

“Step Out of Line”  
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau  
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church  
Exodus 1:8-2:10; 3:1-15  
September 29, 2019 - Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

We have been reading about Abraham and Isaac and Jacob the past few weeks. We’re skipping over the rest of the book of Genesis to get to the book of Exodus, but first a quick review:

Jacob had twelve sons, and his son Joseph the dreamer was sold down the river to Egypt by his brothers. But Joseph rose to great power there and eventually saved his family from famine. There, in Egypt, the people of Israel remained.

And then our story picks up:

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. 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.” Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, 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.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, “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.” But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” 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.” So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, God gave them families. 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.”

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. 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. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

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. 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. 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?” Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother. 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. 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."

We're skipping a few verses here, in which Moses kills an Egyptian who was beating one of the Hebrew slaves. Moses, now a fugitive, flees and takes up shepherding:

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then God said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." God said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" God said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." God said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

God bless pajamas.

If there is no youth event, no dinner invitation, no committee meeting on a Sunday, this pastor is in his pjs by 7 p.m. After a long day of sustained energy, I'm ready for supper, maybe some reading, a glass of wine, and a silly movie or television show.

Last Sunday, in my pajamas with a cat in my lap, I discovered that the Emmy Awards were on, and I lingered there for a few minutes. I started thinking about how it's a bit ironic that there was a live telecast to give trophies to programs that are almost never watched live anymore. And then Alex Borstein won the award for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series.

In her acceptance speech, Borstein thanked her parents and grandparents:

"They are immigrants, they are holocaust survivors. My grandmother was in line to be shot into a pit and she said, 'What happens if I step out of line?' [The Nazi guard] said, 'I don't have the heart to shoot you but somebody will' and she stepped out of line and for that I am here and my children are here. So step out of line ladies, step out of line."

Some have taken Borstein to task, pointing out that it's deeply problematic to suggest that if only more victims of the Nazi regime had shown a bit more courage they might have survived, or to gloss over the fact that in most cases an act of such resistance would have been met with death. I don't think that's what Alex Borstein meant to suggest at all, but rather to celebrate surviving and the spirit of resilience that has marked the chosen people of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In stories like that we find hope. Perhaps not enough to overthrow evil armies, but enough to survive for the next day. Stepping out of line — doing the small, unexpected thing in obedience to God — is a motif that runs through our holy texts and perhaps nowhere more than in the series of events leading up to the great liberation from Egypt that is the foundational story of the Hebrew scriptures.

Here we find seemingly powerless people who should not be expected to do anything extraordinary simply to have peace or freedom or life. Here we find them getting extremely creative, because the forces of empire are seeking to destroy or distort peace and freedom and life. Here we find them creating and participating in small acts of transformation, subtle acts of subterfuge, just enough resistance to survive another day and to make that day worth living.

It starts with ol' Pharaoh fearing the Israelites. They're outsiders, you see. Though they've been there for generations, they're not real Egyptians. Who knows how loyal they'll be?. I suppose Pharaoh could have embraced these refugees who came to his land seeking the Egyptian Dream that their ancestor Joseph offered them. But no, he rounds them up and presses the boot of his empire to their necks and turns them into free labor. They were to be stifled and broken. "But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread" — and we have the first resistance of this story. Life. Family. In slavery, the Israelites don't give up on each other, they embrace. At night, when the taskmasters have gone home. They make more Israelites.

Pharaoh looks for another approach to his Israelite problem. He calls in these midwives —Shiphrah and Puah — these women who stand at the threshold of birth, the liminal space where Israelite mothers and babies are so vulnerable. Pharaoh breathes an evil conspiracy into their ears, ordering them to simply murder newborn boys as they are born. Shiphrah and Puah have a conspiracy of their own and this one is in holy obedience to God. When the boys survive, Pharaoh wants to know why his order was disobeyed. And here I imagine that Shiphrah and Puah are taking advantage of the ignorance and squeamishness of their king. He'll buy anything they tell him when it comes to childbirth. So they spin a yarn about "vigorous" Hebrew women with incredibly short labor, all the while recalling the hours they spent helping bringing new life into Egypt.

This resistance fib means Pharaoh will have to turn things up a notch. He brings all of his people into his anti-immigrant campaign. He orders Egyptians to toss boys into the Nile. And then we get the story of a mother hiding one of those Israelite boys until she has no choice but to do something. So she puts him in the river all right, but in a basket among the reeds near the riverbank. Her daughter—we later learn her name to be Miriam — is the surveillance team, about to deftly step out of line herself.

Who should arrive on the scene but Pharaoh's daughter! This is either the best or worst thing that

could have happened! But she sees the baby and her heart warms. She knows what's up, that an Israelite placed this child in the river with a prayer instead of letting him be tossed in by one of Pharaoh's goons. Miriam steps into the scene — and I have to imagine it seemed a bit overly convenient to Pharaoh's daughter that an Israelite girl popped out from behind a rock — and she offers to find an Israelite wet-nurse. I think Pharaoh's daughter was nodding and leading the witness as she said, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages."

