

Don't Believe In Kings – Ben Wayman

Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. What a way to start a story. It's so dramatic. A new day, a new king, and a lost history. We find out quickly that this new king who didn't know Joseph is bad news for the people of Israel. We'll come back to this in a bit, but I'd like to leave you with the intro ringing in your ears: *Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.*

Got it? Ok. Let's talk about Chance the Rapper.

Chance the Rapper is one of my favorite readers of the Bible. Chance says he speaks to God in public and the way he talks to God is good fun to sing along with. But even more, I love how he applies Scripture to everyday life. He sees the world through the lens of the Bible. This is what good Bible readers do. And it takes a particular mindset to do it well. Does anyone else here like Chance? Alright, you Chance fans, this is your time to shine. I'm going to begin with a line from one of his songs, and I want you to finish it for me. Ready?

“I don't make songs for free . . . [I make 'em for freedom.]”
“Don't believe in kings. . . [believe in the kingdom.]”¹ That's right. Don't believe in kings, believe in the kingdom.

Today we meet some real-life examples of people who don't believe in kings but believe in the kingdom. So today we get to talk about kings and the kingdom.

I want to suggest that we need to be converted to believe in the kingdom. The Apostle Paul calls it *transformation* and it affects our whole body – including our minds. Paul is what we'd call holistic. He calls us to be transformed this morning – in our mind and our body.

To get to the Goodsen Chapel at Duke Divinity School, most people come from the upper level and so go down several flights of stairs. Just above the first staircase is a huge stone arch with the words *Be transformed by the renewing of your minds* chiseled deeply into the rock. This reminder is emblazoned in my memory. Paul's recommendation places the emphasis on God. Be transformed. Let God do it. And let God do it to the whole of you, by renewing your mind. Our minds must be transformed if we're going to be able to believe the claims of our faith.

That's because believing in the kingdom is hard. It's especially difficult with the noise of the media and rants of political leaders constantly ringing in our ears or emblazoned on a Twitter feed. We know many kings of this world, and on our less faithful days we believe

¹ Chance the Rapper, “Blessings.”

that the destiny of this world lies in their hands. The kings of this world would love us to believe this – that our hope, or our freedom, or our future is in their hands.

So now we return to Exodus, where we are introduced to a new king who seems to pull all the strings, and hold all the power. This king, we find out, thinks in binaries. He's an "us" versus "them" kind of guy. It's "his people" versus the "Israelite people." It's his fellow Egyptians that he enlists to stomp down the Israelite people. The kings of this world think in binaries. But the problem with binaries is they're too small for the universe God has created. The new king of Egypt did not have the eyes to see that "his people" could include people of other races, and so he ruled out of fear.

Fearful people can be violent, as we've seen recently in Charlottesville. But fearful kings are often violent. And so the new ruler of Egypt enslaves the Israelite people, ruthlessly oppresses them, and then commands two Egyptian midwives named Shiphrah and Puah to murder every boy born to the Hebrews. We hear a very similar story with King Herod a thousand years later. These stories are really just the first play in the *How to Rule the World* playbook of kings who are conformed to this world. But our story in Exodus takes a different turn.

But Exodus tells us, the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. What an amazing act of civil disobedience! What a courageous act of insubordination! What an act of faith! These women, Exodus tells us, *feared God* and so did not obey the king of Egypt. We cannot let the courage and vision of these women go unnoticed. This is much, much bigger than disobeying your ranking officer. These women disobeyed the direct order of the king of Egypt. Shiphrah and Puah were feisty, as Pastor Niquita called us to last week.

How these women came to fear God we will never know. But they have been transformed such that their renewed minds gave them the clarity and the courage to refuse to enact the evil commanded by the king. In response, the king commands **all** his people to drown Hebrew baby boys in the Nile River. And his people complied, apparently without objection. The king's citizens had been formed as patriots who pledged their allegiance to him and so had conformed to his small world.

