

“Resistance is Not Futile”  
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 16 (A) – 21 August 2011  
Exodus 1:8 – 2:10; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

The midwives of Egypt midwives said no to Pharaoh, and it made all the difference for the Hebrew people. They had migrated to Egypt centuries before to escape a terrible famine, and thanks to the high status of their kinsman, Joseph, the Hebrews received a warm welcome.

Over time, though, that appreciation began to wane, as the Hebrew people became more numerous. Pharaoh could count, and he didn't like the way the numbers added up. He felt that the Egyptians were becoming a minority in their own country. Pharaoh feared that the Hebrews would rise up in revolt or aid a foreign invader.

So Pharaoh came up with a Final Solution to his problem. All newborn Hebrew males would be killed at birth, but the midwives said no, concocting a flimsy excuse. Their refusal could have cost them their lives, but they feared God more than they feared Pharaoh. Somebody else would have to do his dirty work.

Since the midwives had let him down, Pharaoh decreed that it was now the responsibility of all patriotic Egyptians to kill Hebrew baby boys. We don't know how successful that policy was, but we do know that at least one got away. His mother somehow bore him without detection and hid him safely for three months. Then she placed her baby into a makeshift boat, and set him on the Nile, a river teeming with crocodiles. It was an act of faith born of desperation.

After floating downstream for a while, the baby was found by none other than the daughter of Pharaoh, who made arrangements for his care and eventually adopted him as her own son and named him Moses. This was a huge act of betrayal and resistance. We can only

imagine Pharaoh's reaction if he had discovered what his daughter had done. Again, there's no indication of why she took this terrible risk, but like the Egyptian midwives, the motive could have been nothing less than love and mercy.

When every instinct of self-preservation warned them to comply rather than resist, this little disconnected band of women kept their courage. When every social norm of obedience to authority, drilled into people since childhood, commanded that they kill those baby boys, they thought for themselves and made their own decisions about right and wrong. When they had nothing to gain and everything to lose, a small group of women told the powerful Pharaoh no, conspiring behind his back to save the lives of children, one of whom grew up to become the revolutionary liberator that Pharaoh so feared.

Fast forward fifteen-hundred years and cross the Mediterranean Sea to Rome, and you have another group, under immense pressure from the ruling authorities. They were recent converts to faith in Jesus Christ, and keeping the faith was tough for them. Already, Caesar had blamed them for a catastrophic fire that consumed a large part of Rome. They were scapegoated because they were different, and their punishment was exile.

Only recently, under the order of a new Caesar, these people had been allowed to return home, but they were still treated as freaks. Paul wrote those people a letter. We heard a little snippet of it moments ago, where Paul encouraged them, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds."

To a people in great distress, that was a major challenge. It must have been tempting to indulge in practices that would help them fit in a little better; practices they knew would be a betrayal of their faith. Yet Paul encouraged them to resist the temptation, to say no to Caesar, to

follow their faith with integrity and say yes to God, no matter what the cost, confident that whatever might happen, God would take care of them.

It's hard to have courage, and think for yourself, and make the right decisions, when those thoughts and choices cut against the grain of society. It's hard to be visibly different in a world that demands conformity. But none of those people we've been talking about were alone in their resistance. The midwives conspired together. The mother of Moses was connected with a community of support. Even Pharaoh's daughter had collaborators who helped perpetuate her deception. The Christians of Rome had each other, and all of these people who said no, when it would have been so easy to say yes, to go along to get along, all of these people, whether they were aware of it or not, had God with them, too.

We know how hard it can be to make of ourselves a living-sacrifice to God. We know how tempting it is to conform ourselves to this world, instead of being transformed by the renewing of our minds through Christ Jesus. Yet we can, and in many cases we do.

