
From Fear to Awe

A sermon by the Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton

Proper 16 A

Exodus 1:8-2:10

When I was in seminary, one of the most beloved characters at St. Bartholomew's church was Shy Bunny. Shy Bunny would attend parish events with the Reverend Nancy Baxter and always attracted a crowd of children, and frankly a number of adults as well. We of course knew that Shy Bunny was a lifelike hand puppet, but that did not diminish the excitement that would attend her appearances.

My favorite appearance in the parish was the year that Shy Bunny led the parade out to the Easter garden. Children had brought flowers to plant and we ready to bury a figure of Jesus in a tomb of rocks at the center of the garden. The children knew that when they came to look on Easter morning, the figure would be gone, and the banner of Alleluias, they had buried in the same spot at the beginning of Lent would be dug up and hung over the entrance to the nave. The year that Shy Bunny led us to the garden was special, because we learned that Shy Bunny had a secret longing. Because of her appreciation for our liturgy, she wanted more than anything to be , a verger. So, on that sunny Saturday, Shy Bunny was presented with her own black verger robe and her own personal size verge to lead us to the place of celebration.

After we were done with the garden, I was talking to Nancy and she told me why she started bringing Shy Bunny to the parish. She said, "I like to have Shy Bunny around so that the children get to know her. That way, if they end up being in the hospital, Shy Bunny come to visit them. They will have had the experience of seeing Shy Bunny here at the church, and hopefully that familiarity will help them remember the safety they have experienced here. Then the hospital will not seem so scary."

Several months later, my husband and I found ourselves at Scottish Rite Children's Hospital for several days with our then two-year old son. We were terrified and not really sure what had caused him to struggle to wake up a few days earlier. We were in that place of testing and fear, and we frankly felt powerless. We were in the grips of the hospital system, with little that was known, and much that was unknown. When we returned to our room one morning after yet another test, we walked in to see our priest standing by the window.

She was there of course to bring Shy Bunny to visit Matthew. The funny thing, is I do not even remember if Matthew noticed Shy Bunny. He was probably more interested in the plastic dinosaur that Shy Bunny had brought. But I burst into tears. I was so relieved in the midst of fear and a sense of such powerlessness to see a symbol of love and comfort. I was reminded that we were not alone. Our son was ultimately fine, but I never forgot the sense of moving from a moment of complete powerlessness and fear towards a sense of strength beyond my own making.

In the story from Exodus this morning we hear the familiar story of the birth of Moses. How times have changed. There is no longer a king who remembers the leadership and kindness of Joseph, and the Hebrew people have found themselves in a place a great hardship and persecution. Their lives are bitter and the only thing they know is if they don't keep making more bricks, they will find themselves in an even more difficult predicament. The King is so afraid that the Israelites will gain power over the Egyptians that he decides to embark on a calculated path of genocide.

Long before Moses is on the scene, the King calls into his presence the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah and orders them to kill all male babies when they are attending to their work. We are not told much about these midwives except that they "fear" God.

To fear God in this sense, is not to be afraid, but to rather have such a sense of awe that one is able to gain strength in situations where it does not seem possible. Fear of God is actually the absence of fear that paralyzes and a gaining of strength beyond ourselves. It is hard to imagine that when confronted with the King of Egypt, that two Hebrew women would be able to mount an insurrection. But that is exactly what fear of the Lord allows them to do. They refuse to kill the male children.

When the King calls them into his presence and demands to know what they have done, they respond with a craftiness that appeals to the King's prejudices. He has already decided the Israelites are close to animals, and so they tell him that the women of their ways are different than the delicate Egyptian women he knows. Hebrew women are so quick to give birth they tell him that they are not even able to get to the births in time to carry out the orders of the King. The King is so startled by their response that he is forced to think of other means and the midwives are spared after having saved countless lives.

Their fear of the Lord has given them strength and purpose, when no outward authority or power seems available. I have to believe that the midwives fear of God and the strength that attends them was forged in years of support from their community. They were formed long before they were in the audience of a King, and it was in the moment when they could not imagine a way out, that the strength of those prayers yield an astounding result.

To be in a situation that seems infinitely powerless is often where God can enter most powerfully to shift the course of oppression and fear. When we let go of any sense that we are in charge, the way is opened for God's power to be manifest in new ways.

Leymah Gbowee of Liberia had some sense of that power. She is a devout Christian who had become increasingly disheartened by the decades of civil war that ravaged Liberia in the 90s. The women of that country could no longer stand to see their children killed and co-opted into service by the roving bands of guerilla soldiers. They started in 2003 by gathering daily in a fish market near the presidential palace to sing and pray for peace. The movement grew to include thousands of women of both Christian and Muslim faiths to witness to the country's leadership that these years of strife and chaos needed to come to an end. They were avowedly non-violent in their protests and they were armed only with white t-shirts and their signs for peace.

In the documentary entitled, "Pray the Devil Back to Hell," we see the story of these women unfold as they gradually bring pressure on the President, Charles Taylor. The title of the documentary comes from a statement of Leymah Gbowee. She was commenting on the supposed religiosity of both the government and the rebels. The rebels were frequently seen praying at the mosques and the President Charles Taylor claimed to be a Christian that could literally pray the devil out of hell. Leymah Gbowee responded if that was the type of prayer at work, they needed to pray the devil back to hell.

The women gathered each morning with the full awareness that they could be shot down at any moment. Their presence is enough of a disturbance that they eventually are granted an audience with the President. They demand that he go to Ghana for peace talks. The highlight of the documentary is when a group of the women peace demonstrators go to Ghana to observe the peace talks.

Led by Gbowee, the women gather outside and stage a silent protest. They express their displeasure that the men seem more focused on enjoying the local hotels, than coming to any sort of peace agreement. The women decide to confine the men to the conference center, refusing to let them leave until they come to an agreement. When they are threatened with eviction, Gbowee confronts the men with the only power she has. She threatens that all the women present will remove their clothes if the men do not continue the talks, which would bring complete shame upon them.

The men decide to continue the talks.

The president, Charles Taylor eventually ends up in exile, there is a new period of peace for Liberia. The first African

female head of state, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is elected. When you hear Leymah Gbowee share her story, you are struck by her witness. That somehow the pain and suffering of her country allowed her to find a strength that acknowledged her powerlessness and yielded to the power of God.

Luckily, most of us are not confronted with civil strife and violence on this order. But we all have moments when fear overwhelms us. When we believe our only resources are so insignificant they cannot possibly make a difference. What good is a puppet? Or a papyrus basket? Or a white t-shirt? But if we can yield our fear to the power of the living God, it is remarkable what God can do. Amen

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