

## *They Let the Children Live'*

**Exodus 1:8-2:10**

### **Back to School Blessings**

Today, we celebrate a back-to-school blessing day. We pray for all students who will soon return to school and we bless their backpacks. As an immigrant, I am still not familiar with Back-to-school traditions in the United States. Many students in the United States do feel excited about the back-to-school season, but personally, I have never met any Korean students, especially high school seniors, who are excited about going back to school. Many parents in the United States buy their children new backpacks at the start of the school year but in South Korea, it's not a common tradition to buy new backpacks for children every year at the beginning of the school year. I generally used my backpack until it was worn out. While we have a back-to-school-blessing, the Korean church does not. Although back-to-school traditions may be different from country to country, we all value the importance of education for our children and future generations. So, we pray for our children to learn and grow in school. We pray for teachers and school systems. And of course, we pray for their safety throughout the school year, especially from mass shootings, which is a very unique prayer concern in the United States.

Students and parents are worried about mass shootings as the school year begins. That's a tragic reality we live with today. We must acknowledge that not every culture of our society is beneficial to the well-being of our children. Some cultures are even deadly for future generations. While we don't have a Pharaoh who ordered innocent children killed, deadly forces still threaten our children's lives. Deadly gun violence, the plague of racism, aggravating hunger and poverty, increasing substance abuse among youth, climate change, and the rise of militarism. Metaphorically speaking, there are still many Pharaohs jeopardizing the well-being and very lives of future generations.

### **Pharaoh Enslaves the Israelites and Egyptian became ruthless toward the Israelites**

Today's scripture reading shows how a deadly culture can be forged by a political leader to consolidate his power. By the end of the Genesis narrative, the Israelites had become welcomed guests because they were the family of Joseph. But now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph (Exodus 1:8) and he needed to consolidate his regime. So, he instigated fear in the Egyptians of the Israelites as a political strategy. Because fear of out-groups often becomes a powerful source of in-group unity, political leaders often attempt to solidify their power by scapegoating a relatively weak minority as a threat. The new Pharaoh stimulated Xenophobia and enslaved the Israelites. The ripple effect of this political decision from above influenced the ordinary people. The biblical author repeatedly says, "the Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites." According to Exodus 12:40, the Israelites had lived in Egypt four hundred and thirty years. This means there is a high probability that some Egyptians knew Israelites personally. Some might have had Israeli friends and the Israelites had Egyptian friends. They were neighbors and friends for a long time, but now xenophobic policies and irrational fears instilled by political leaders created a ruthless and deadly culture against the Israelites.

When the people became numb to the suffering of the Israelites and accepted atrocities toward them as a necessary means to control the potential danger, the Pharaoh moved to the next step, ethnic cleansing. He ordered Hebrew midwives to kill Hebrew boys at birth. The midwives were people whose vocation from God was to preserve and protect life. But now, the Pharaoh demanded they deny their vocation and kill. The same thing can happen to us if we, Christians, do not live out our vocation to preserve and protect life. In fact, history shows that Christians and churches have often denied our vocation and complied with the Pharaoh's deadly

commands. The history of the Holocaust is a vivid example of a failure of Christians living out their vocation to love and protect life. An estimated 1.5 million children were killed during the Holocaust. The same thing could happen again at any time, in any place, if Christians simply comply with the state and the dominant culture. How can you preserve and protect life, especially, for our children in deadly cultures of our society. What can we do about deadly gun culture in the U.S.? What about racism and climate change? I know these issues seem too big to handle, but we cannot give up.

### **Women resisted Pharaoh's deadly command and found a way to preserve life**

We often assume that God's divine intervention is always magnificent in its scale, but in this biblical text, God protected the vulnerable children through vulnerable women who risked their lives to preserve life! Two vulnerable midwives refused to obey Pharaoh's command. Maybe their actions were the first acts of civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance for the sake of justice, described in the Bible and human history. They lied to the Pharaoh and broke the law for the sake of justice and life. They risked their own lives to protect the lives of children and they let the boys live! Someone had to take a risk to protect children and let them live and thrive.

Think of Moses' mother. She must have known Pharaoh's command, but she didn't surrender her boy and raised him until she could hide him no longer. Then, she got a papyrus basket for him and put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. She did the best she could to protect her baby and then, put it into God's hands. Then, the daughter of Pharaoh found the basket and saw the child. "he was crying and she took pity on him" and took him as her own son. She must have known about Pharaoh's deadly command, but she willingly risked herself to protect a vulnerable life. God's intervention for salvation was manifested through vulnerable women who had compassion and care for a vulnerable baby. They were weak but powerful enough to twist the most powerful man's deadly intention.

Someone has to take a risk to protect children and let them live and thrive. We are called for this mission to save, protect and preserve life, especially, the lives of little ones! What can we do to be instruments of God's intervention? First, pray for all students, teachers and staff at school. Become a loving family for our Sunday School kids and youth so that they can truly experience that they are loved in this place. And say 'no' to deadly cultures of the world. Say 'no' to racism and any other forms of discrimination. Say 'no' to deadly gun culture in the U.S. Help our students grow and thrive. Let them live their lives fully and meaningfully. We may not change the deadly cultures at once, but God will intervene and save lives through our acts of obedience, just as God thwarted Pharaoh's evil intention through vulnerable women and raised Moses to save the oppressed and the marginalized. Amen.