

The Book of Exodus opens with a stark and telling verse. “Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.” *Exodus 1:8* Joseph had helped the previous king with drought, and his dreams and had risen to power in the Kingdom of Egypt. But now there was a new king who did not know Joseph.

And in this new kingdom Pharaoh said, “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.” *Exodus 1:9-10*

This is the background to the story which we heard Geoff read this morning. And this is the means by which we all at some point in our own lives turn away from people who we don’t understand, who trouble us, or overwhelm us. We say, “I don’t know them.”

Last week we heard that God appointed the team of brothers, Moses and Aaron, to go to Pharaoh and tell him that their people needed relief. And today we continue with another short section of Exodus that we don’t usually hear on a Sunday morning, but is crucial in the bringing about of the Exodus. Pharaoh showed no mercy to the very people who were building his cities and pyramids and oppressed them more and more.

When Moses and Aaron went to see Pharaoh, they asked for some respite from the misery of slavery and constant toil. They told Pharaoh of the Lord, the God of Israel, who desires health and life for people. Pharaoh utters the words that are like putting up a hand and stopping both conversation and knowledge. “Pharaoh said, Who is the Lord that I should heed him and let Israel go to worship? I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go.” *Exodus 5:2*

Out of sight, out of mind, right? It’s easier to be hardened against people you don’t know. Pharaoh didn’t want to know anything about the suffering, the life or the religion of the Hebrew people.

There was an article in the NY Times on Friday about the difficult problems that have come along with having open air restaurants in NYC in this pandemic. The diners, sitting at their tables in the middle of streets under leafy boughs; it’s a lovely and refreshing picture for a warm summer evening. It allows restaurateurs to remain in business and make some money in this very difficult economy.

But, unfortunately, there are also people in the streets who are homeless, some of whom are suffering with mental illness or addiction. They come begging at tables and generally creating an unwelcome distraction to diners. During this season of Covid they are being housed in hotels scattered around the city and are near people of the neighborhood trying to have a nice meal out.

It’s a difficult problem. The residents don’t want the homeless to be housed in their neighborhoods. The restaurant owners don’t want the homeless to trouble their customers. And if restaurant goes

could be inside as they used to be, then they wouldn't have to be bothered by sights they don't want to see. Out of sight, out of mind. The homeless need safe shelter. The hotels need paying customers.

I'm not suggesting that there is a good way out of this problem. I am sure that elected leaders would very much like to find a just and equitable solution. But it is a good reminder to us that when a problem is right in front of us, instead of safely out of sight, then we can't ignore it.

Pharaoh, very much wants to ignore the problem that Moses and Aaron bring to him. And what better way for Pharaoh to deal with the problem brought to his doorstep than to send it away summarily, and make Moses and Aaron think twice about coming back ever again.

Not only will Pharaoh deny that he knows the people and their God, he, in his great power will add additional burdens to those already oppressed. He'll show this God of theirs who is in charge. If the people have to work even harder than they did before, then they won't have time or energy to think about taking a little vacation to go and worship their God, whoever that is.

It is a ruthless and inhumane system that is in place for these slaves, and for slaves throughout our world's history. The oppressed must learn a brutal lesson: If you don't appease the oppressor, the only one who has the power to give any relief, then you will be punished. That is Pharaoh's modus operandi, and unfortunately, that has been the way that peoples have been subjugated in the brutality of slavery and oppression all through time.

To add more to Pharaoh's arsenal of persecution, he calls the people lazy. In this way Pharaoh further dehumanizes the Israelites by telling them that it's their own fault. He's not an oppressor. No, it's that the Hebrew people are lazy and they don't need time off to rest. They need to be taught how to work harder.

It's an awful cycle of pain and suffering. The Hebrews are told that they must now not only make the same amount of bricks each day for Pharaoh's building projects, they must also collect their own straw to make the bricks. Additionally, Pharaoh has placed Hebrew taskmasters over the Hebrew people. This sets one Israelite against another to divide them.

We here in the modern age of technology and progress still have found ways to oppress people we don't know, or don't want to know. Instead of showing mercy, instead of getting to know people who look different, or worship in a way different than our own, we have a tendency to blame the already afflicted. We still think that certain people are lazy and deserve what they get. Some still teach their children that they can always pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. Hard work and ingenuity will solve the problem of poverty, we think.

But that's not true. We still have systems in place in which some people are given advantages in life because of their skin color, or their family's ability to accumulate wealth, or the neighborhoods in which they were born. Others are born who do not have these advantages available to them. And we don't know them.

Jesus pleads with his followers to not count how many times one is allowed to forgive. There is no mercy and no love when one is keeping score; as if forgiveness is a thing to be legislated. In the parable told today in the Gospel of Matthew, the servant who would take advantage of his fellows is an oppressor and a tyrant. He treats the ones he should know with harshness. He shows no mercy.

Remember Peter, at the time of the arrest of Jesus, who denies Jesus three times. No, I wasn't with him. No, I don't know him. I don't know the man. It's a singular sort of cruelty or fear that allowed Peter to walk away. It allowed Pharaoh to walk away. It allows us to walk away.

Paul's words from this morning ring out, "Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? .... we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. ...Each of us will be accountable to God. *Romans 14:11, 12*