

Preserving Life

[Exodus 1:8-2:10](#)

[Psalms 124](#)

[Romans 12:1-8](#)

[Matthew 16:13-20](#)

How many of you are familiar with the Greek God Pan? He has horns and the lower body of a goat. Maybe this is embarrassing to admit, but when I first learned about Pan, I imagined Mr. Tumnus from *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. After all, the faun from CS Lewis's novel is half goat and half man, right? Kind of, but not exactly. Fauns are mythical creatures, but they are peace loving and romantic. There are also Greek satyrs which are similar, but they are a rowdy partying crowd. Pan is something altogether different. In fact, Pan is the one from whom we get the word panic. Pan is considered a god, raging and fierce. He is the enemy of those who wander in lonely places, suddenly assaulting them with terror and death.

Last week we talked about Mount Hermon. In the far north of Israel, just below Hermon, is a 130-foot-tall rock wall. At the base of the wall is a cave and deep within that cave is a mountain spring. That spring is the headwaters of the Jordan river. When we think of the Jordan, we imagine the peaceful, verdant place where Jesus was baptized. But for thousands of years, the cave housing this spring was considered the gateway to the underworld. This was once the site of worship for the Canaanite god Baal, who insisted that infants be thrown into the waters to satisfy his rage. By the 3rd century BC, the Greeks and then the Romans had turned this site into a place of worship for Pan. It is a deep cave, and Pan worshipers threw goats in from the ledge far above. If the sacrifice floated up or if blood poured out from below into the river, then the god was said to have not accepted the sacrifice and the one offering would spend their life in panic waiting for retribution.

This cave is located in Caesarea Philippi. The city is named for Caesar, the Roman imperial authority, and Phillip was the ruler of this particular province. Hence, Caesarea

Philippi. It is here, standing on ground claimed by a pagan God and an imperial ruler, that Peter makes his counterclaim regarding Jesus' deity and authority. And to punctuate Christ's supremacy, standing in front of a 130-foot imposing stone wall, Jesus claims that the rock upon which his Kingdom would be built was this unimposing fisherman turned disciple, Peter. See, The Author of Life does not require the fearsome terror of a pagan deity or the imperial authority of Rome, even if it was the most powerful empire of its time. In Christ's kingdom, it is the unassuming, the small, and seemingly powerless who God uses to demonstrate the infinite power of Heaven.

Those who came to worship at this temple in Caesarea Philippi lived in terror of the god who hid behind the gates of the underworld. Jesus handed the keys of Christ's Kingdom to Peter and claimed supremacy over those fearfully crouching behind Hades' gates. When the Son of The Living God shows up, the one death could not hold, and the gates of heaven are unlocked, the power of the Prince of Peace will prevail against the gates of Hades. Death may appear powerful, but Jesus came to open the way of life. In God's Kingdom, life always overcomes death.

Our psalmist speaks to exactly what the disciples were encountering standing above that cavernous spring. Remember, in the literature of the Ancient Near East, deep water was symbolic of the battle between primeval chaos and the source of life. Without the Lord, those waters are indeed raging and terrifying. But because we stand in the name of the Lord our God, we find help. Our Lord is never overcome. Our God is the God of Life.

Serving the Lord of Life brings us comfort, but the work of the Kingdom is to bring that life to others. And sometimes serving this Kingdom will involve risk and sacrifice. Paul tells the Romans we are to be living sacrifices. Sometimes we get it in our heads that we must be extraordinary people to matter. But in today's reading from Exodus, we see examples of what that sacrifice looked like for a couple of women who were entirely unremarkable, held no status or authority, and were still used to bring the life of God in the face of death.

Pharaoh, the most powerful man in the known world, issued a command: every Hebrew boy born was to be thrown into the Nile. He was doing what empires do. He was managing a population he feared by eliminating its future. And the women who stood between that imperial decree and the lives of those children were not generals or priests or anyone with a title. They were Hebrew midwives. Shiphrah and Puah. **Their** names are recorded. Pharaoh isn't even named here. He's simply called the King of Egypt. But the names of two seemingly powerless women are memorialized forever.

They feared God more than they feared Pharaoh. So, they let the boys live, and when Pharaoh summoned them to account for themselves, they lied to his face and got away with it. The text doesn't wring its hands about the lie. It just says God dealt well with the midwives, they were given families, the people multiplied, and the empire's plan failed. The resistance was not organized. It was not powerful. It was two women, working in the shadows, doing what they knew to be right, one child at a time.

God creates life. And God's people participate in that creative work by protecting it, by standing against the forces, large and small, that would unmake it. Pharaoh's work was chaos and death dressed up as policy. Shiphrah and Puah's work was the opposite. They were, without any grand self-understanding, co-creators with the God of Life.

This is exactly what Paul is describing in Romans. He calls us to offer our bodies, not just our beliefs, not just our intentions, but our actual physical selves, as living sacrifices. The word he uses for transformation is the Greek metamorphosis. Not information. Not even inspiration. Metamorphosis; a complete change of form, from the inside out. And then he says something that cuts against every instinct we have: don't think of yourself more highly than you ought. The Kingdom does not run on rank or reputation. It runs on every member fully and faithfully using what they've actually been given: prophecy, service, teaching, generosity, leadership, compassion... offered wholeheartedly, without inflation and without false modesty.

But hear me. That is not an invitation to make ourselves smaller than we are, or to let modesty become an excuse for withholding what God has given us. Shiphrah and Puah didn't wait until they felt ready, or important, or certain they could make a difference. They just did the next right thing with what they had, one child at a time.

This is where last week's sermon about unity presses into us again, but with a firmer hand. We are one body, yes. We act together, yes. But Paul is also naming something Shiphrah and Puah already knew. When the priorities of empire directly contradict the purposes of God, when obedience to the system means participating in death, that is when the body resists. Not with panic. With the quiet, persistent, costly faithfulness of people who fear God more than they fear Pharaoh.

I visited this cave at Caesarea Philippi myself. It is beautiful in the way that genuinely ancient places are beautiful, mountains, cool river water, the sound of the spring moving through stone, and peaceful birds singing in nearby trees. There is something faintly sinister about the cave itself, even now. But what struck me most was the ancient pillars of the Augustan temple still standing nearby, or rather, not standing. Ruins. The empire that built them is gone. The gods Baal and Pan are no longer worshipped there. The panic has not prevailed. And the spring that once represented the gateway to the underworld still flows, still feeds the Jordan, still waters the land below. Christ's Kingdom is still bringing life. And the gates of Hades have not prevailed.

In a moment we will come to this table, one body, fed by one bread, and we will be sent back out into the world as members of one another. Not as people with power or status or authority, but as people who have been transformed enough to know what we are for: preserving life, resisting death, offering what we have, showing up where we are. Like two midwives in Egypt whose names outlasted the empire that tried to silence them.

May we be a people who are that faithful. May we be that unafraid.