It can start with something as simple as seeing what others do not perceive and saying what we think when others remain silent or parrot the ideas of some talking-head on the radio or the TV. This is how it happened with Peter. Jesus asked the disciples what people were saying about him, and the answers flowed forth. But when Jesus wanted to know what they thought, only Peter spoke up and said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Maybe the other disciples didn't know that, or perhaps they were too afraid of getting it wrong to say anything. Peter's answer was an act of courage, enabled by faith, and his words revealed the truth for others.

How do we see the world: through the lens of political commentators with extreme views? from the limited perspective of our own self-interest? Do we tow the party-line, because

the consequences of not doing so seem unthinkable to us? Are we trapped in habits of thinking built up over a lifetime, and if so, were those habits of thoughts formed from the love, mercy, and forgiveness of our God, or were those habits of thoughts marinated in some self-centered or cynical ideology of man's making? Where do we make compromises just to fit in? When have we ignored the call to resist and follow our faith?

Consider illegal immigration. Like the ancient Hebrews, many people today flee from political repression and dire poverty to seek a new life in America and Europe. More often than not, we do not welcome these people, as the Egyptians initially did, because we fear the change they bring with their different culture and language. We worry that this influx of undocumented workers will take jobs away from official Americans, most of whom have "earned" that privilege by simply being born here. We resent that they do not pay taxes, but often benefit from taxpayer funded services. It's interesting to me how this last part bothers us when it comes to dark-skinned immigrants, but not when a major corporation, like GE, doesn't pay taxes because of loopholes, yet benefits from the roads and the police and fire services just like the rest of us, except on a much larger scale.

And it's not like this hasn't happened before. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Irish flocked to America in the wake of the potato famine, and the Germans and the Italians came in droves, followed by eastern Europeans and the Chinese, the good God-feared American people panicked like the sky was falling. Over time, they gave up Gaelic and Polish and Yiddish, learned English, and became productive members of society. Are we completely ignorant of our nation's history? Can we afford to be, when confronted with contemporary events?

And where is the love and mercy of God in all this? Yes, laws have been broken, and we need law to maintain order in society, but we just assume that the laws are just. Some laws may

need to be changed, and Christ calls us to rely on grace, not law. The summons of God, made repeatedly in scripture, is for us to resist the powers that be, to resist the fear-mongering self-proclaimed experts, to resist the people who tell us that following our self-interest is the only way to make it in life.

We are called by God to say no when we are tempted or ordered to do what we know is wrong, even if our resistance comes at a terrible cost. But despite the risk and the possible loss, saying no to Pharaoh and Caesar, saying no to our fears, is worth it, because when we say no to the forces that oppose God's love, we say yes to God. And the more we do so, the more we learn that resistance is not futile.

It may take more time than we like. Decades passed before Moses became the man that led his people out of slavery. Centuries went by before the Christians of Rome could follow their faith legally without fear of reprisal. (Yes, the Christians of the first three centuries were law-breaking criminals.) The scripture counsels patience, because God is just and faithful. We live in a world that celebrates the grand gesture. The homerun gets all the attention, when a base hit single is often the game-winner. Our world seems unaware of the many decisive moments that happen every day, when we make decisions based on our faith in God's goodness and grace. "Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds."

As the week unfolds, I invite you to scrutinize your life, and wonder where you might offer resistance; look for the moment when you can say no in a way that says yes to God. It might be when your employer asks you to do something you know is wrong. It might be when you feel like you just have to buy that whatever-it-is that can help you keep up with the Joneses' and feel a little better about yourself. It might be that letter you've been putting off writing to your elected representatives. It might be that small act of kindness you think won't make a

difference, when deep down inside you know that it's worth the trouble, because the future is not ours to control, but we can sure try to tinker with it.

It's time to join the midwives of Egypt and Moses' mother and Pharaoh's daughter. It's time to follow the example of our Christian ancestors in Rome. It's time to resist and say no to certain people and things so that we can say a faithful yes to God. It means being different in a world that makes fun of those who dare to be different, and frequently does much worse than just making fun. Find your faith. Be transformed by the renewing of your minds. And stand in awe of the legacy you might leave through the grace and mercy of God. Amen.