

The Faith of Pharaoh
Text: Exodus 5:1-18
The Reverend Christopher A. Henry
Morningside Presbyterian Church
Atlanta, GA
June 15, 2008

*“But Pharaoh said, ‘Who is the Lord, that I should heed him and let Israel go?’”
Exodus 5:2a*

Recently, a friend gave me an article to read that had an extremely thought-provoking title. It was the cover story of the March 2008 edition of *The Atlantic*, and the title read, “Which Religion Will Win?” As you can imagine, this is a subject that interests me a great deal, and so I read the article with great appetite. The author, with much statistical data and historical precedent, concludes that the religion that will finally gain a hold on the world is...secularism. He shows that as countries develop economically and politically they tend to become more and more secular, with even the most devoutly religious leaning toward more rational and non-religious beliefs. The article celebrates this development and its capacity, in the mind of the author, to end religious violence and bring peace to the world. Without religious fanaticism, the author claims, there will be no need for war. He ends with this thought, “Historians may one day look back on the next few decades, not as yet another era when religious conflicts enveloped countries and blew apart established societies, but as the era when secularization took over the world.”¹

What surprises me most about this move toward secularization is the pervasive use of religious language that is used to support it. Just a couple of examples should make my point. For almost a year now, the Nike Corporation (a name, by the way, which comes from the Ancient Greek Goddess of Victory) has advertised its products using the slogan “We are all witnesses.” You can see the phrases on billboards, t-shirts, television commercials, and on the rotating displays on the sidelines at every game of the NBA Finals. The campaign centers on LeBron James, star guard for the Cleveland Cavaliers, and is built around the notion that we all long to be witnesses to such greatness as he possesses on the basketball court. The language of witness, of course, contains a great deal of meaning off the basketball court for those of us who are people of faith. The word, you may know, was originally used for Christian martyrs, those who were executed for their insistence that they were witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The use of religious language in wider culture is not limited to the world of sports, of course. The now-familiar sentences, “Change we can *believe* in” and “Leadership we can believe in” are prime examples of how language of faith and belief now appears everywhere in our society, even as statistics tell us that religious belief and participation in faith communities is fading fast in our nation.

I remember attending a lecture given at Duke Chapel and sponsored by the Religious Life Staff at Duke University. The lecture was given by a well-known chemistry professor at the university and was titled, "Why I Am A Believer." I can remember the excitement I felt at the opportunity to hear a brilliant scientist explain his belief in God. But this is not what happened that evening. Instead, the professor stood before us and explained how he was a believer, just not a believer in God. "I believe," he said, "in the laws of science and in the trustworthiness of mathematic formulas. I believe in the beauty of logic and the simplicity of numbers. This is my belief system, and I would challenge you to find a more passionate or devoted believer than I." I left the lecture hall both disappointed and challenged by his words.

It was not until I encountered the great Reformed Theologian Karl Barth and his commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans, that I gained some clarity on this professor's words. Throughout his career, Barth spent much time explaining the danger of religion, which he described as an invention of sinful humanity. In so doing, he affirmed the words of John Calvin, who insisted that the human mind is a permanent factory of idols." Barth reminded Christians that we must never worship our religion, which inevitably devolves into self-worship, but rather we must worship the God who is revealed to us in scripture, prayer, mission and ministry.

When we encounter Moses in this morning's story, he has received the revelation of God in the form of a burning bush. He has been commanded by the God of Israel to demand that Pharaoh set the Hebrew people free from their slavery and bondage. Now, Moses, alongside his brother Aaron, stands in the court of the Pharaoh, the ruler of all Egypt. What Moses asks for is essentially a three-day weekend, an opportunity for Sabbath worship and sacrifice to God in the wilderness.

Pharaoh's response is crushing, quick, and cruel. Without hesitation, Pharaoh denies the request of the people, and the very existence of their God. "Who is the Lord that I should heed him? I do not know the Lord." Pharaoh's absolute refusal to give the people the freedom to worship is rooted, interestingly, in his own faith. His own belief system. As soon as he dismisses Moses and Aaron along with their God and the call to worship in the wilderness, Pharaoh names for us his own belief system: "Why are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labors!" And so the writer of Exodus describes how the Israelite slaves are driven to longer hours and more difficult working conditions and how they cried out in pain and anger. But Pharaoh, and his unyielding faith in production and power are insistent. The people are called lazy for their desire to worship and sacrifice in the wilderness and the business of brick making continues at even greater speed. In other words, the people of Israel are forced to operate out of Pharaoh's paradigm, and are given no time to imagine a different way of being, a

different way of seeing, a different faith. Instead, the slaves in Israel become adherents to the faith of Pharaoh.

The faith of Pharaoh, which is self-centered, relying on no one but himself for authority and truth.

The faith of Pharaoh, which is driven by the pursuit of power and the fear of the other.

The faith of Pharaoh, which insists that there will never be enough bricks or enough time.

The faith of Pharaoh, which is fueled by insecurity, distrust, coercion, and finally, despair, because the faith of Pharaoh ensures that he will never rest, never worship, never be in community with others, never delight in the goodness of creation, never play, never stop and simply say, "All is well."

