

## WHY ARE YOU SO AFRAID?

Scripture Readings: Exodus 1:8-21, Matthew 11:16-19, Matthew 11:28-30

So you know how families tend to have their own vernacular, created from stories we half remember and retell every time we get together, when we could get together? These secret languages, peppered with nonsense words, mispronunciations, mishaps of years past, and the unfortunate nicknames of our childhoods – they persist, as a kind of short-hand for love and co-created memory.

In my family, one excerpt of our dialect is the phrase, always shouted with an edge of near panic, “Help me! It heavy!” It started when my cousin David, who is now an adult, was only two years old, and he had hoisted his tricycle up with his tiny arms. His face blanched and he looked genuinely afraid as he struggled to hold it aloft. “Help me! It heavy!” Which was, of course, hilarious because while yes, we could certainly have rushed in and helped him with this unnecessary moment of toddler power-lifting, he could also just.. put it down.

I wonder how often we do that in God’s eyes. How often we are holding aloft something heavy and even harmful, giving it all of our attention and exertion, crying out for God’s presence and asking to please be rescued. Help me, God! It heavy! And God just looks down and smiles, and wishes we would hear the message... “Oh kiddo... why don’t you just .... put it down?”

In some ways, we are a culture of big things as a piece of our imagined identity. America fashions herself in the image of the Grand Canyon, the Rocky Mountains, the Mississippi River, the impossibly large expanse, the endlessly possible future. It’s rooted in our ideology and lore, we, white people, imagine an America that is larger than life, an idealized version of a world where, all things being equal, anyone can become anything. We’ve made that a cornerstone of our belief system, and our education system, and our justice system, and we are facing the consequent and cataclysmic break that comes with reckoning with our reality – that all things are not equal, and never have been. Whew, that is a heavy thing to confront.

We tend to fill our packs and weigh ourselves down with the stones of maintaining a status quo as we imagine it must remain. We hold tight and fast to the structures and systems that surround us like air.

Where is our sense of moral, faithful imagination? Can we even picture a world without poverty, a United States without racism, a culture without scarcity of food or medicine or education for anyone at all? What would happen if, one by one, we put down those heavy things in favor of something lighter, something very old and very new? Something like the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Of course, if we were going to put down those heavy structures and systems, we’d have to put down the beliefs that got us here in the first place.

White supremacy? Put it down.

Heteronormativity? Put it down.

Transphobia? Put it down.

Fear of not only anyone who doesn’t identify as Christian, but anyone who doesn’t identify as our kind of Christian. Anti-semitism, Islamaphobia, and so on. Just put it all down. Oppression is bad for everybody – obviously the worst for the oppressed, but it’s not good for the oppressors either.

The elevation of these systems of hate and violence are held aloft with such passion by some, and as often invisible structures simultaneously, and as such it can be easy to miss what is actually happening here, to see that these beliefs are inexcusably wielded shields of fear. So.. why are you, am I, are we so afraid? Because make no mistake, we are.

Fear that equity means others will treat me as I have allowed them to be treated. Fear that the same rules may actually apply to all of us, and I will therefore need to do the hard work of making sure the rules that govern my most marginalized siblings are of a standard that I would be happy to have them applied to my own children. Fear that Christ won't really follow through on His promises, perhaps, and falling in trust with Him will prove foolish in the end.

But a failure to confront these needless, heavy ideas we tote around with us doesn't make them any lighter. It makes them dangerous. Truth will find its way out. Truth will always fight to get to the light, like a seed shooting into the darkness of the earth, the truth will contort herself however necessary to reach, and grow, and emerge into the fresh, open air.

It will be hard to convince ourselves that we need to put down these heavy things because fear can be a spectacularly effective liar, but we do. Because we can't possibly accept Christ's invitation to an easier burden, a lighter yoke, or the much needed rest if we insist on holding on so tight to these heavy things.

