

Who Do You Fear?
Exodus 1:8–22; Exodus 2:1–10
Sunday, August 23, 2026

Let us pray: Lord, may your Holy Spirit guide us to understanding and love – of *you*, of your Word, and of each other – in Christ. Amen.

In June and July, we looked at the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the book of Genesis. Then this month we have looked at the story of Jacob’s son Joseph, as he was sold by his brothers into slavery and taken to Egypt, where he eventually rose in power to be Pharaoh’s most trusted advisor, saving Egypt and his family from a severe famine. The book of Genesis ends with Joseph and his brothers reconciled and the whole family – seventy people – moving to Egypt to live there, before Joseph dies at 110 years old. You would *think* that the story (and our sermon series) ends there. But it doesn’t.

The end of Genesis and the beginning of the book of Exodus are separated by over 400 years. And yet they are inextricably connected. One flows right into the other. Because what we see is that, over 400 years later, “a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.” Joseph had saved Pharaoh and Egypt and the *whole region* from this famine, but now there is a *new* Pharaoh who does not know that story. Does not remember what Joseph did. And like the saying goes, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

Over the course of those 400 years, the people of Israel have been fruitful and multiplied. They have gone from seventy people to *hundreds of thousands*; we don’t know exactly how many, although Exodus later talks about 600,000 men, so some estimates have put the total number at 2.5 million Israelites. Whatever the number was, it was *a lot*. And they have grown exceedingly powerful. Pharaoh looked around and saw all those people and said, “There’s more of *them* than there are of *us*. If they decide to join our enemies and fight us, they will wipe us out.” So Pharaoh hatches a plan to enslave the people of

Israel; to set taskmasters over them and force them to work. The Egyptians oppressed them and made their lives bitter and hard, but through it all, the Israelites kept on multiplying! So much so that it says the Egyptians came to *dread* the Israelites. They were *afraid* of them. And like Yoda says, “Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.”

So Pharaoh hatches *another* plan. He says, “If we can’t stop them from multiplying, then *we will stop them from multiplying*.” And he orders the Hebrew midwives to kill all of the male babies as soon as they are born; just throw them into the Nile River. But the Hebrew midwives *do not* do this. They let the male babies *live* because, they say, “The Hebrew women are *so vigorous* that they give birth before we can even get there!” But the *real* reason they don’t follow Pharaoh’s order is because, it says, *they feared God*.

That’s a really subtle detail here that we don’t often pick up on. Pharaoh and the Egyptians feared the Israelites. But the Israelites feared *God*. And if you look at the Hebrew words, you see that these are two different kinds of fear; two different words are used. The Egyptians’ fear of the Israelites – their *dread* – is a fear based in *loathing* and *hatred*; the Egyptians were *sickened* by the Israelites. But the Israelites’ fear of God is a fear based in *awe* and *reverence*. It is a healthy respect for the power of God. It is a fear based in *faithfulness*.

And I think this asks the question of us, “Who do *you* fear, and *why*?” Do you fear *God* out of a sense of awe and reverence and a healthy respect for who God is and what God can do? Or do you fear *other people* out of a sense of loathing or hatred; a fear of who they *might* be and what they *might* do?

It’s like in the movie *Home Alone*, where 8-year-old Kevin is absolutely terrified of his next-door neighbor, Old Man Marley. He always has an angry scowl on his face, and he never talks to anyone, and

Kevin is convinced that he is a serial killer who murdered his own family, and he's going to murder Kevin if he gets a chance. For me, growing up, it was *my* next-door neighbor, Old Man Strickland. I didn't think he was going to murder me, but he looked *mean*, and he never talked to us, and *stay off of his lawn*, don't even mow *one foot* onto his side of the property line.

But that was as a *child*. We were *all* probably afraid of *someone* when we were little. Adults can be irrationally scary. It almost feels silly to ask adults if they are afraid of other people. But so many of us *are*. Maybe you're afraid of this specific person because of how they have hurt you in the past and how they *might* hurt you again. Plenty of people are afraid of people of other races, nationalities, religions. Just look at the fear that is so prevalent in our society today; who we are *told* to be afraid of in the media that we consume.

We are told to be afraid of people of different political beliefs and parties. That person on the other side? They want to take away your rights and destroy your way of life.

We are told to be afraid of *immigrants*. That they are criminals, and they are lazy, and they are going to come here and replace you and take your jobs (even though they're lazy!), and they are going to take government benefits that they don't deserve, and pretty soon you will be in the minority.

There is a major surge right now of Islamophobia. We are being told to be afraid of Muslims. That they want to impose Sharia Law on you and kill anyone who is not Muslim.

We are told to be afraid of trans people. That they want to come into your bathrooms and play your sports.

There are so many more examples of how we are told to be afraid of people who are different from you. But how many of those people do you actually *know*? How many people of different political beliefs or parties do you *know*, and are *they* like that? How many immigrants do you actually *know*, and are *they* like that? How many Muslims do you actually *know*, and are *they* like that? How many gay or trans people do you actually *know*, and are *they* like that? Or are we just *judging* people without *knowing* them?