The faith of Pharaoh is contrasted with the God of Israel, who rests on the seventh day of creation and steps back and with contentment borne of rest, declares a judgment of "good" over all creation.

The good news of the Exodus story is this: the faith of Pharaoh no longer rules the lives of our ancestors, or our lives. His twin gods of power and fear have been defeated, washed away in the rushing currents of the Red Sea. Therefore, we must no longer live in fear, driven by the desire for power. Instead, we are commanded to have faith in the God who provides for all of creation, and takes time to delight and rest in it.

The story before us this morning draws sharp division between the faith of Pharaoh and the faith of Israel. The gods could not be anymore different, but they are gods nonetheless. The choice for the Israelites is not between faith and no faith, but between competing gods. The same will be true at the foot of Mt. Sinai, when the choice is a God of the Law or the shining golden calf of their own construction. The same will be true when they enter the Promised Land and find there the Canaanites, and their gods of fertility and commerce. The same is true for us today. As one great preacher has said, "the greatest heresy in the American church today is not atheism, but superficiality." We live in a culture surrounded by superficial, commercial, and insincere religiosity. Indeed, the faith of Pharaoh is alive and well in our society and in our churches.

This Saturday, our denomination's churchwide General Assembly will begin meeting in San Jose, California for its biennial gathering. There the commissioners from all over the country will consider many overtures and resolutions, hear many presentations, and debate many issues of importance to Presbyterian congregations and parishioners. I have had the privilege of attending three General Assemblies and serving as a Youth Advisory Delegate to one in 2001. At all of these meetings, I have observed the paralyzing force of fear in our denomination. If, like Pharaoh, we refuse to acknowledge the power of the Spirit of God at work in our midst, then we risk becoming members of Pharaoh's church, where all the power belongs to us and our only goal is to survive the next

debate with our power and our perspective still in tact. If this happens, then our fear will overwhelm our faith, and our church will simply fade away as did the faith of Pharaoh. But, if we remain open to God's continuing providence in the world, there is hope for us yet.

Belief in the providence of God, which stands at the very heart of our Calvinist tradition, has drawn some criticism over the centuries. It is too Pollyanna, too optimistic, some will say. It leaves no place for human freedom or agency, others chime in. It is fatalistic and dooming, other critics charge. I submit to you that, at its core, our belief in the providence of God is none of these things. Instead, it is a grateful acknowledgement that it is God who provides for us. God who gives us all that we need and some to share.

Here is a case in point: the story that Bill Humphries just read for us from the gospel of Mark. This encounter between Jesus and his disciples occurs at the end of the eighth chapter of the gospel. For background, we must keep in mind what has happened thus far in the ministry of Jesus. In the sixth chapter of Mark, Jesus miraculously feeds a crowd of 5000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish after the disciples panic that there is not enough bread for the hungry followers. At the beginning of the eighth chapter, the same scenario presents itself, and the disciples again begin to panic. This time, Jesus again calmly asks what provisions the disciples have, and they respond that they have found seven loaves of bread and a few small fish. Again, Jesus blesses the bread and provides enough for all to eat, with baskets left over. So, these first disciples of Jesus have just experienced two remarkable feeding miracles. And then they get on the boat and, perhaps understandably, forget to bring the bread. So, naturally, they respond with panic. And Jesus becomes angry, not, as the disciples mistakenly think, because they have forgotten to bring bread. Jesus looks at them and asks one of the most poignant and powerfully heart-breaking questions of the entire New Testament, "Do you not yet understand?" In other words, do you not yet trust in the power of God to provide? Where is your faith? Jesus even asks the disciples if their hearts of been hardened, an obvious and justified reference to the hardened heart of old Pharaoh himself. The disciples have been with Jesus as he has taught and preached and healed and performed miracles. And yet, they hold on to the faith of Pharaoh.

Many of you know that I spent a week in the country of Haiti in April, coincidentally the same week that the manifestations began over rising food prices that have left so many without the basic necessities of life. While there, Sara and I stayed at St. Joseph's Home for Boys, an orphanage and guest house to which I was returning after seven years. The boys at the home have all been literally rescued from the streets of Port-au-Prince. That is one thing that they have in common. Another is that they pray together each and every morning and evening, praying for each other and for their devastated country. The third commonality they all share is that all of these young boys can dance! One night while we were there they performed what they call the Resurrection Dance

Theatre, an amazing display of physical strength and grace and a beautiful testament to their own resurrection and the power of God at work in the world. It was storming that night, and the water kept pouring onto the dance floor while they performed. I sat mesmerized and overwhelmed by the juxtaposition of the resurrection dance theatre in the midst of storms and the amazing work of that ministry in the midst of extreme poverty, disease and hunger. These boys had been on the streets; they were not Pollyanna optimists about the predicament of their nation. But they knew what to do. Pray for those who are suffering, dance for those who are suffering, and never lose trust in the one who holds all power.

Now that is a truth worth believing. That is a faith worth proclaiming to the world.

ⁱ Alan Wolfe “And the Winner Is...” *The Atlantic*. March 2008: 56-63.