Thank goodness Shiphrah and Puah were not alone in their protest against an evil king. Next we read of the mother and sister of the baby Moses, who used a basket to save him from the Egyptian people who believed in their king. We should pay special attention here to the "basket" Moses is placed in because the author of Exodus uses the same Hebrew word used to refer to the "ark" in Genesis – the only two places in the Bible! God is all over this insubordination business because God is the true king, and God is with God's people. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. The point I want to make here with Moses' mother and sister and then, with the very daughter of the Egyptian king, is that these women don't believe in the king. God has transformed them by the renewing of their minds.

We all need God's help to believe in the kingdom. The kings of this world can be pretty convincing when they fire their missiles and march their armies. When Paul says, *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds*, he might as well have said, "Do not believe in kings, believe in the kingdom." The world believes in kings or Presidents or dictators. But not Christians. Our minds are transformed, renewed by the Holy Spirit.

Believing in the kingdom in a world that believes in kings can get you into trouble. Strike that. Let me rephrase: Believing in the kingdom will require us to be a people who can face trouble with conviction and courage. This world and its kings are not at all pleased with rivals. But we are subjects of the King of heaven and earth, as Peter discovers today. It's no coincidence that Peter's discovery and confession occur in Caesarea Philippi. This is a place of religious and political significance. Caesar Augustus claimed to be divine -- "Son of the Divine One"-- and Philip was the puppet king of the areas east and northeast of Galilee.² Caesarea Philippi was named by "Herod the Great after he built there a temple to Caesar Augustus" and then it was "renamed by his son Philip, who . . . renamed it after Tiberius Caesar and himself."³ Kings who wanted people to believe in them and nothing else named this site. But Peter would not bend the knee. At Caesarea Philippi -- a monument to the kings of this world -- Peter confessed that Jesus is *the Messiah, the son of the living God*. Here Peter claims Jesus as the Anointed King of the world! Peter's confession and our faith in Jesus is political all the way down.

We worship a King this world does not know. What's more, we worship a Crucified King who would rather be killed than kill, a King who, in the face of evil and violence, submitted rather than counter it with force. Jesus Christ is our King and our crucified King calls us to be the crucified people of his kingdom. We see this in the next few verses, when Jesus explains that he will *undergo great suffering . . . and be killed . . .* (16:21), and then tells his disciples, *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me* (16:24).

Even though we'd love to read Jesus' invitation metaphorically, he means it quite literally. Here Matthew uses the word "ekklesia" for the first time in his gospel, and he will use it again only one more time. No other gospel uses this Greek word for church -- ekklesia -- which means, a "congregation called out." We are called out to be a people who will die for our King. Not kill, only die. Are we a church who is capable of following King Jesus to the cross?

Believing in the kingdom does not make sense for those who are conformed to this world. Christians see and say and do things that are absurd if what we say about Jesus is not true. Our lives must be aligned to the gospel, which we believe and trust is true. The former pastor of the New Bethel Baptist Church in Washington D.C., Walter Fauntroy,

² Nickle, *The Synoptic Gospels*, 52.

³ M. Eugene Boring, *Matthew*, NIB 8, 343.

“said that when Rosa Parks sat down in the front of the bus, ‘she was making a statement as to whether or not God could be trusted.’”⁴ I am here today to say, God can be trusted. Today we are invited to trust in the kingdom of God with the whole of us – *to present our bodies as a living sacrifice. . . which is our spiritual worship*. Can you believe in the kingdom with your body? Believing in the kingdom in this way will cost us our lives, but we know God is waiting for us on the other side of death with arms wide open, waiting to receive us.

Losing our lives will be difficult. But we are not alone. We have each other. And we join a great cloud of witnesses like Shiphrah and Puah and Miriam and Peter and Paul. What’s more, these witnesses have given us great gifts to help us become people capable of following Jesus, even to the cross. One of the gifts we received earlier in Psalm 124. Can we pray this psalm together, one more time?

If it had not been the Lord who was on our side—let Israel now say—if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us; then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us; then over us would have gone the raging waters. Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us as prey to their teeth. We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped. Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

May God give us eyes to see and bodies bold enough to follow Jesus, wherever he may lead us. May we be a people who place our hope in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. Amen.

⁴ Will Willimon, quoting from Richard Lischer’s *Preacher King*, in Willimon’s *Who Lynched Willie Earle?*, 41.