

## Shrewd Discipleship

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

27 August 2023

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

### Psalm 124

124:1 If it had not been the LORD who was on our side -- **let St. Paul's now say** --

124:2 if it had not been the LORD who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us,

124:3 then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us;

124:4 then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us;

124:5 then over us would have gone the raging waters.

124:6 Blessed be the LORD, who has not given us as prey to their teeth.

124:7 We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped.

124:8 Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

Today we learn that *if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, our enemies would have swallowed us up alive. Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.*

I'd like to explore three questions this morning. First, what does it look like for the Lord to be on our side? Second, what do God's ways tell us about God? And third, what does it all mean for our discipleship?

So *what does it look like for the Lord to be on our side?* Our Exodus lesson helps us answer this one. Today's reading begins with one of the best lines in all of Scripture: *Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.* This is an eloquent way of saying, *we have a problem and the problem goes all the way to the top.* Joseph, you might remember, was God's tricky way of saving Israel and all Egypt from famine. His brothers sold him into slavery, but what they intended for evil, God made good. The problem today is that the new king has no interest in Joseph or God, and so he sets about securing his power.

The king does what the kings of the world do: he wields the sword. He thinks he's being shrewd, but his tools of oppression and slavery are the same ruthless tools

that kings and emperors have always used. Predictably, the king resorts to killing his slaves in a fearful effort to maintain majority rule. There's nothing shrewd about the king's actions. His actions are boring, just like sin. They're predictable, destructive, and all too common.

This morning I'd like to suggest instead that it was the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah, Moses's mom, Moses's sister, and the daughter of Pharaoh who display shrewdness. To be shrewd means to be sharp and astute, but more fundamentally, I want us to understand shrewdness as a kind of focused attention to God and careful judgment concerning God's will. Christians call this discernment. This discernment can be understood as the difference between strategy and tactic.

Theologian Sam Wells draws on the work of French philosopher Michel de Certeau to distinguish between the strategies of the powerful and the tactics of the oppressed. He does this in his book *Improv*, but more recently in an article where he explains, "A strategy builds a citadel, and from its control base makes forays into the hinterland. A tactic has no home base, nowhere to store its booty, and survives by hand-to-hand encounters on the ground."<sup>[1]</sup> The powerful of this world use strategies, but the God we see in Jesus is tactical. Jesus, remember, had nowhere to lay his head, and so he was always on the move, engaging people on the ground, where they lived.

Today I'm inviting us to understand shrewdness as the tactical approach of God's people. Shrewdness requires a focused attention to the reality that without God, we will fail. We need God on our side because the strategies of this world are not the tools of Kingdom people. Tactics are what shrewd disciples employ when facing the strategies of the powerful.

We see this all over our story from Exodus. In today's reading, Shiphrah and Puah shrewdly deliver the Hebrew babies despite the king's murderous command, Moses's mom shrewdly hides her baby in a basket before placing him into the Nile, Moses's sister shrewdly suggests Moses's mom to serve as a wet nurse for the basketed baby, and Pharaoh's daughter shrewdly offers wages to Moses's mother to raise Moses, whom she knew to be a Hebrew baby.

Years ago, Mathias Zahniser preached a sermon he titled "Outfoxing Herod" and today we see several women outfoxing the King. Today we learn that the Lord's being on our side often involves a good deal of outfoxing, of shrewdness, by God's people.

The last time I preached this text, I pointed out that “Shiphrah and Puah outwitted the king through their ingenuity and creativity. They improvised. They did what they knew best: delivered babies, in direct opposition to Pharaoh’s brutal policy, and God preserved their lives.

We don’t know if Shiphrah or Puah delivered Moses himself, but we do know that their faithful resistance created a world where the Hebrews continued to bear children. Because of Shiphrah and Puah, the brutal racism of the Pharaoh, taskmasters, and Egyptian people could not prevent God’s purposes or God’s people.” The king’s violent strategy was overcome by Shiphrah and Puah’s shrewd tactics.

So in answer to the first question, *what does it look like for the Lord to be on our side?*, I suggest that it looks like God bringing good out of evil through the shrewdness – the, creativity, discernment, and faith – of God’s people. We see this all over the stories of Scripture, but most clearly, we see this in Jesus, which leads us to our next question:

*What do God’s shrewd ways tell us about God?* Well, that God is shrewd. Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi shows this clearly. Many things are going on here, but let me just name three that underline the shrewdness of God.

First, God reveals God’s self to an unassuming fisherman and not a religious leader, designated prophet, king, or emperor. Here we have a regular guy, a fisherman, identifying and announcing the true identity of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. In God’s shrewdness, he picked a foolish proclaimer to shame the wise.

Second, Peter’s announcement takes place at a site loaded with political symbolism. The city of Caesarea Philippi memorialized the Roman Emperor and Philip the tetrarch. Peter’s statement is one of political resistance and revolution because he here announces someone far greater than the Emperor. In God’s shrewdness, Jesus picks this political site to reveal himself as the true Son of the living God, contrary to the Emperor’s very same claim about himself.

