

# "Who Am I?"

First Presbyterian Church of Annapolis

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by Rev. Dr. Andrew Kort

At the beginning of the book of Exodus, we are told that a new king arose over Egypt. As he pulled into his office and unpacked the U-Haul from the back of a camel he looked around and noticed something. There were a lot of Israelites. Exodus tells us the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them. So the new king thought, "Wait a minute. This is Egypt. The Egyptians are supposed to be the ones who are strong and in charge—not these people who come here from somewhere else." So out of fear, and viewing the presence of the Israelites as a threat and a matter of national security this new king institutes his own version of immigration reform. He says, "Look, the Israelites are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them or they will increase and they might join our enemies and fight against us." So they oppressed the Israelites and forced them into hard labor—under the watchful and brutal eye of the Pharaoh.

Scripture tells us, after a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites continued to groan under their oppression and they cried out. Out of their oppression and slavery their cries for help reached all the way up to the very ears of God. God, who is faithful and just, remembered his covenant with Abraham—the covenant that said they will be my people and I will be their God—and God took notice of them.

I wish I could stand up here and tell you that this is the only case of oppression and that it was only a concept for some far off distant biblical land...but it isn't. It is an ever-present reality today too.

In her book, "Feminist Theory and Christian Theology,"<sup>1</sup> Serene Jones, the President of Union Seminary in NYC, flushes out what she refers to as "five faces of oppression" in the United States. First there is oppression as exploitation. This allows some groups to get more and more and more while others are constrained. Think of the difference in pay between men and women that often exists. Women are expected to work just as hard, yet they are often paid less. A recent article in Forbes.com reports that "For the last decade, median earnings for women working full time, year-round have been just 77% of men's earnings."<sup>2</sup> Then there is oppression as marginalization. This speaks to those who are pushed to the outside and to the fringe, pushed out to the margins. These are folks who are made to feel as if their lives are not as important or do not matter as much as the lives of others. This is why we say Black Lives Matter. Often times these are people whom the system often cannot or will not use. Think of an immigrant or someone with a mental illness or someone in declining health. There is oppression as powerlessness. This is when someone's is made to feel patronized, infantilized, trivialized, silenced, disrespected, or made to feel invisible—like they don't exist because it is hard for them to exist. I think of the working poor, those who work 40 hours a week or more and yet, still can't work their way up. There's oppression as cultural imperialism. This was brought to the forefront recently with the issue of the legality of same-sex marriage. Oppression as cultural imperialism is when there is one dominant meaning or view of society and it minimizes the experiences and perspectives of another group or just labels them as "the other" or tells them they are out of line. Finally, Jones describes oppression as violence. We can think of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Freddy Gray, Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and

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<sup>1</sup> Serene Jones, "Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace," Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2000, pgs. 79-93. Some of the comments that follow each "face" are my own.

<sup>2</sup> From Forbes.com <http://www.forbes.com/sites/forbeswomanfiles/2014/04/07/the-awful-truth-of-the-gender-pay-gap-it-gets-worse-as-women-age/> retrieved on August 27, 2020.

countless others whose experience gives witness to this kind of oppression as violence to the Black community.

With so much oppression in the world, oppression we see and read about, oppression we don't even think about, and oppression that may happen to some of us, it is so overwhelming and it is so easy to think—"I know this is so big and so deep and so profound of a problem, I really wish someone could do something about this?" Yet we are told, out of their oppression, the cries for help reach up to the very ears of God.

So the Bible, in the book of Exodus, a book dealing with liberation from oppression, we are introduced to Moses. He's got some history on both sides of the coin here. He was rescued as a baby by the Pharaoh's daughter who took him as her son and raised him into adulthood. But he's also one of the Hebrew people and he knows it. Plus there's that little episode where in a fit of anger he kills one of the Egyptians and buries him in the sand. Word of that incident got back to Pharaoh who in turn wanted to kill Moses.

So fearing for his safety, Moses flees. He runs from his problem and he ends up in Midian where he's working as a shepherd. One day he's doing his normal everyday thing, minding his own business, tending the flock, when he sees a bush on fire. But it is the strangest thing. It was burning, but not consumed. Maybe even stranger, suddenly a voice comes from the bush. It's God.

Moses draws near. God says, "Come no closer, but listen to what I am about to tell you. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And I've heard the cries of my people, who are being oppressed, and I am going to deliver them and liberate them and I want you to help me do it. So I'm sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt."

Moses immediately begins to backpedal. Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? Back to Egypt?! Moses had to have remembered the last time he was there. He had to have remembered that the Pharaoh wanted to kill him. He knew that he didn't leave there on good terms, so the last thing he'd be cut out for would be a diplomat or a negotiator. And I'm pretty sure that Moses remembered why the Pharaoh wanted to kill him in the first place—because he had murdered an Egyptian. He'd be returning to the scene of the crime. So when he's saying "Who am I to go to Pharaoh?" he also knows that he's a murderer, that he has a past and that past isn't clean. He's thinking that there must be someone else, someone who is not a murderer for crying out loud, who can negotiate on behalf of God.

But God isn't looking for someone with a perfect past. And God is not looking for a negotiator, God is looking for a liberator.

And there was also that little story near the end of chapter 2 where Moses stood up to some other shepherds who were advancing on the daughters of the Priest of Midian and Moses drove them away. So Moses has already shown that he's got it in him. God sees and remembers it. The problem is Moses obviously does not.

