

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
Your Will Be Done: Protecting the Vulnerable  
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Exodus 1:8-22; Matthew 18:1-11

Twenty years ago today the skies were silent and empty. All domestic air travel had been canceled. People were trying to rent cars to drive home from distant destinations. We watched in horror as time after time the images of the twin towers collapsing were being burned into our brains. Then there were the ongoing broadcasts of first responders hoping against hope that survivors would be found. There were desperate families seeking loved ones who had gone to work in the towers as if it were another day and had not been heard from. There were the pictures and stories of those who made last minute calls to family before their lives were lost. In all of that we knew we had seen the face of evil. We had seen the face of evil, meaning that we had seen human beings who were willing to kill themselves to extinguish the image of God in other human beings. For that is what evil is. It is the intentional destruction of the image of God in others, meaning that evil can be seen in the taking of thousands of lives at the twin towers, or in the actions of an online troll who uses social media to destroy the lives and reputation of those they don't like. Evil is about diminishing or destroying the image of God in others.

Almost immediately the questions began. We wanted to find out who these people were who could do such a thing. We wanted to know how these people had evaded detection while training in the US. We wanted to know who recruited them, funded them, and sent them. We wanted to know who was to blame so that we could deal with them appropriately. But the one thing that did not get a great deal of thought was how did these men come to participate in such a great evil. What I mean by this is that these men were not born as haters of the West. They had ordinary childhoods without any great trauma. So how is it that they could be so swept up in Al Qaeda, that they were willing to kill themselves and thousands of people they did not know, whom they had never met, and who had never done them any harm? Or to put it simply, how does evil do this? How does evil grow? I ask, not out of morbid curiosity or for some academic purpose. I ask instead because if we know how evil grows then maybe we can find a way to short circuit its power; to offer the world a counter narrative so that instead of evil there is good.

To discover how evil grows I offer our text from Exodus as a template, because I believe that was its intent. The intent was to help God's people understand how easy it was for evil to grow and flourish, so they might avoid it. So here is the narrative of the growth of evil. Evil often begins with a single individual who believes that they should possess all power; in this case Pharaoh, whom the text implies has taken power by overthrowing his predecessor. Evil grows then through a series of steps. First, the one seeking to consolidate their power needs an "other" or an "enemy" on whom to focus. In this case the "other/enemy" is the Israelite people, and by the way this is the first time the Hebrews are referred to as a people. Second, it is necessary that the "others/enemies" become an object of fear. Pharaoh does this well by telling his people that the Hebrews are more numerous and powerful than the Egyptians...both of which are lies. Third, this fear then gives Pharaoh an excuse to oppress the Hebrews, which allows the

Egyptians to see the Hebrews as less than human. They are more like animals used for labor. Finally, because the Hebrews are less than human it allows Pharaoh to propose killing all the male boys, first at birth by the midwives, but then by the entire population. Evil has grown, spread, and infected the entire populace. I would argue that it was this same narrative that was followed by Bin Laden prior to the 9-11 attacks.

The question then becomes, is there a way in which this progression of evil could be short circuited? Is there a counter-narrative to that of the growth of evil? The answer to these questions is yes and yes. And to find it, we need look no farther than two women, the Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah. They are enlisted in Pharaoh's evil scheme to kill all the male children so that the Hebrew people could not rise against him and so that the girl children could be married to Egyptians and bear Egyptian children. This command of Pharaoh left the women with three options. First, they could go along with the narrative of evil and kill the children. Second, they could resign and allow someone else to do the killing. Or three, they could choose to write a new narrative, one of protecting the vulnerable, which is the choice they made. They would lie to the king. They would risk their lives, but they could protect the vulnerable. This is a different narrative because it says that the children are not "others/enemies." It says that the children and their parents are fully human. It says that these children deserve life and not death. And the women made this choice because they feared God. Fear here does not mean fear of punishment. Fear here means having awe and respect for God. They understood God to be one that cares for every life, Hebrew or Egyptian. In these actions they not only short circuit evil they create a new narrative...the narrative of protecting the vulnerable. This, for those women, is the narrative of those who fear God.

This sermon series is about doing the will of God, and at the heart of God's will is protecting the vulnerable. I say this not only because of what Shiphrah and Puah did but because protection of the vulnerable is one of the great narratives of Torah and of the life and work of Jesus. We can see this in the Law of Moses, reading from Exodus 22, "*You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan...If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate.*" The counter narrative of protecting the vulnerable applies to how God's people are to treat foreigners who live among them, widows and orphans who have no one to protect them, and to the poor who have limited resources. Jesus continues this narrative when he tells the story of the separation of human beings into sheep and goats, with the sheep at God's right hand and the goats at God's left hand. Those who sit at God's right hand are those who have protected the vulnerable hungry by giving them food; the vulnerable thirsty by giving them something to drink; the vulnerable homeless by taking them in; the vulnerable prisoner by visiting them; and the vulnerable sick, by caring for them.

Narratives are powerful. They can shape lives, communities, and nations. The narrative of God, the narrative of God driven by God's will, is the protection of the vulnerable. The narrative of evil is that there are "others/enemies" who are less than human and deserve to be diminished and destroyed. It is a narrative that seeks to eliminate the image of God from those to whom God has given it. This narrative

helps to rescue and enlarge the image of God in all human beings, by seeing none as the other, seeing none to be feared, seeing none to be oppressed or destroyed, but seeing every person as the object of God's and our love, compassion, and care. It is this narrative that calls us then to be intentional in our protection of the vulnerable, for the vulnerable are all around us. They can be children in the Foster Care system. They can be adults with disabilities. They can be the poor who are often forced into borrowing from lenders who charge excessive rates of interest. They can be children with inadequate educational opportunities. They can be families who live without health insurance or adequate housing. They can be the homeless who struggle with mental illness, and a lack of support services and affordable housing. They can be those who have come to our nation from Afghanistan seeking a better life.

The challenge for us then is to ask ourselves first, which of these narratives are we choosing? Then ask ourselves second, if I am choosing the narrative of protecting the vulnerable, how am I living that out in my life?