

“The News from France”

Exodus 1:8-22

A Sermon
Delivered by
Chaplain Carey Cash

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Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in Your sight O Lord our Strength and Redeemer, Amen.

Many of you know that my father was a career Naval fighter pilot and ship's commander. Because of this, I spent the better part of 18 years, along with my mom and sister, following dad's career to whichever assignment the Navy had for him. By the time I'd reached 6th grade, my dad had been in a few changes of command, either as the newly arriving Commanding Officer, or the one being relieved. For those of you who don't know, a change of command is exactly what it sounds like – literally a change of commanding officers. Typically, after two-three years at an assignment, the commanding officer will go on to his or her next job and a new commanding officer will assume the duties of leading that unit. One change of command that will forever be imprinted in my memory was when I was 10 years old and my dad was assuming command of the Naval Fighter Weapons School; better known as “*Topgun*.” I didn't realize the significance or prestige of that job as a 10 year old. This was 1980, so it was before the movie came out. And I should say that my dad was always humble about what he did even when his success took him to positions of great leadership and visibility. Certainly looking back on my dad's career as a naval officer today, I'm even more impressed with what he did, and the spirit with which he did it.

Well my behavior at that change of command was less than impressive. There I sat on the second row next to my mom and sister, right behind the family of the outgoing Commanding Officer and a few other special guests. Before us all stood the giant hanger door at Miramar – the one with the bold phrase – *Fighter town USA* written on it. Upon the hanger was draped a giant American flag, and beneath that flag was the stage, brightly trimmed in bunting with the official party seated there in all their regalia. As is always the case with a change of command, there was a guest speaker, and not surprisingly the guest speaker was an Admiral. I don't remember who the Admiral was, but I do remember that his speech, at least in the mind of this 10 year old, was going on a little bit too long. As the Admiral spoke, I shuffled and fidgeted, and moved around in my seat, and finally after what seemed like an eternity, the Admiral wrapped up his remarks and sat down. When I saw that he was done, I leaned back in my seat and in a very audible way, let out something like, “Oh brother...!” My

mother, who was sitting next to me, slowly turned to me, and I remember it well, because the look on her face was a mixture of disbelief and “I’m going to kill you.” You see not only was I loud, but the nice woman sitting right in front of me was the Admiral’s wife, and she’d heard the whole thing - evidenced by her disapproving turn of her head...I don’t remember much after that ceremony. I do know I survived because there are pictures of me eating at the reception. But I don’t remember a lot after that. I am certain that when I got home, there was a reckoning.

Changes of Command are a part of life in the military (and yes, even for kids). We’ve all been to them, sat through them, and many of you have been the official party honored at them. Some of you have been the guest speaker. It’s one of the things that make serving in the military always interesting. Every two-three years there’s a shift, a change; a new leader comes aboard and brings with him or her, a new philosophy, a new approach, a new outlook, often new priorities. This can be exciting; but it can also be worrisome. Leadership styles are as different as the men and women who bring them. And just as a command’s morale can be improved by an excellent commanding officer, so from time to time, a command can suffer from a poor one. An inspiring person can be followed by someone with lack of vision. Firm but fair leadership can be followed by a harsh or even abusive example. Whoever assumes command, he or she shapes the lives of the men and women under them – for good or for bad - at least for the foreseeable future.

Our Scripture this morning from the Book of Exodus recounts for us a change of command that happened in the ancient world; and it was anything but pleasant for God’s people. In Exodus Chapter 1, verse 8, we’re given some of the most foreboding words in all the Bible:

“Now a new king arose over Egypt
who did not know Joseph.”

We have reason to believe this new king was King Rea, the founder of the Hyksos dynasty. The meaning behind this phrase that *he did not know Joseph*, is not so much that this new king had no personal acquaintance with Joseph, but rather that he was unaware of or cared little for Joseph’s contribution. If you remember Joseph, a few years earlier, under a different king, had saved all of Egypt. Having been given a dream by God in which he saw that a great famine was coming, Joseph counseled the king to store food for seven years so that the people of Egypt would have provisions when the famine hit. That king listened to Joseph, and so when the harsh years came, Egypt was saved, and was able to share her bounty with the nations. The king treated Joseph kindly, saying “Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?” He made Joseph a

governor over all Egypt second only to himself. And Joseph's family – his brothers and their wives and children - were given the right to dwell with the Egyptians as friends, multiplying in the land and living in peace. But this new King, this new Commanding Officer, did not know Joseph. The past blessing of Joseph and his people played no part in this king's vision of Egypt's future. He knew neither Joseph nor his God, and thus his priorities looked very different. Looking out on the vast multitude of Joseph's people, this King didn't see a reminder of God's blessing and deliverance; he saw a threat. He viewed them with suspicion, for his chief concern was power and keeping it. And so in a decision that must have sent shockwaves throughout the land, the king ordered slave masters over them, to oppress them with forced labor, making their lives bitter.

