Paying Attention to the Right Things
By Rev. Emily Chapdelaine, 10.4.26

Last Sunday, Ellen reminded us of exactly how difficult it can be to hear God amongst all the noise and activity around us. She reminded us that God is with us all the time, but that our awareness of God is sometimes lacking. And why wouldn't it be? In the year of our Lord 2026, the greatest commodity is our attention. In a paper for Georgetown University, student Rai Hasen Masoud writes about the attention economy as a threat, not just a cultural shift. Masoud defines the attention economy as a "system [that] treats cognitive focus as a scarce resource to be algorithmically extracted, packaged, and monetized by dominant technology platforms." Before this period of time, I am not sure we have ever considered our attention a finite resource. Yet as a new parent who tried to work and care for my child at the same time, I can say for certain that my attention is very much a finite resource. In this age where our attention is now currency, the media we consume acts as a broker, placing advertisements in front of us and then analyzing our response to create more targeted advertisements based off of the attention we are giving away. Global digital advertising revenue from 2022 was estimated to be $567 billion, I can only imagine what it is today. Lest you are thinking, I don't have social media, I don't go on my phone or computer, your attention is still a commodity that media companies are vying for. The creation of 24/7 news channels is all about attention too. Since all media companies want our attention, they are not always offering us that which is good, that which promotes our well being or edification. Our brains are wired to attend to things we view as emergencies or crises, and so our media companies are feeding us sensationalized content that provokes our anxiety and our anger. What do our brains do to assuage our anxieties and stoke our anger? We seek more information, we want to know more. If we find the right piece of information, we can be comforted that something like *that* will never happen to us. If we find the right piece of information, our anger will be justified, it will be righteous. And so we continue to engage with whatever viral content is most disturbing, seeking information rather than sitting with our feelings and listening to God. We give away our attention, this valuable finite resource, for free, to the detriment of our hearts and minds. Now, I could talk about the attention economy and what technology is doing to our brains ALL DAY, but I promise it is relevant to the scripture we read.

The story of the midwives is almost always treated as the prologue to the story of Moses. We either skip it entirely or rush past it, hardly *paying attention* to the pharaoh or the midwives. But this little section of Exodus has more to say than simply setting the scene for Moses to be born. One of the things I learned in seminary is how to read between the lines of stories in scripture. If I *pay attention* and don't take the story at face value I usually come up with a lot of new questions and observations. For example, this story is a tight 15 verses, and yet, numerous things happen that logistically would have taken years. It's entirely possible that these 15 verses take place over the span of an entire decade, we simply do not know and the Bible doesn't tell us. In these 15 verses, Pharaoh has to sow division across his land and make a bunch of new laws enslaving people, then the Israelites have to continue multiplying at least long enough to become a nuisance, then Pharaoh has to have the idea to call the Hebrew midwives, they have to disseminate Pharaoh's orders, and then Pharaoh has to notice that the people are still multiplying. I am all too familiar with how long it takes to grow a baby, let alone enough of them to be a noticeable problem. So there is a lot logistically happening that isn't explicitly stated, but is important to the story.

Now, Pharoah is not a tech billionaire, but he knows a little something about attention and propaganda. "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Let us pause and think about that for a moment. Up to this point, the Israelites had not yet been enslaved. There is no indication that they want to leave Egypt. There is no indication of animosity between the Israelites and the Egyptians. Further, the Israelites cannot already be more numerous and more powerful, otherwise they would not have allowed themselves to be enslaved. Whatever executive orders Pharaoh used to enslave the Israelites and make their lives bitter would have been alarming. No one is just quietly agreeing to be a slave and do that back breaking labor for free unless there was a threat of violence, in this case, state sanctioned and executed violence. The only thing that Pharaoh says that is true is "they will increase." You see God commanded them to be fruitful and multiply all throughout Genesis, and they were fruitful and they did multiply. Pharaoh is manufacturing this fear, this anxiety about the Israelites. He doesn't really know anything about them, but he does know that he would like more affordable manual labor and there are some people over here who aren't exactly his people. Pharaoh wants to build, he wants to make money. So he fabricates fear and sells it to the people of Egypt so that they will accept the enslavement of their friends and neighbors. Pharaoh is decidedly not *paying attention* to anything but his selfish desires and how to make them a reality. He is not *paying attention* to ethics, or history, or even what is good for his own people.

