



**Dr. James C. Howell, Senior Minister**  
**Exodus 1:8 - 2:10**  
**August 24, 2008**

It's only fair to confess to you that when I hear a passage like this, I tend to have irreverent, silly thoughts. And it's not entirely out of order. I think for the original Hebrews there were comic elements here that you and I missed. The passage is itself a bit irreverent. Everyone revered this great pharaoh except the Israelites, who were irreverent. They poked fun at him. They begin by not even giving him his name. His name was Ramses the Great. Ramses the Second. The greatest of all the pharaohs ever in Egypt, the most accomplished militarily, the greatest builder. His monuments are still there, strewn across the land. Ramses the Great, the longest ruling of all of the pharaohs. It is no accident that it was under that pharaoh's reign. The Gods decided to come down and let his people go.

They were the kind of irreverent thoughts I have, a little bit like this. I have a friend in the room, he's a cousin of some sort. His grandmother and my grandfather were brother and sister. What does that make us? Friends, I think. And he's done some genealogical poking around, and it's interesting. You go back to the 1800s, people used the name Pharaoh as a first name. Why would you name your son Pharaoh? It's funny the way it plays out. If you've ever been to the Hatteras Lighthouse, down at the coast, they actually have a stone wall there that commemorates the historic keepers of the Hatteras Lighthouse, and there was a family of Farrows, F A R R O W S, who manned the lighthouse, father to son for a while. One of them, his first name was Pharaoh, so you get Pharaoh Farrow, as in oh baby, let my people go, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. We won't sing that together today.

It's fun to make fun of the pharaoh. Pharaoh Farrow, let my people go. It's irreverent...I remember singing that, incidentally, when I was in seminary. I know you wonder what seminary life is like. Somebody asked me this recently. They said, "Is it like being in Sunday School all day long?" And I said, "No, it's more high-minded than that. It's way above that." I was a Duke, after all. That's the school that supplied the coach that turned the American Olympic basketball program around, a Duke. You can look at Shane and Ellen, and you can tell the fruits of the learning at Duke Divinity School. We don't just read the Bible like you mere mortals. We read the original Hebrew. It's very high-minded. And we don't just think about concepts, we think about the philosophical backgrounds from the Middle Ages. I've forgotten a lot of that stuff. I've been out of school so long. I remember things like singing Pharaoh Farrow let my people go at late-night parties. And also we would play this board game that you may be familiar with, it is called Risk. I don't know if you ever played Risk. It's a big board game. You try to conquer the world. It takes you many nights to play Risk. You maneuver your armies and you reinforce them and you try to conquer the world and you're moving them about, and it's a game.

The Olympics are a game. I'm losing so much sleep with the Olympics. I stay up late at night, I watch this, I'm tired. I need the Olympics to be over so I can catch up on my sleep. Countries competing with one another. Well it's just a game there, but as the Olympics have been playing out, we see the competition of countries on the stage of history, don't we? It's

unfolding before our very eyes. For people who think that religion is a matter of some private, spiritual, invisible something, look at this story, it's about God's action within the vicissitudes of history. We see the names that we see in the news now, Georgia and Russia and China and Pakistan. All that's going on in the world out there, there's a competition among the peoples of the world and it's a perilous game. It's more high stakes than a game of Risk or than the Olympics. And it's scary when we see it. It's scary when we see what's going on. And the point of this story is that the little baby Moses is born. Pharaoh wants all the little boys killed, but Moses' mother puts him in a little basket and it floats downstream. It goes where God wants it to go. It goes to Pharaoh's very own house. It's a child being sent to be in competition against Pharaoh.

In the ancient world, the Battle Among the Nations really is a battle for who is God and who isn't. The Pharaoh, Ramses the Great, would have worshiped the great Egyptian Pantheon of Horus and Osiris and Ra, and those Gods indeed seemed impressive in those days because Egypt was at the zenith of its power. That must be the true God who leads the Egyptians, Israel's God, Yahweh, a shrimp, a Lilliputian God on the stage of history. How could their God be a true God because after all, Israel was enslaved. God had seemingly done nothing for them. Who is God and who isn't? Nobody would put their money on Israel's measly God, and yet it's always that way in the Scriptures, isn't it? It's always David against Goliath. It's always the people of Israel who were smaller than all the other people, who were the ones who were chosen to be the bearer of God's good news to the kingdoms of this Earth. It's a little baby Moses who is sent to take on the greatest of all the pharaohs. It is a small, vulnerable infant named Jesus who takes on the powers of the day and turns out to be the true King of Kings.