How stunned God's people must've been to find themselves the object of such hostility and malice. Having once enjoyed the favor of the king in the bosom of Egypt, the tables were turned and almost overnight, the people of God had become the outliers. But the new king wasn't done yet. His command philosophy was still evolving. He wouldn't be satisfied until God's people were ground into powder. He went to the Hebrew midwives and ordered them to kill every male that was born to every Hebrew woman, right there on the birthstool. The midwives disobeyed the king. We're told that they "feared God and did not do what the king had ordered." When the king realized this, he summoned them and said, "Why is it that you have done this? Why have you let the boys live?" The midwives, walking a very careful line, responded that the "Hebrew women are far too vigorous, their labor is too quick and they give birth before we can arrive." God was kind to the midwives because of their faithfulness. He gave them families of their own. And so the children of Israel continued to increase throughout all of the land. All of which drove the king to issue one of the most brutal edicts ever given – every male child that was born to a Hebrew woman was to be thrown into the Nile River. And at this, *the lamps went out in all of land and the people of God would not see them lit again in their lifetime*. For it would be two full generations – some 60-80 years later - before Moses would finally appear to deliver God's people.

There are many issues that hit us from this account of this great and terrible change of command in the ancient world. But chief among them is the question: *How should believers live when the tables are turned?*

I suppose the first issue we need to settle is to concede the fact that tables have been turned. "A new king has risen to power who does not know Joseph." I'm not speaking of any political leader or statesman. Leaders are representative of far greater movements already afoot. I'm saying that a new spirit now prevails in our world that does not know God and fails to acknowledge the blessing that comes from obedience to God's laws. No serious student of our culture, who looks at the trends and the political correctness that dominates our

speech, can come to any other conclusion than that believers are now the outliers. There was a time when the burden of proof rested on the atheist or the agnostic, those hostile to the faith. No longer – the burden of proof now lies squarely upon the shoulders of anyone who dares to hold basic and historic Christian beliefs. The tables have been turned.

Much of this is due to the fact that most people today have forgotten the past. Like the ancient king who did not remember Joseph, the spirit that dominates the discussion, shapes policies, and guides institutions has forgotten the basic grammar of religious faith that once shaped our nation and much of our world. Just a few years ago, a well-known political leader referred to the story of the Good Samaritan in one of his speeches (Luke 10). A Chief Washington Correspondent for CBS News who was reporting on the speech confessed that that portion of the speech left him stumped. “There were a few phrases that I just didn’t get,” he said. “One was [this talk about] “when we see that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, we won’t pass to the other side.” The correspondent – a central figure in our media - had no idea what story the man was citing. More and more of our leaders in government, academia, the military, and the media have no grasp of the basic images of faith that have framed so much of the fabric of what is good in our land.

But more than just no memory of the faith, this new spirit, like that king thousands of years ago, is increasingly hostile to the faith. The International Bulletin of Missionary Research reports that between the years 2000-2010, there were one million Christians martyred - worldwide. We tend to think of Christian martyrs as those who died in the Roman Coliseums. It’s true, Christians were killed then. Under the reign of Emperor Diocletian for example, some 20,000 were martyred. However, we are now living at the high-water mark in all of history for Christians being martyred for their faith. In Europe, the hostility is growing at an exponential rate. 85% of all crimes classified as anti-religious are against Christians. In Great Britain, professions such as magistrates, doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and midwives are slowly being closed off to Christians because of professional restrictions against freedom of conscience. Teachers and parents are getting in trouble when they disagree with state-defined sexual ethics in the UK. One couple was barred from giving foster care by a judge who cited their Christian beliefs as being destructive and inimical to the child’s well-being. And this is England...the land of John and Charles Wesley.

In America we see this spirit as well. Some of you might remember in 1993 a columnist in the Washington Post infamously referred to evangelicals as “largely poor, uneducated, and easy to command.” People were shocked at the rather overt and brash way he spoke of believers. But 20 years later, this kind of thing is commonplace and in fact has become the conventional wisdom of the day. Such that in 2007, the New

York Times # 1 bestseller was Christopher Hitchens' book, *God is not Great: How Religion Spoils Everything*. Hitchens claims that what we really need is a new enlightenment where we can be delivered from what he calls "religious bondage." The tables have been turned. A new spirit has arisen that does not know Joseph or his people.

