharaoh to hoard up the fruits of the land – another sign of fearfulness.

Pharaoh was worried that they would become even more numerous,  
but even under his oppressive regime we see in v. 12,  
“They multiplied and spread!”

There’s something about these people that isn’t adding up – they aren’t NORMAL.

(Pharaoh could have seen this as an opportunity to learn what makes them unique,  
to see if the blessing on them could also become a blessing for Egypt.)

Verses 13 and 14 are carefully crafted as seen in Tim Mackie’s translation:

“and Egypt **enslaved** the sons of Yisrael *with brutality*,  
and they made their lives bitter with harsh **enslavement**  
with mortar and with brick,  
and with every kind of **enslavement** in the field;  
all their **enslavement** in which they **enslaved** them *with brutality*.”

You see the repeated in first and last lines this idea of being enslaved with brutality.

Then you see a further elaboration on that in the second and fourth lines  
about harsh enslavement and every kind of enslavement in the field.

Then we see in the very center of these repeated patterns  
two words that stick out as unique: mortar and brick.

The only time these words are used in the Hebrew Bible are here in this passage  
and when describing the tower of Babel in Genesis.

Mortar and brick.

Building cities for people

who want to make a name for themselves.

Mortar and brick seem to be a tangible symbol of the harsh oppression  
of Egypt’s enslavement in the same way that a cotton field  
would conjure intense memories of harsh treatment for  
those enslaved in the American South.

These are people of God's blessing, they are God's chosen children.  
And now their lives are reduced to making mortar and brick for Pharaoh.  
Picking cotton for their master.

But as I said at the beginning of this message,  
when an evil villain raises its head, we must look for signs of our Creator,  
we must look for signs of hope.

As Mr. Rogers famously said, when something really bad happens,  
look for the helpers.

In v. 15, the king of Egypt addresses two midwives who assisted  
the Israelite women when giving birth.

Now remember, the multiplication of the Hebrews is a big sign of God's blessing  
*and* a big reason for Pharaoh's fear.

These midwives are right there at the moment of all these  
daughters and sons of Israel being born –  
they are conduits of life, conduits of God's blessing.

The midwives whom Pharaoh spoke to were called Beautiful and Sparkle.  
I'm serious! The names Shiphrah and Puah mean Beautiful and Sparkle,  
so that's what we're going to call them.

Pharaoh tells them that when the Hebrew women give birth,  
they should kill every child which is a boy,  
but allow every child who is a girl to live.

The conduits of God's blessing through innocent life  
are being called upon to act as agents of death.

Do you think that's going to work?  
Not a chance. Beautiful and Sparkle feared Yahweh and they did not do  
what Pharaoh said.

When Pharaoh hears this, he is so angry, he comes to them and says,  
“WHY HAVE YOU DONE THIS? Why have you let the boys live?”

Beautiful and Sparkle, they aren't dumb. They know they need a cover,  
so they deceive Pharaoh. They bat their eyes and say,  
“Oh, Pharaoh, the Hebrew women  
are much more vigorous than Egyptian women,  
and they give birth before we can get there!”

At this point it becomes apparent that the experience of the Hebrews in Egypt  
is being portrayed as like an upside down version  
of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Back in Genesis chapter 3,  
God gave Adam and Eve a command not to eat of tree of the knowledge of  
good and evil. But they did. And do you know what God said?  
“What is this you have done?”  
And Eve says to God, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate it.”

Here's how it works:

Here in Exodus 1, in place of the good and loving God  
we have the evil and oppressive Pharaoh.

And while God gave a good command,  
Pharaoh gave an evil command.

When God's command was disobeyed, he said, “What is this you have done?”  
When Pharaoh's command was disobeyed he says,  
“Why have you done this?”

Whereas Eve reports that she was deceived by the serpent,  
Beautiful and Sparkle deceive the serpent himself.

So this is a land that is the opposite of Eden.

God's people are still there and God is still there,  
but the order of operations seems to be flipped around.

This is beautiful, rich, layered storytelling and it has a profound message:

This place is not for you, Hebrew people.

You don't belong here. This isn't the way of Yahweh's blessing.

When everything was perfect in the Garden,  
God's partners had to watch out for the deceiver.  
But when everything has gone to hell in Egypt,  
God's partners have to watch out for a sign of blessing  
that came through Beautiful and Sparkle.

Because of their great courage, guess what?  
The people increased and became *even more numerous*.  
And God gave these midwives families of their own  
because they honored and feared Yahweh rather than Pharaoh.

But just as God never tires of blessing,  
Pharaoh never tires of cursing.  
If they couldn't kill these boys as they were born,  
they would go through the camps of the Hebrew families,  
rip them from their mothers arms  
and throw every boy that was born into the Nile.

To understand what brick and mortar means to the Israel people  
you also have to hear the cries of parents and children as they are  
ripped apart.

This isn't just ancient history.  
This happens in our own day.  
This is genocide. This is holocaust.

Hear the cries of Uighurs undergoing forced sterilization.  
Hear the cries of migrants who forcibly separated from their children.  
Hear the cries of mothers who can't afford formula or diapers.  
Hear the cries of families in Ukraine and other war zones  
around the world.  
Hear the cries of ecosystems collapsing under pollution.

The villain still does his work.  
But he will not have the last word and we are not to fear what he can do.

Instead, keep your eyes open for God's blessing,  
fear the Lord, and live with the courage of Beautiful and Sparkle.