A story about power, true power. Victory over the seeming powers of the world. I'm not sure of what all this means for us, although it must mean a lot. One is we see the history that is unfolding before us, it does seem scary. But I think God is trying to say to us that we don't need to be afraid, that at the end of the day God will emerge victorious, that whatever powers vaunt themselves, that we need not be afraid because God holds history squarely in God's hands. Ramses, the greatest of all the pharaohs, eventually fell. All the great powers eventually fall and are judged by the God who is not mocked.

I love that moment in Russian history when Stalin had invaded all of Eastern Europe and Pope Pius XII sent him a message and said, "I order you to remove your regiments from Eastern Europe." And Stalin mocked and said, "Pope, how many regiments do you command?" But Stalin fell. All the powers eventually fall and are judged by the God who is not marked.

I think there may be something else in this as well. When I read that a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph, I think, Who was Joseph. Joseph was a man of faith. Joseph was a man of holiness. Joseph was a man who trusted in God. Joseph was a man of purity. And I would suggest to you that we live in a culture that does not know Joseph. We live in a culture that does not know God. We live in a culture that does not know or care about holiness or purity.

It's easy, by the way, I know this. I try to check myself. I've told Lisa that as I get older preaching, that I'm going to start talking about the good, old days, how wonderful the good old

days were and how everything's so much worse now than in the good old days, and for her to get out of the pew and come over here and kick me in the backside, because that's not actually wisdom I would be offering you. It's nothing but just getting old. That's just what people do. When they're getting old, they say, "Oh, things are terrible now, but once upon a time they were great. If we can't just go back to the good old days." As if nostalgia is going to solve anything. And we do have a selective memory when we think to the past, don't we? We think, oh, things were better... We think about the '50s. I was born in the '50s. Now those were Happy Days, weren't they, in the '50s? That was a better time. It was Ozzie and Harriet, and the TV show that I always tell my children expresses the ultimate truth of the universe, Father Knows Best.

It'd a black and white world...The '50s. Those were Happy Days. Let's go back to the '50s. But how good were the '50s, really? How good were the '50s? If I wanted to get a drink of water there would be a water fountain there for white guys like me. There'd be a tall water fountain with cold water in it, but next to it would be a smaller, lower, unchilled water fountain for black people who could not drink from the same fountain as I? The '50s, was it more moral then? I'm not sure. People get better or worse and we're prone to wonder. We are prone to wonder.

As the hymn sings it, there's just garden variety sin in all of us. But I do wonder if in our day we face a peculiar evil. That evil may be. Once upon a time people might argue over what is good and bad and what is right and wrong. But today the problem we have may well be that we've given up on the idea of there even being such a thing as right and wrong. Just kind of do whatever. Just do whatever and it'll be good enough somehow. Maybe that's the peril of our day. A culture has arisen that does not know Joseph.

I was in the bank a few weeks ago, and I'm standing in the line there and there's a woman there and she's having a conversation with a friend. I'm trying not to eavesdrop. I just want to make my deposit and get out of the bank. But they started talking. I can't help but hear what they're saying. I did not let myself get drawn into the conversation. One woman looks at her friend and she says, "My boyfriend got me pregnant." And I thought, "Oh, my." And her friend, who didn't look to be startled by this, said, "Well, how's that been?" And she said, she said, "Well it's no big deal except for his mother." And the other woman said, "What's that about with his mother?" And she said, "She, I don't know, she is some kind of a Christian." I mean she said it with utter disdain in her voice. "She's some kind of a Christian."