These three women — plus the maid and attendants — have quietly risked their lives for this child who will grow up right under Pharaoh's nose and who will ultimately free these troublesome Israelites.

Out in the scrub of the wilderness, a bush burned. We don't know how long it burned before Moses and his herd found it. I imagine when you're out there with the animals and nobody to talk to and you've exhausted all the herders' songs you know, a burning bush is at least something out of the ordinary. How long do you think you need to watch flaming foliage out of the corner of your eye before you notice that the fire isn't destroying the bush? I imagine Moses going forward with the flock for at least a few minutes before saying, "Hold on, I need check this out."

When Samuel hears God's voice, it echoes through the halls in the still of night.  
When Isaiah hears God's voice, he gets a vision of the temple filled with winged creatures.  
But the call to Moses awaits his gaze.

Moses has a conversation with this burning bush and I've always wondered if the animals were thinking, "Oh boy, he's talking to shrubbery. We're never getting home."

Moses converses with God much in the way we talk to a fast-food worker in the drive-thru lane. Imagine if you ordered your pumpkin spice latte and the voice that came back knew your name and told you take off your shoes.

But this is no trick. God shows the holy ID: the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob; the God of the exalted ancestor of a multitude, the God of laughter, the God of struggle. And now Moses is thinking, "I should've just kept moving. Why did I step out of line? We're never getting home."

It turns out that God has heard the cry from Egypt and has a plan. That plan involved liberation and a land flowing with milk and honey. Oh, and it involves Moses going back to the land where he is a fugitive and demanding freedom for the Israelites.

Moses asks "why me?" and God doesn't answer. God says, "I'll be with you." So Moses asks for a name. Last week we heard Jacob demand to know God's name, but only getting a blessing and a new name for himself. Here God relents. Sort of. This name is confusing and strange. "I AM WHO I AM" is what we get in our pew Bibles. It could be translated "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE." God's name, it appears, is a verb that twists back on itself, because *of course* that would be God's name. God's name is "being" present and future. In promise and laughter and struggle, in acts great and small that proclaim God above empire or nation, God is and will be and that "is" and "will be" are defined by God, not by Pharaoh nor any of the other power-wielding pharaohs that the people of God will ever encounter.

So what does it look like to follow this God who hears the cries, who is and will be? If Moses and

Shiphrah and Puah and Miriam and her mother and Pharaoh's daughter and the oppressed people of Israel are our examples, what does it mean to step out of line?

I am looking at people who have already stepped out of line. As citizens of empire, your job this morning was to go buy stuff. As dwellers in this culture, your call today is to worry about yourself and to accumulate whatever you want and to then, if you want some good P.R., to worry about someone else. As those exposed to the plague of cynicism, you are expected to roll your eyes at anything hopeful or sincere or that claims to have meaning or truth.

And here you sit, gathered together with other beloved weirdos to recite ancient words and to give each other permission to wonder what they mean and to sing in public and to hope to catch a whiff of mystery and connection to something greater than yourselves. What a strange decision you made. It would be so much easier to do nothing on a Sunday morning. Or at least to flock to a fancier church that would offer you some capital in the social status game.

This week I got to see young people step out of line. While alleged adults who can't argue with the science spend some of their allotted lifetime heartbeats mocking a sixteen-year-old for calling out the empire's indifference to a burning planet that is being consumed, here in Birmingham we have Stella Tarrant. She's a student at Simmons Middle School who saw that there was no Climate Strike planned for Birmingham. So she started one. Stella and kids from all over the Birmingham area went to school on September 20th, took tests and went to class in the morning, and then stepped out to gather in Linn Park.

My parents won't be around for the worst of what lies ahead for our environment if something doesn't change drastically. Stella and her friends will carry that burden — and they know that the suffering will hit others with fewer resources and less power even harder. These kids should not have to step out of line. It should not be their responsibility. But each previous generation has failed — so far. So these kids step out line. Thanks be to God.

The City of Homewood has no arrangement for recycling at apartment complexes or businesses. And so Kathy and Dave Silvie gather as much of our church recycling as possible and take it home. That's out of line. Thanks be to God.

Stepping out of line means giving heed to the call to follow a narrow way — the tricky, complicated, faithful, grace-filled path to which Jesus calls us. The call to go with the flow, to not cause a ripple, to get back in line — that call is loud and threatening and terribly alluring. None of us follow Jesus perfectly. We find ourselves in line a whole lot. And each generation can't help but nod as some who step out are punished for doing so. If they are killed, then we make them heroes, later.

But we do get these opportunities, great and small.  
When we feel the weight of empire.  
When the leaders allow their foolishness to show.  
When we can't hide new life any longer.  
When a conspiracy of hope forms in our midst and all we have to do is breathe it in.  
When we're minding our own business and we suddenly see what we can't ignore.  
When the God of being shows us holy ground and says,  
"I am who I am, and I am sending you." Amen.