Now we hear this and we're apt to say that we need not worry. Christians will rise to the occasion like they have before, and be strengthened even more in their faith. This is what persecution does. And we comfort ourselves by this thought. Tertullian did say that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Well the Christian Church has been strengthened during times of persecution; *but not always*. A disturbing truth that history reveals over and over is that the Christian faith can be snuffed out in nations and cultures – completely. We don't like to think this way. In fact we're taught to NOT think this way. Didn't Jesus say that he would build his church and "the gates of hell would never prevail against it?" He did, and on the whole this is true. The Christian faith, the Body of Christ, the remnant of the faithful will never be utterly overcome. This Church, the church universal, is "a sight that causes even the chief demons to tremble," says Screwtape. But churches, communities of believers, great territories and regions once known for the faith have been utterly extinguished of their Christian witness, and have closed their doors for good. Go to Asia Minor today, the region that is so often mentioned in the New Testament. The Christian communities at Ephesus, Galatia, Bithynia, the seven churches of the book of Revelation - they're all gone. There is barely a Christian pulse in those lands anymore. In France, a country that was once home to great men and women of faith and missionary zeal, now 60 % of its people, never or almost never, attend church. As one man said, "[France] eldest daughter of the Church, what have you done with your baptism?" And we see it here too – churches closing their doors throughout our land; even this chapel has experienced its own share of decline. Our Midshipmen come from a culture where one out of five in our nation declares themselves, "no religious preference." The tables have turned, and the consequences are far-reaching and of eternal significance.

Now some of you may be saying "Chaplain I come to chapel to hear good news; and this is not good news." I understand that sentiment. I don't like to hear bad news. But if we as believers do not reckon with the seriousness of the threat facing us in the "spiritual places," if we don't see what's happening, if we just assume this is the "new normal" and continue to live and let live, then like the frog in boiling water, the faith in this land will slowly and rather painlessly die...even here on the Yard...even in this great chapel. This is why the Scripture says to the Church at Sardis, "Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God."

Nearly 75 years ago, newly elected Prime Minister of England, Winston Churchill came over the public broadcast system of his nation and spoke seven words that managed to wake his people up to the awful threat they were facing. His message: “The news from France is very bad.” Of course he was speaking of the fall of France that happened in less than six weeks and placed the might of the German army just miles across the English Channel threatening to plunge the world into “the abyss of a new dark age.” Politicians didn’t usually speak that way, to tell people the bad news. They still don’t. But Churchill did, and because of it, England woke up and gave an answer. In fact, in that very same broadcast, Churchill closed with words that have become famous in the prose and speech of every English-speaking nation: “Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duty and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth lasts for a thousand years men will still say, this was their finest hour.”

Brothers and sisters, *the news from France is very bad*. A new spirit has risen to power who does not know Joseph or his people. Will we continue to slumber and enter a new dark age? Or will we wake up to what can be our finest hour? All of which brings us to the Hebrew midwives. It’s interesting, we really don’t know if they were Egyptian women or actual Hebrews. But it doesn’t really matter. Faced with a world set against them, the scripture says, “they feared God and did not do what the king had commanded them.” And because of this, God blessed them. You and I don’t have to go out looking for a fight; that’s not what this is about. The challenge - like it did for the midwives - will come to you. Somehow, someday, in the course of your days, you’ll be asked, like they were, to subtly dismiss your faith from your decision-making process. You’ll be pressured to be silent when staring at immorality or injustice. You’ll be asked to give hearty approval to ways of thinking that run counter to the clear teaching of the Bible. You’ll be tempted to trim your sails in whichever direction the winds are blowing in order to keep climbing the professional ladder. You’ll be asked to deny your Lord. And when these challenges come, and they will, Midshipmen, chapel family, here’s what we do. We remember those faithful midwives, and we fear God rather than men. We draw lines in the sand and say, “in the name of Jesus Christ, ‘No!’” ...remembering that there exists a far greater reward for those who overcome. “For to him who overcomes,” Jesus said, “to him I will give the right to eat from the tree of life...” “To him who overcomes,” Jesus said, “to him I will give a white stone with a new name, known only to him who receives it.” “To him who overcomes,” Jesus said, “to him I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my father.”

The tables have been turned. The news is not good. But to him who overcomes in the name of Jesus, there is great reward...for him and for the people of God. They that have ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church. Amen.