We live in a world that doesn't believe in God and it's hard to know why and what the problem is. Sometimes we think it's outsiders have come in from somewhere, that must be the problem, or we stop praying in the public schools or we did something. We don't know what the problem is. Something's wrong. Who knows? Maybe this young woman has maybe seen a Christian that would cause you to say anything other than "Christian."

I don't know. We live in a world where there doesn't seem to be such a thing as right and wrong ... I thought about that woman and her disdain for the faith, and it occurred to me as I looked at her that, you know, Mary had a boyfriend and what did his mother think when she was pregnant?

You see, God comes down to save us who are lost. And what it requires of us is really peculiar. I love the two women that are named in this story. They don't name the pharaoh. It's Ramses the Great. They should show him the honor of saying his name, Ramses the Great, but they disregard him so much they don't even say his name. He's just a king who arose over Egypt. They don't even want to utter the name. He's so insignificant in God's plans of history, Ramses the Great. They don't even say it.

But they do name two poor slave women who are the midwives. It's their job. This is before we had birthing rooms and so on. It's the midwives' job to come and help the Hebrew women deliver their babies. The Hebrew midwives are named Shiprah and Puah. You might not want to name your son Pharaoh. You might hesitate from naming your daughters Shiprah and Puah, but if you knew Hebrew, you might actually want to use those names. Shiprah means beautiful, and Puah means fragrant flower. Shiprah and Puah. Beautiful and fragrant flower. But these are not shy, demure, retiring gentle petals of women. Instead, they've got some kind of backbone. They get right in the face of that pharaoh who tells them he's the pharaoh. He's the most powerful man in the world and he tells them when the time comes to deliver the Hebrew women, if it's a boy you kill the boy, which shows how stupid the pharaoh is, doesn't it? Because if you want to control the population, you don't kill the men, you kill the women. And if you're all about building programs, you don't kill the men, that's your work, that's your labor force. Instead you kill the women. It's mocking pharaoh, he's such a knucklehead. And Shiprah and Puah see through it, and they say to him, it's almost like the Olympics of childbearing. They say, "Well..." The Egyptian women need midwives because they're so frail, it takes them forever to get the child out. They need so much help you have to hold their hand. But the Hebrew women, they have no trouble at all. Labor begins, baby shoots out, they're back to work. They have no problem.

Pharaoh's amazed by these. What Shiprah and Puah engage in we would call civil disobedience. The powers of the day say this is what you shall do, and they refused to comply. And the fact is, in every culture, in every nation, in all of history, there are many points where the faithful are required to say, "We refuse to comply, we will be disobedient." Or as it says in Exodus Chapter 5, verse 29, "We would rather obey God than men." Shiprah and Puah would rather obey God than men.

And the question is, what does that mean for us? Do we just live in this world and say, "Oh, I'm just going to fit in. I'm just going to kind of go with things. It's kind of a cool, hip, chic world out there anyway. I'm just going to milk it for all that it's worth." Or are we going to be like Shiprah and Puah and say we would rather obey God than men?

What would that protest look like for us? It could be very simple. You need to think about what you do day in and day out. How many times has something come up in the course of your day and you need to just refuse to comply? The world says this is the way. This is the way. This is the way to get ahead in business. This is the way to run your family life. This is what you ought to buy. This is what you ought to do and we just say, "Sorry, sorry. We would rather obey God than men, sorry."

We're going to be like Shiprah and Puah. It can be very simple things. There's the old story, by the way, about the woman who grew deaf as she got older but she kept coming to church. And so people, they asked her,, "Why do you keep coming to church? You can't hear the choir, you can't hear the preacher. Why do you keep coming to church?" She was deaf. She said, "I want to be sure the devil knows whose side I'm on." And the question for us is, Whose side are you on? Does the devil notice whose side you're on by what you do?

We run these announcements in the worship bulletin. I always have qualms about this. You know, we have the order of service, and then we have the announcements, the things that are coming up. And I don't know how you think about it. I ought to interview about this. What do you think about those announcements? Do you read them, do you pay attention to them? Do you just go yeah, yeah, yeah? Like the flight attendant stands up, tells you how to get out of the plane if it's crashing. You go yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, flown before. Is that what it's like? Sometimes I think we mislabel it. I think we make it look like, "Hey, here's a nice activity for some nice people and if you're just bored and have nothing else to do, come up here to the church and we're just going to have a nice little time together. We hope you'll come. It's an opportunity for you if you don't have anything else to do."