Now, it would be naïve to imply that there aren't some very real things to be afraid of. Some fear is built on dangerous lies. And some fear is built on the very real danger those lies produce. People of color, and especially our Black siblings and our transgender siblings, have sound statistical reason to be afraid in their encounters with law enforcement. People with compromised immune systems have good reason to be afraid of those who are refusing to contribute to the better health of all. We have a lot of problems in our world, our nation, and our community. I don't think Christ's call is to a Pollyanna interpretation of the world.

No. Christ wasn't in denial. Christ was offering another path. Because if we put down the heavy burdens that lock us into a state of fear rooted in what it might mean if we genuinely supported equity for all of us – if we put those burdens down, maybe we could sprint for miles. Maybe those who are locked in to these oppressive systems and are the targets of them could sprint for miles too. Maybe that's where justice finds purchase. Are we really willing to let fear keep us from finding out?

I have a dear friend who lives in the Galilee region of the Holy Land, an English teacher writing his PhD in his third language, my friend Emil has a gift for reminding me to be humble by virtue of his very existence. We were recently catching up, and discussing the nature of racism in his country and mine. He identifies as Palestinian and Christian, living in what is known as Israel. And he absolutely loves to travel, so Covid-19 has hit him especially hard. And he told me that he misses his adventures, mostly for the new people and perspectives he gets, but he also misses it because that's when he gets to take his backpack off.

He said this "Laurie, it's like I have this heavy pack filled with stones on all the time. And when I go somewhere new, when they don't see me as Palestinian, when they don't have that hatred of me and that racism towards me, I feel like I can take that pack off and ahh.. I am so light and so free!"

I've asked him how he copes with it, a person born in a country of his ancestors, where his family goes back generation after generation if that sort of thing matters to you, and yet where he is reliably restricted in his movement, and punished for his heritage as an Arab and as a Christian. He's a well-educated man, and a polyglot, and much of the world would be open to him, happy to have him, yet he chooses to stay, to teach in a community of intentionally interfaith and cross-cultural k-through-12<sup>th</sup> students committed to peace and education. Why don't you just leave? I've

asked him more than once, an overly simple question for a profoundly complicated world. He smiles – “I have thought of it often, but this is my home. My work to do is here.”

The midwives in today’s story from Exodus, Shiphrah and Puah, are among my favorite figures in the whole Biblical canon because all that they did – all that they did – was their jobs. Their role was to help usher in new life when the time came. Childbirth is hard and the role of a midwife was – and is - a sacred responsibility, a commitment and promise that a pregnant person would not have to be alone in a time of immense stress, worry, pain, and fear. It doesn’t say that these two women created a massive and complex system to overthrow the fearful Pharaoh’s oppressive regime. All that they did – all that they did – was that they let those boys live.

And because those boys were allowed to live, and their mothers were given care equal to other mothers, Moses came into being and the entire trajectory of our faith story changed. Those boys became the living seeds of faith, each representing a possible future, each resisting by being born.

Resistance can take all kinds of forms. It can be as big or as small as the moment in which we find ourselves. Palestinians often use the phrase “to exist is to resist”. Put another way, the couplet by 1970’s Greek poet Dinos Christianopoulos:

καὶ τί δὲν κάνατε γιὰ νὰ μὲ θάψετε  
ὅμως ξεχάσατε πῶς ἦμουν σπóρος

What didn’t you do to bury me  
but you forgot I was a seed.

It’s a phrase that’s been picked up by protestors from Mexico to Michigan, from Johannesburg to Jerusalem. And it’s one to which we would do well to attend here, and now. How is your life a seed of resistance to a world that pushes us in so many ways to be fearful and self-centered and cruel?

What heavy things are you carrying that you can put down, and immediately be freed to receive what Christ is promising?

What small thing can you do right where you are, to recognize that the seeds of liberation already planted within you?

The liberating Christ is calling to you. The God of freedom is beckoning. Put down the heavy burdens, and run to Them instead.