

**"The Pulse of Life"**  
Sermon on Exodus 1:8-20  
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Last summer I got back into swimming laps. The very first time in the pool I swam all of 3 laps, stopped from exhaustion, and then checked my pulse. And generally, you can get a good sense for your heart rate if you count the amount of heartbeats you have within a period of six seconds. Say you have 14 beats in that span of time. Multiply that number by 10 and you find that your heart is beating 140 times per minute. Well I checked my heart rate, and I was able to count to 18. 180 beats a minute – incredibly fast, especially given I'd done just 3 laps, which meant I was very much out of swim shape. Of course, if you had seen me standing there in the pool you wouldn't have been able to discern anything about my pulse. You'd think everything looks pretty quiet and uneventful...unless you were close enough to press into my pulse and feel rapid coursing of life.

In many ways the scene in Exodus chapter 1 appears to have no pulse. God is never mentioned by name, and there certainly appears to be no God-movement. Oppositely, what we have is an Egyptian king who deeply fears this foreign group of Israelites as they are growing larger and larger. And so - as you heard in the reading - a shrewd plan of control is made. The king's fear is concretized into an expansive infrastructure of slavery in which taskmasters are set over the Israelites who are given hard labor working with mortar and brick and in the fields. Twice we are told that the Egyptians were "ruthless" in the manner they imposed these tasks.

The picture painted is one of comprehensive, pervasive oppression...and God is nowhere to be found. And yet - what happens when we press closer (pulse) to the passage? We might notice that amid all of the oppression and distinct reasons for hopelessness...that three times in chapter one we have these curious words.

First in verse 7: *"the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and become so numerous that the land was filled with them."* Then verse 12 as the oppression gets worse: and still we read, *"...they multiplied and spread."* Then again the same thing in verse 20. Three times we hear the Israelites are *exceedingly fruitful, multiplied, increased.*

Where have we heard that vocabulary? This is the vocabulary of Genesis. In the creation story, God gives the directive to humanity to be **fruitful** and **multiply**. It is then the same vocabulary used when God promises Abraham that from him will come a great nation of people so **numerous** that they will number as greatly as the stars in the sky. In fact, one of the most fundamental ways that the children of Abraham will always know God is faithfully blessing them, faithfully present, faithfully fulfilling the promise to make them a great nation – when they see their people multiplying and becoming as numerous as the stars.

And so yes, on the surface of Exodus 1 there is nothing but ugly, systemic, persistent evil...and yet just below the surface we are being told "the pulse of God has not been thwarted; the pulse of God is, in fact, racing through the enslaved people of God."

In the face of some of the most complex and challenging realities of our times and our lives...do we detect the ever-faithful pulse? I wonder where we might point and notice the multiplying fruit of the Holy Spirit - "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

Pharaoh notices this pulse, and he discerns slavery alone is not thwarting the Israelites. Sometimes the place of the pulse becomes most evident when evil itself decides to double down right in its direction. Pharaoh goes with Plan B - genocide. Surely death is the most fundamental way to stop a pulse. And yet once more if we press close enough (pulse) to the story we find, again, there remains distinct pulse - even as the end is surely near. In this instance, the pulse is made known through two women: Shiphrah and Puah.

Ancient documents of this time almost never mention women by name and the men that are mentioned are kings and warriors. How profound that our ancient Scriptures name Shiphrah and Puah - and never give a name to Pharaoh by the way. It's as if the Scriptures themselves are signaling - if you want to find the pulse of God, if we you want see where God is really raising something up - look quite far from the big names and big places where the world might point.

Shiphrah and Puah are two foreign women. In faith, they disregard the king's law about killing all baby boys, and instead these midwives, as they help Israelite women give birth, they let the boys live, they lie about it before authority, and throughout they put their lives on the line. There's that pulse - found only if one peers below the massive infrastructure of slavery and the great edict of genocide and sees the unlikely people and the stirring of God in their midst.

Since January, the officers and staff of the church have been reading a book called *Sailboat Church: Helping Your Church Rethink its Mission and Practice* - and essentially the book talks about what it means to be the kind of church whose sail catches the wind of the Holy Spirit and discovers itself moving in God's ways, in God's direction, on God's power. And during our discussion times with this book, at some point someone(s) within the staff, the elders, and the deacons has inevitably raised this very good, very honest question: "But what if you're a sailboat and there is no wind? What about the times or seasons or realities in this world where the air is just thick and stale and not moving?" Or...to translate that same question into the image I have been using - "what if there is no pulse?"

And I think this question feels inevitable at some point, particular in these recent days amid a pandemic, cries for racial and economic justice, massive unemployment, the profound difficulties of doing school well and safely, a divided country - amid all of these very significant and seemingly impossible challenges - many of us I think are often not sure where God is in all this, let alone where a living pulse is racing with new life.

I was thinking about this very question the other day while sitting on our couch holding Logan as he was sleeping. And I am thinking about this question while the news is on in front of me...and I'm also glancing occasionally over to some notes on the computer where I'm trying to prioritize various church-related things going on.

All to say I'm looking this way to hear the latest about all that's going on in the world; I'm looking that way to try and sift through all the plans...and then some small movement catches my eye. Logan's eyes are now open. I turn my gaze downward, and there is this little face gazing with full intensity right back at me. And he's got those tiny, wonderful baby breathes going (heh heh heh heh).

And it struck me again: the witness of Exodus chapter 1, and truly the witness of Scripture time and again is that if want to find the pulse of Holy Spirit life, we want to see where and how God is moving - it requires us to look down.

Frequently our eyes and ears and hearts are captives to the big names, the movers and shakers, the big problems, the big solutions, the big momentum, the big projects...these are not unimportant to be sure.

- It's just we worship a God who saved us not by coming as a great monarch but as a babe in a manger born to a couple peasants in an out-of-the-way village.
- We worship a God who delivers the people of God from slavery by starting with two immigrant women.

What would we see if we let our gaze look down from all the places that normally capture our attention? When we drop our gaze from all the big things and sometimes overwhelming concerns, and we attend toward what is often overlooked or the seemingly powerless or hardly noticed - who or what do we notice?

Or what if we drop that same gaze inward and look unto the parts of ourselves that often feel the weakest, most uncertain, or just emptiest of spaces....the parts we usually might try to hide or not look at...and yet, is there a pulse there? Might we find, if we look down, that it is indeed true God's power is perfected in weakness? God has a thing for going toward and through precisely that which we or the world thought weak or inconsequential or...secondary or foreign...the-other-side or broken-beyond-repair?

The truth is that at the heart of our faith is this profound scandal: we believe in a God for whom even death itself does not stop the pulse. Which means most fundamentally the constant and ever-promise of Jesus Christ is this: There is a pulse. The Holy Spirit is actively birthing new life just under the surface and often not where we first look or naturally look - without or within.

And is it possible that pulse is racing at 180 even this very moment?

More, is it possible that the unlikely face of that pulse is the gaze of Jesus himself looking right back at us.

And is there anything more life-giving and vitalizing the soul of a people than being seen...and loved?  
Amen.