I think we mislabel these things. It looks like a nice activity for nice people to do nice things with other nice people in a nice place, and I think this is wrong. I think what we offer you is a church. We ought to understand it for the radical measure that it is. When we ask you to come to something it's your opportunity to tell the devil whose side you're on. It's your opportunity to tell the devil whose side you're on.

Tonight we have what's called a Youth Bash. It's kind of the back-to-school activity for youth. And we know what we're up against. We're not dumb. We know what we're up against. I've got teenagers in my house. I know how it is. And what we're trying to say is, "Hey, this will be so much fun. This will be fantastic. It will be the grand time of your life." And if you're a youth parent, I know what you're doing, you're thinking is it going to be enough fun for my kid to enjoy it or am I going to be sorry I sent him? Then they're going to say, it would be more fun to do this. We know what you go through. But just be very clear. Be very clear, as a family you're making a decision, whose side are you on? Whose side are you on? If you send your child over here it may not be as much fun as whatever it is that other kids are doing this afternoon, but it says to the devil, this is whose side we're on. We're on the side of God. We would rather obey God than men. We're not trying to raise normal children who just fit in. Parents tell me that all the time, I just want my child to be normal. In this world you'd better hope your child is really abnormal.

We have a Hymn Sing tonight. I don't know how you feel. Do you see the ad for the Hymn Sing? I know some of you, you think, "Oh, the Hymn Sing, yes, those are old hymns my grandma sang. I want to come to the Hymn Sing." And others of you go, "Yeah, yeah, it's not really my style of music." I don't know what to make of styles of music. When I think about styles of music that I like, I can tell you this, my son and I were watching the Olympics the other night and an ad came on for the closing ceremonies, which we are going to watch. And the reason we're going to watch the closing ceremonies is they said featured at the closing ceremonies will be legendary rock guitarist Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin. I mean, we're

watching that if it's 3 in the morning. We love Led Zeppelin, see, but it's not about musical tastes, is it? When you come to the Hymn Sing, you know what we're going to sing tonight? We're going to sing in a world that is riddled with fear and paranoia. The Egyptians were afraid. America's afraid. Everybody's afraid. In a world that is riddled by fear we'll come here tonight together and we will sing What Have I to Dread, What have I to Fear, Leaning on the Everlasting Arms. We think about what matters and what doesn't matter, but tonight we're going to come together and we're going to sing When Christ Shall Come We'll Shout of Acclamation and Take Me Home. What Joy Shall Fill My Heart.

What matters, what doesn't matter? When the offering plate comes around, I know you want to zone out right now. "Oh, Howell's going on about money again, he's always trying to get my money." Absolutely, I'm never going to rest until I get your money. Let's just be very clear about that.

The thing about money that's interesting is that every time you pull a dollar bill or a \$10 bill or a one hundred thousand dollar stock portfolio, whatever it is that you have, there is a battle going on for your soul. What are you going to do with it? Are you going to obey God or are you going to use it for yourself? It's just very clear. A battle goes on for your soul with what you do with your money. Make no mistake about it. And I don't know, most people that I talk to, they like the idea that the money says, "In God We Trust."

Well if you think that's a good idea, then every dollar that passes through your hands, you'd better be deadly serious about am I exhibiting trust in God with what I do with this money, or am I kind of giving God chump change? And I can't give out as much chump change now because I'm paying more for gas.

A battle is going on for your soul. Are you going to say to the devil whose side you're on? It's a question we all have to answer. We're going to be like Shiprah and Puah, beautiful, fragrant flower. Together, not alone, together, being able to say in the face of the king that does not know Joseph, we will follow the baby in the basket. We are servants of the child in the manger. It's laughable to the world. The world wants to say, "Christian." But we say, "Yes. We are Christian. We're followers. We believe there's such a thing as goodness and right and wrong and God. And hope." It doesn't matter what it costs us. We're going to follow Him.