

# Sermon for Sunday, August 27, 2023

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“Vision Correction”

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Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

The only time my blood pressure reading is high is at the eye doctor. Every other time it's checked it's really healthy; but it spikes when I'm in that chair anticipating what's ahead. *What's the smallest row you can see? The top one? Better 1 or 2?* Neither. *You have another prescription change, would you like to consider this \$800 pair of eyeglasses while your eyes are dilated?* My eyesight isn't great to begin with, and I'm sure my anxiety about all things eye doctor makes it even worse.

Fear can make it hard to see clearly. That seems to be what's happening for the new Pharaoh in our story today. I wonder if he feels anxious, if he's maybe in over his head, not quite up to the task of governing a growing nation. We know this Pharaoh is lacking in at least one key regard, he doesn't know his people's history. He doesn't know Joseph. It's been over 400 years since Joseph and Joseph's God helped Egypt survive a seven-year famine. There's wisdom to be gained from knowing that story, from knowing about God who does some pretty great work when things look bleak. Yet, we're told, this Pharaoh doesn't know Joseph.

Without such key wisdom and perspective, I imagine the work of governing feels daunting. Maybe things feel out of control and Pharaoh wants someone to blame. Whatever the reason, Pharaoh focuses on the Israelites. His gaze narrows. He fixates on these foreigners. He tries to control them. Fear can lead us to respond like Pharaoh - looking for someone, anyone to blame, trying to desperately control our environment and the people around us. We can get fixated on problems. Our eyes narrow. We can't see clearly.

Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives, have a different type of fear. They fear God. The phrase *the fear of God* is often used in ways that imply punishment from an angry God. The scriptures describe fearing God differently. To fear God means to have awe, reverence, humility before the God of all creation. Where fear usually narrows our focus and leads us to try to control, fear of God widens our gaze. It helps us to let go of control because God is God, and we are not. Such reverence and awe help us to see life and goodness rather than fixating on problems, to see others with compassion.

That's how the women in our story today see, even in a time of fear. Hearing about them can help us reflect upon how we see. First there's Shiphrah and Puah. Pharaoh tells them, “When you see

the Hebrew women on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him.” Yet, if these midwives were really to see the Hebrew women before them, they would not be able to kill their babies. And that’s what happens. Because they look to God with awe, they can truly see the women, they can see new life and see it as a cause to rejoice rather than fear. Shiphrah and Puah do have reason to fear Pharaoh. They put themselves at great risk by defying his orders. Yet their fear of God gives them a wider perspective. God is God, Pharaoh is not. The Pharaohs of the world may wreak havoc for a time, but God’s new life will prevail.

One of the babies that Shiphrah and Puah protect turns out to be Moses. When his mother looks at him, she sees that he is a fine baby. Actually, the Hebrew phrase used here is the same phrase that’s used repeatedly in Genesis 1 when God looks at creation each day and sees that it is good. When Moses’ mother sees her baby and sees that he is good, it becomes clear to her - she must do whatever it takes to protect him. Rather than being overwhelmed by fear, this mother’s awe and reverence for God’s good creation gives her focus and helps her to act with courage and strength.

She could be killed for defying Pharaoh’s orders. Her baby could easily drown in the Nile. Or worse yet, he could be seen and taken from the river by one of Pharaoh’s own. Pharaoh’s daughter does see the ark and orders her servant to take it from the river. Will she follow her father’s orders and throw him back into the Nile unprotected? No, because she sees the baby and hears his cries and has compassion for him. Her father wants her to fear this Hebrew child, but she gazes on him with love.

Meanwhile, Moses’ sister has been hiding in the bushes so she can see what happens to him. Her careful attention means she’s ready to act when Pharaoh’s daughter takes him out of the river. In a time of chaos and fear, these women respond with courage and strength because of how they see. They see life and goodness, they see with awe and reverence and compassion. In the way that they see, these women help change the world. All of this goes on right under Pharaoh’s watch. He’s so worried about the threat of the Hebrew boys that he overlooks the women.

Pharaoh’s fear clouds his judgment and his vision. This happens to us so often as well. Our vision needs help and correction, not in the form of \$800 eyeglasses, but in the form of what scripture describes as the fear of God. That is the lens that gives us perspective and wisdom. When we look to God with awe and reverence, when we stand before our creator with humility and wonder, then we can see the world more clearly. In relationship with God, we are assured that we need not fear. God is at work. Our eyes are opened to see life and goodness even in times of chaos. We are given what we need to respond with courage and compassion.

We are also assured that God sees us and sees all our struggles with compassion. We’ll hear more about how God sees next week.

Beloved of God, God gazes upon you with love and compassion. You can fear God and see differently.