The book of Exodus as a whole is trying to answer the question, who are the Israelites? To whom do they belong? It is unclear if Pharaoh knows the shared history between them and doesn't care or if he is ignorant of the whole thing. But if Pharaoh was *paying attention*, he would have learned or remembered that the God of the Israelites protected Egypt from great devastation. The people of Israel were invited to live in Egypt, because their God, the Living God, prepared Egypt for the coming famine and helped them to weather it. And God helps the Israelites weather this oppression too. "But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread." Then our scripture says this multiplication of Israelites is the reason the Egyptians came to dread them. I want to pause here again. I don't know about you, but I think if people I knew and liked, people I was not prejudiced against were suddenly demoted, made second class, separated in status from me, I think I would have some problems with that. In fact, I know I would have some problems with that because I have problems with the way our country treats people of color. So I believe here that the Egyptians were already prejudiced against the Israelites before Pharaoh enslaved them, and I believe that Pharaoh's own propaganda fueled, if not created, that prejudice.

But the Israelites, at least at this point in scripture, have been *paying attention*. They likely know that The Living God brought them into Egypt to protect them, and that God will bring them right back out again now that things are bad. The midwives Shiphrah and Puah are brought before the Pharaoh. Despite their semitic names, it is unclear if Shiphrah and Puah are Hebrew women working as midwives or if they are Egyptian women working as midwives for the Hebrews. I'm not sure it matters. Can you imagine being called to Pharaoh like that? A man the Egyptians revered as a god. I would be so stressed. What can he possibly want with them? It's not going to be good. Pharaoh gives his terrible order. They either verbally agree, or he simply dismisses them assuming that they will obey. I wonder if Pharaoh too forgets that he is not a god. Although Shiphrah and Puah are the only named midwives here, if the Israelites are truly as numerous as the text suggests, they are more likely the leaders in a kind of ancient midwifery guild. They would have gone back and had to gather other midwives in and share Pharaoh's order. An order that would have been the most recent in a long string of orders aimed at creating division and breaking the spirits of the Israelite people. From the scripture we learn that the midwives do not obey Pharaoh. They are the first to resist him. Scripture does not tell us how they came to this decision, but I do not think they spent long debating it. What Pharaoh asked of the midwives was antithetical to their spirit, their purpose, their very being. These women who had found meaningful work, coworking with God and each other to bring life into the world had been charged with dealing death. It is no accident that Shiphrah and Puah's names mean bright and brilliant. In this story, they are the light that shines in Pharaoh's darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

The midwives had been *paying attention*, and they remembered The Living God. They felt the wrongness of this order in their bodies, their minds, and their spirits, and they honored those feelings. Moreover, Shiphrah and Puah had been paying attention to Pharaoh. How long do you think it took for him to realize this plan wasn't working? The highest ruler in all the land *paying attention* to the midwives of his slaves? I don't think so. I'm not sure he even really knew anything about pregnancy and birth, that is how out of touch this man would have been. The midwives are able to continue helping to birth all the Hebrew children, because no one is *paying attention* to them. When Pharaoh finally does notice, they are able to use his own prejudice and propaganda against him. The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women. They are so strong and full of life, they just give birth before we get there. The Hebrew women are full of life, their very being resists death. This defiance of Pharaoh's order is the beginning of the Israelites' bid for freedom. Liberation ultimately comes to the people because these women *paid attention* to their bodies, their spirits, their vocation, and their call from God. They were able to do what Paul wrote about in Romans 12 as we read earlier. With the help of God and their community the midwives were transformed by the renewing of the mind and they discerned what was the will of God—what was good and acceptable.

Now, I said my diatribe in the beginning was related, and it is. Pharaoh's propaganda was powerful enough, and it was not fueled by hundreds of billions of dollars in profit. It didn't exist in the people's pockets or homes. We have to be clear eyed about our attention so that we can be good stewards of it. Some of us already have an attention deficit disorder and still we give what we have away, allowing ourselves to be enthralled by advertising and propaganda. I don't even mean only political propaganda, I mean people getting convinced to eat tide pods or that cauliflower pizza crust is good. We are not called to spend our one wild and precious life doomscrolling. Our attention is worth so much. Until we view our attention as a finite resource, until we understand it as the hottest commodity on the planet, we will struggle to pay attention to God and God's call on our lives. We get to decide how our attention is distributed. We get to decide whether we will abdicate responsibility and succumb to the fear, rage, and nihilism that modern pharaohs cultivate or whether we can stop and listen to our bodies, listen to our friends, listen to the earth, and listen to God.