

Immerse Day 26 :: March 8 (by Kristy Miller)

As always when I read these passages in Exodus, I pause when I read that "The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt..." Exodus 14:8. Throughout the plagues, the Bible describes Pharaoh's hardened heart. In several plagues: boils, hail, locusts, darkness, firstborn, Pharaoh's and, sometimes, his officials' hearts are hardened. Sometimes, the Bible tells us that Pharaoh and his officials harden their own hearts. This makes sense to me. I know that to end slavery in Egypt was a complex decision because, I'm assuming, their economy depended on unpaid labor to survive. By the time Pharaoh came to power, the relationships Joseph forged with Egyptian leaders were, perhaps, forgotten. Power was threatened; and an economy was conceived, built, and woven into everyone's everyday lives. Changing an entire system requires stamina and wisdom and time to dismantle, re-design, and build. Un-doing systems is so much harder than building justice into the fabric of daily life from the outset. When will humanity learn this most basic lesson and alleviate the suffering of entire people groups? But, I digress.

So, I understand that hardening one's heart is part and parcel to the human condition. However, we also read that the Lord hardens the leaders' and officials' hearts. The Lord is the agent of the hardening. I've often wondered why a loving God would use this tactic. Why would he purposely harden the heart of a king? Why would he deliberately cripple a leader? He is the almighty God, the sovereign God, the just and merciful God who loves his children. Was Pharaoh not his child too? What would compel a loving father to use such an elegant but destructive tactic for the demise of so many of his children? I understand that our Lord disciplines us for our good. I understand that leaders and kings enjoy immense benefits, and thus are subject to harsh discipline. And, I understand that God, himself, explains the reason. He hardens their hearts so that "...I [God] will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord." Exodus 14:4. And, I understand that hundreds of years later, he would sacrifice his own son so that the rest of his children would not need to be sacrificed. But it still makes me pause and feel some empathy and, yes, even sympathy for Pharaoh. What if? What if the Egyptians had respected the midwives? Listened to them and followed their lead?

The midwives. They were commanded by Pharaoh to murder the Israelite boys. The Bible says that "The midwives...feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live." Exodus 1:17. What if the everyday Egyptians had feared God and kept his commands? Were they, in retrospect, responsible for the death of their king and their officers? At least in part? What if they had refused to use the bricks the Israelites made in forced labor and created their own? What if they had intentionally built habits and attitudes that did not depend on forced, cheap labor? I wonder in what ways I am similar to the Egyptians, the everyday Egyptians. Am I complicit in leaders' abuse of power? Do I force God to use elegant and somewhat brutal tactics when I forget to fear him? When I do fear him, do I contribute to the preservation of leaders' best selves and help create the context in which they can lead as they were designed, by God, to lead.

Many leaders feel such responsibility and incredible pressure to serve those who trust them. Not all, certainly. And some leaders have hard hearts incapable of leaning into suffering let alone the creativity, stamina, and wisdom to design and implement an entirely new system, one that is more just and more fair and more kind. But what about those leaders who are genuinely working as hard as they can on behalf of others and on behalf of ideals. They need midwives who can refuse an order, and in so doing, propel new life into stagnant systems. What if all the ordinary Egyptian citizens had learned from the midwives, followed their lead, and created a populace that did not require a king's hardened heart nor the spectacle of their officers floating in the Red Sea to fear God and give him glory?

These questions make me pause and then they invite me to look around. Who are the midwives now? Who are the people who fear God, refuse an order, and love their leaders enough to stand in the way when those leaders are on a path that will, eventually, result in hard hearts and destroyed lives? What would it take for me to become a midwife, if only for a day or an hour?