Third, Jesus himself is a shrewd Messiah. During Peter’s day, there were many expectations swirling about the Messiah. People expected a King like David, or a Prophet like Elijah, or a Political Revolutionary like Judas Maccabeus who would stomp out the Romans for good. But instead, God’s messiah was Jesus – an unassuming man from Nazareth with poor parents, without powerful connections, or political network. Instead of a palace, he had nowhere to lay his head. Instead

of a military stallion, he would travel by foot and one day, ride a donkey. Instead of a political takeover, the Romans executed him like an everyday slave in their everyday Roman way. In God's shrewdness, Jesus defied Jewish expectations of the Messiah.

Jesus's crucifixion is one of the greatest acts of divine shrewdness in the history of the world. Early Christian theologians describe Jesus's death as a great Divine trick on the Devil. We'll call it a tactic. Origen imagines that it's like Christ the king disguised himself as a citizen of his enemy, who then persuades the people ruled by his enemy to return to his rule. St. Augustine likened Christ's saving work to a mousetrap that catches the devil, but my favorite description is a fishing one offered by Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory suggests that in the cross, the deceiver (the devil) is deceived by Jesus. Gregory imagines that Jesus uses his human flesh as bait for the devil to swallow up, but when he did this, he swallowed the hook of Jesus's divinity, which the devil cannot contain. Jesus conquered the devil with a shrewd tactic.

God is shrewd. God's ways are shrewd. And now we're well on our way to answering our last question: *what does this all mean for our discipleship?* It follows that we are to be shrewd disciples of Christ. This, I think, is what Paul means when he talks about being transformed by the renewing of our minds. It takes renewed minds to see and embrace Jesus as messiah. It takes renewed minds to embrace Jesus's kingdom, which he likens to a mustard seed. A mustard seed. Think about that. It's more like a weed that grows into a bush-house for birds than a great sequoia that stands over all other trees. Parables give us snapshots of the kingdom and provide us brain exercises to renew our minds and expectations for our God who is shrewd, creative, and tactical.

For Paul, one aspect of our transformation is learning to think differently about ourselves. It's not about you, or your ministry, or your agenda. It's about *our* ministry as Christ's body. We are members of one another, and we need each other to be faithful. It's not about you. It's not about me. It's about God, and God invites us to be shrewd people in a violent world that show the world what it is not, but helps it see what it can be.

I need to offer a word of caution that helps us identify whether we're being faithful as a church. If we find that we're not being shrewd – being discerning, courageous, tactical – then it's possible that we're not being faithful. It's possible that we are living as strategic Egyptians rather than tactical Israelites, that we're

using numbers and power to exert our will rather than discerning together what the will of God is.

Sam Wells calls this a “strategy church” and we need to be on the lookout that we don’t become this. A strategy church, according to Sam, assumes that “Jesus ascended before he’d actually finished his work amongst us, and that therefore it falls to us, his beloved and chosen followers, to complete the work he was too busy or distracted to attend to.” A strategy church may have a hard time finding comfort in the prayer of Psalm 124 because it doesn’t need the Lord on its side to succeed because it has a strategic plan. If we can’t make the words of Psalm 124 our own, we should beware that the Lord is not on our side and that we have been employing the power politics of the world.

But a tactic church, or what I’m calling a shrewd church, assumes God is at work all over the place and looks for opportunities – even in the daughter of Pharaoh – for faithful discipleship, witness, and ministry. A tactic church assumes that God is bigger than our imaginations and so expects to find resources and allies for faithfulness in what others might consider unlikely places. Discerning the shrewdness of God, the tactic church expects to discover the Spirit at work in unlikely people like Shiphrah, Puah, Pharaoh’s daughter, and even Peter. The tactic church has the eyes to see and faith to follow an unlikely Messiah like Jesus.

The world, like the king of Egypt, thinks and moves in terms of numbers and power. Violence, oppression, and possession are the tools of the world. But in God’s shrewdness, God shows us that Love is the real power, and it’s self-giving and generous. The currency of the kingdom is faithfulness and self-emptying love. Kingdom people shrewdly outwit the powers and principalities of this world through faithful discernment and shrewd tactics, like the Hebrew midwives, like the sister of Moses, and like Jesus.

Make no mistake, shrewdness does not mean that we will not suffer. We have ample evidence to the contrary. But shrewd living is faithful living in a world that killed the Author of Life. And the good news is, the cross is not the end of the story. As Jesus promises Peter, the gates of Hades will not prevail against Christ’s church. We can be confident that by shrewd discipleship we are faithfully imitating the God whose ways are shrewd and who makes a way out of no way. Thanks be to God.

<sup>11</sup> S. Wells, “The Pandemic and the Shape of Church,” Living Theology Forum (March 2021). Accessed 24 August 2023:

<https://www.livingtheology.cuf.org.uk/blog/shape>