Fear likes simple enemies. It thrives on turning a complex group of human beings into a single, frightening “they.” Fear doesn’t want us to *know* people; it wants us to *categorize* them. It doesn’t want us to *ask questions* or seek understanding; it wants us to *imagine*. And once someone has been reduced from a person into a threatening category – “the Muslims,” “the immigrants,” “the liberals,” “the conservatives,” whoever – it becomes much easier to fear them. That’s how fear works.

That’s how fear worked in Egypt. Pharaoh didn’t *know* the Israelites. He didn’t know their *stories*. He didn’t know what they *believed* or what they *wanted*. He looked at a huge group of people and said, “There are too many of them. They might turn against us.” Notice that word “might.” Pharaoh’s fear was built on what the Israelites *might* do. Not what they were *actually* doing. And once he became afraid of what they *might* do, it became very easy to justify doing terrible things to them. That is one of the most dangerous things about fear. It can make us do things or support things or talk in ways that we would never do if we actually *knew* the people we were afraid of.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote, “Those who are still afraid of men have no fear of God, and those who have fear of God have ceased to be afraid of men.” Bonhoeffer’s fear of God was what allowed him to stand against Hitler and the Nazis, even though it led to his death. His fear of God was what gave him the courage to say with his last words, “This is the end, but for me, the beginning of life.” The Hebrew

midwives' fear of God was what gave them the courage to defy Pharaoh. Pharaoh's fear of the Israelites did not result in *courage* but in *cruelty*.

Who are you afraid of – God or people? And what will that fear lead you to *do*?

Not *all* of the Egyptians were afraid of the Israelites. After Pharaoh orders the midwives to kill the male babies by throwing them into the Nile, we get the story of a man and a woman who are descended from Jacob's son Levi. They have a son and hide him for three months, so that the Egyptians don't kill him. When they can't hide him anymore, they put him in a basket and leave him in the reeds on the bank of the Nile. The painful irony of having to leave their baby in these waters where so many other babies had been killed.

But Pharaoh's daughter comes down to the river to bathe, and she sees the basket. She opens the basket and sees the baby, and it says she took *pity* on him. That Hebrew word for *pity* isn't just that she felt bad for him. It means *compassion*. She has *compassion* for him. Compassion literally means, "to suffer with." The Israelites were suffering, and she suffered with them. She takes the boy into her home – into *Pharaoh's* home – and names him Moses. We'll hear more about Moses next week.

I think that this story highlights the challenge for us – whether we can look at the people that we are told to be afraid of and have *compassion* for them. And more than that, can we *love* them, as Pharaoh's daughter came to love Moses? But all of that *starts* with *knowing* them. Getting to know the people that we are told to be afraid of. Who they are. What their stories are. You can't really love someone unless you know them. But once you come to *know* them and *understand* them, it becomes a lot harder to *fear* them and to *hate* them.

Go back to the movie *Home Alone*, where Kevin is scared of Old Man Marley. Until Old Man Marley comes up to him in a church on Christmas Eve and smiles and says, “Merry Christmas.” He sits down with him and starts talking to him. He tells him how his granddaughter sings in the choir, and this is the only time he gets to see her, because he had a falling out with his son and they don’t talk anymore. As Kevin talks with him and hears his story and gets to know him, he realizes that he’s actually a really nice person who is afraid of things just like Kevin is.

I was scared of Old Man Strickland until a hurricane came through and blew trees and branches down all over the neighborhood. I was outside cleaning things up, and Mr. Strickland came over to help me pick up branches. Then I went over to his yard and helped him. We were talking the whole time, and I found that he was actually really nice. After that, I wasn’t scared of him anymore.

A couple of weeks ago, we had a conversation on immigration after worship, where members of our church family from Ghana and Hong Kong and Colombia and Iran told us about their experiences immigrating to the United States. We heard about their hopes and their fears and the challenges they faced. We talked about how easy it is to turn immigration into a nameless, faceless “issue.” But when we listen to the stories of real people who have immigrated, and we get to *know* them and *understand* them, we see them not as an “issue” that someone tells us we should be *scared* of, but as people just like us. Because they *are*.

I want to encourage you to spend some time today or this week thinking about what people you are afraid of. Be very honest with yourself. Who are you afraid of? And *why* are you afraid of them? Where does your fear of them *come from*? Is it because of who they actually are and your lived experience with them? Or is it because of who you are being *told* that they are and what your experience with them *might* be like?

It's not a matter of *whether* we are afraid. We are *all* afraid of *something*, *someone*. The question is whether we fear God or other people, and what we will allow that fear to *do* to us. The midwives feared God, and it made them *courageous*. Pharaoh feared the Israelites, and it made him *cruel*. I wonder who Pharaoh's daughter feared to make her *compassionate*, or if there *was* no fear in her, as scripture says, "Perfect love casts out fear." Fear of God moves us toward *faithfulness* and *love*. Fear of other people moves us toward *hatred* and *suffering*. Jesus feared God, and that gave him the courage to go to his death on a cross – to suffer *with* us and *for* us – with words of grace and love on his lips. Who do *you* fear? And how will that fear lead you to live?