If that isn't enough, Moses starts in with all the questions and excuses. "God, what if I tell them I'm here because you sent me and they start asking me questions like 'God sent you? From a talking bush that was on fire? *Riiiiight*. Well, if God sent you, then what's his name?' What am I supposed to say then?"

Moses keeps going all the way into the next chapter. He says things we are likely to think from time to time—What if they don't believe me? What if they don't listen to me? What if they don't take me seriously? What if, what if, what if, what if...

And then he starts trying really hard to get God to pick someone else. It's like when you are in class and the teacher asks for a volunteer to read or come up front and answer the question and everyone kind of looks everywhere except at the teacher trying really hard to avoid eye contact and hoping someone else will get called on instead. So Moses gives it one last try. "God, I'm not really a good public speaker. I am a shepherd, remember. I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."

Moses is a great figure in the Bible. He's a hero of our faith. He's one of the top heroes of our faith. Everyone has heard of the great Moses. But what we can easily forget is that he is just like me and you. He's normal. He's human. He was a shepherd with a speech problem who was sent to confront the mighty Pharaoh. He is full of self-doubt and insecurities. He is almost paralyzed by a bunch of "what ifs." He is thinking that the problem with the Pharaoh is way too big for him to handle all by himself—and he's right.

But he doesn't have to do this alone. As soon as Moses asks, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring them out of Egypt?" the first words that God speaks from the burning bush are—"I will be with you." That's God's first response and God's first promise to Moses. You will not have to do this seemingly overwhelming and enormous and scary task on your own. I will be with you.

And for every single question and excuse that Moses can come up with, God provides an answer, God provides a solution. Moses asked, "What will I say if they ask me your name and who sent me?" God answered, "Tell them the great I AM has sent you; the God of your ancestors." Moses asked, "But suppose they don't believe me or listen to me. Suppose they doubt that you actually appeared and sent me. Then what?" God showed Moses signs and wonders like his staff turning into a snake, like his hand turning leprosy and then back to normal again. Moses said, "But God, I am not eloquent, I'm slow of speech and tongue." God answered, "Hey, who gives mortals speech and who allows them to hear? I do. Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to say."

You'd think that'd be enough for Moses. You'd think the promises that God would be with him, the display of God's powers, and that promise that God would guide his words, that Moses would be all in, ready to confront the Pharaoh. But get this. He says, "O my Lord, can you just please send someone else."

And this is what I love so much about God. After all of the promises, the signs, and the assurances, when Moses tries one last time to get out of having to go see the Pharaoh—God gets angry...but get this...in God's infinite wisdom and in God's infinite compassion...God decides to send Moses' brother Aaron with him...OK Moses, I will send someone else, but not instead of you—alongside of you. You see, the more Moses pushes away, the more God keeps pulling in. God is that relentless and that persistent. God will not let us say "no, send someone else."

You see, I think God calls us and sends us into all kinds of different places and to different needs and to confront all different kinds of terrible pharaohs. Sometimes we get sent to confront the Pharaoh of hunger in our communities. And it looks like it is such a big task. Sometimes we get sent to confront the Pharaoh of homelessness in our communities. That also looks like a big task and a confusing one. Sometimes we get sent

to confront the Pharaoh of poverty. Sometimes we get sent to confront the Pharaoh of loneliness and the Pharaoh of depression. Sometimes we get sent to confront the Pharaoh of disease and illness. Sometimes we get sent to confront the Pharaoh of racism and the Pharaoh of injustice and of all the many forms of oppression that exist in our world today that make the children of God cry out in anguish lifting their voices to the very ears of God. Sometimes we get sent to all kinds of Pharaohs. There are so many of them out there.

And I know that many times we don't want to go because either we've got other things to do or we are tired or we just really aren't interested. Or maybe we don't think we can be of any use or make any kind of difference that is big enough or worthy enough, like if we think helping out one person is not worth our time. Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? Maybe, like Moses, we think our past gets in the way, as if something we've done precludes us from going to any of the Pharaohs out there. Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? But it wasn't like that with Moses and I don't think it is like that for us. Maybe we think we don't have enough resources or are ill-equipped. Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? Maybe like Moses we have a lot of "what ifs." What if this happens or what if that happens or what if we try but no one listens or responds or gives or donates or volunteers or shows up or signs up? Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?

Allow me, church, to answer that for you—you are a child of the great I AM, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham and Isaac, and Jacob. And God has promised to be with you. And God doesn't send you alone. Like with Moses, there are Aarons all over the place willing to go and help you out and to do what you can't do. Because you see, it is always good to remember that God does not call the equipped, but God always equips the called.

Perhaps then, the better question is not "Who am I?" but "Who is God?"

And we know that God is the God of the oppressed. And God has committed to reaching out the divine and mighty hand, confronting every kind of unjust and oppressive Pharaoh and proclaiming, "Let my people go!"

As people of faith, we consider what we can, and must, contribute to the struggle against Pharaoh. Professor Derek Nelson suggests that as Christians, we bring our lament, we renounce violence, we look for the image of God in each one, and we trust that God is with us in all of this<sup>3</sup>. So, as we prepare to go to Pharaoh, we take our faith with us into the struggle. Because as the great South African theologian Allan Boesak has said, "the struggle is God's way of bringing change."<sup>4</sup>

Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? At your baptism, this identity was sealed...you are God's.

What is awesome is sometimes God decides to send us.

So, Pharaoh—watch out! Because ready or not—here we come.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> From conversation on August 26, 2020 at the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.