

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

THE SHIFTING SANDS OF FORTUNE


*"Now there arose a new king over Egypt
who did not know Joseph. (Exodus 1:8)*

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"Just when we are safest, there's a sunset touch." Robert Browning gave this observation to the world. But Browning was neither the first nor the last to sense the fleeting character of security and success. All things come to pass. Nothing stays.

I want today to rescue a text from the Old Testament that bears on this point, a text that deserves to be better known. The verse describes a critical divide in the life of the Hebrew people. The words are a study in understatement. They read like cold history, but the heart that ponders them will feel the sorrow they convey. The text is Exodus 1:8. "Now there arose a new king over Egypt who did not know Joseph."

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These words report the end of an era. They refer to a watershed event, a crisis happening that would affect the temporal destinies of hundreds of thousands of people. "There arose a new king over Egypt who did now know Joseph."

The background of this word is well known to most of us. Joseph had saved Egypt from famine by predicting that seven years of plenty would be followed by seven years of nothing. He had been sold into Egypt as a slave by his brothers, but had risen in that kingdom to the rank of Prime Minister. His ability to interpret dreams, his strength in resisting temptation, his generosity in forgiving his brothers had made the eleventh son of Jesse a legend in his time.

The Hebrews fared well in Egypt thanks to

Joseph's popularity and power. They were accorded religious freedom, economic opportunity and fair treatment under law. But now all of this is to be changed. Joseph was dead. A new dynasty was coming into power. There would be "a new king over Egypt who did not know Joseph."

Just who this new king was we are not sure. It is likely to have been Seti I or Rameses II, depending on when we date the exodus. When the record tells us that this new king "knew not" Joseph, it is not speaking literally, for Joseph had already been dead some time. This is a figure of speech that suggests that the new Pharaoh cared nothing for Joseph or his services, that he was indifferent to the high regard in which Joseph's people had been held, that he felt no indebtedness to Joseph or his kind.

In short, in the language of our day, a new ideology was to govern Egypt. The old rapprochement that Joseph had achieved was finished. This new ruler came to be known as one of the Pharaoh's of the Oppression. He regarded the Jews as a threat to the life of Egypt and quickly enslaved them. He burdened them with heavy toil. He marked their sons for death at birth. A state of affairs was instituted that was to last for hundreds of years. It would be broken only by an exodus. "There arose a new king over Egypt who did not know Joseph."

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Faith must always interact with world occurrence. The soul has no life of its own that is not life in history. We live, at least in part, in response to the times. A decidedly different day opened for the Hebrew nation with the accession of a new Pharaoh to the throne. While there is no one single event to which I can point as the cause of it all, I suggest that a similar situation exists for Christians in the western world today. There are new ideas, new perceptions of reality, new attitudes about right and wrong and the meaning of existence in the world today that will make

life hard for us. The old accommodations, the former rapprochement that we once enjoyed are rapidly dissolving. Old favors that we had come to take for granted are being snatched away.

Let me try to illustrate what I mean. In the world community of nations we must live with the fact of diminishing American eminence. The causes for this are many and complex. They are not traceable to any one single individual. There is no Pharaoh on whom we can scapegoat it all. It is not the exclusive fault of either political party.

One of the fundamental reasons why we are suffering this diminishing national eminence abroad lies in the fact that in recent years we have backed too many wrong horses! We backed wrong horses in Cuba and the Dominican Republic, in Portugal, in Pakistan, in Spain, and, most ingloriously of all, in Vietnam. The nation as a whole has been living out of phase with the insurgent energies of history represented by the Third World.

George Jackson in his Letters From Prison wrote: "We have been made the floor mat of the world, but the world has yet to see what can be done by men of our nature, by men who have walked the path of disparity, of regression, of abortion, and yet come out whole.

"There will be a special page in the book of life for the men who crawled back from the grave. This page will tell of utter defeat, ruin, passivity, and subjection in one breath, and in the next, overwhelming victory and fulfillment."¹

Do you not sense with me that we are living out of phase with this insurgency? Our inability to deal with racism at home is a particularly disabling handicap at a time when Third World people are on the move. Past benefactions that we have scattered over the world across the years will not suffice. The old arrangements will not hold. The earlier accommodations

will not last. There is a new Pharaoh who knows not Joseph! It is under his regime that we must live.

Another illustration: As churchmen in the United States we must live with the fact that an increasingly secular culture is becoming increasingly hostile to us. There was a time in American life when the Protestant church was virtually a de facto Established church. We thought nothing of offering prayer in a public school, because in a de facto way we had parochialized the public school system. We thought nothing of the right to read the Bible in a public school. We had our baccalaureate services at commencement time. We had our Sunday blue laws on the books to help protect our day of worship. No one questioned our tax-exemption. It was readily conceded that we were performing some kind of merciful, helpful service to society as a whole.

As recently as the fifties and sixties in this century it was an "in thing" to be a part of the church scene. No politician would dare to run for office if somewhere in his biographical sketch it could not be reported that he had a church affiliation. Those who did not attend church services in those years were hard-put to explain their absence. Now, it would seem, those who come are hard-put to explain their attendance. There was strong social support for church activities. But now the climate has definitely shifted. A perceptible hostility has been unleashed against the church.

In a pluralistic society more and more people feel that no one point of view has the right to prevail unchallenged and receive tax benefits. Besides, the country doesn't really want a church that messes around with social issues and questions some of the assumptions of the Establishment. This is the present mood. There is a new king in Egypt and he knows not Joseph. The former accommodations are fast disappearing.

Let me suggest one other area in which I believe

this point is true. As champions of the ethic of individual effort and achievement we must live with the fact that this ethic is not enough in today's world. Deep in the American consciousness is the conviction that any problem that confronts us could be solved if each of us would give it his best effort. The reverse of this position is that every unsolved problem we have is traceable to a failure of individual personal effort.

This conviction, I believe, must be drastically modified. Given what bothers us today in this society, individualism has decided handicaps and limitations. We can't do business in today's world on the basis of Me, Myself and I, Inc., or Us, Ourselves and We, Inc.-meaning only our families.

Many of the things we are hurting for most must be purchased communally or not at all. There are some things that an individual by himself simply cannot buy or effect in our society, no matter how much he wants them or how hard he tries. No man by himself can lick inflation. We need some form of managed economy to curb our greed and selfishness. No man by himself can buy clean air. No man by himself can clean the rivers and lakes of America. No man by himself can purchase clean streets. No man by himself can preserve our wilderness areas and our parklands. No man by himself can bring our cities back to life. We will reach these goals together or not at all.

Years ago we would plunder a wilderness and move on to another one. Years ago we would pollute a lake and then press on to another. Years ago we would strip-mine an entire country into ugliness and then go on to look for another. But we are running out of space, and the exigencies of history are making us face up to what we have done to our environment.

We are now in a game of "Truth or Consequences" in which the consequences are far more severe and quicker in coming than our fathers knew. John Pairman Brown describes the stepped up importance of

today's decisions this way: "The reward of having climbed higher in the evolutionary scale or the historic process is that ever more difficult decisions are presented to us, with corresponding punishments for failure."²

There are problems extant in our world, in our society, in our city that will not yield to the simple application of individual effort. Since we Protestants have been the main generators of this ethic, we are the logical ones to begin to rethink its limitations. Collective actions and approaches are not sin. To absolutize the frail ethic of individual effort and achievement is to become a candidate for irrelevancy in this society. A new king reigns. A new day has dawned.

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I have tried to identify for you some of the factors that make us a mite uneasy as we face into a new year. I have chosen to do this rather than to deceive you with false illusions of well-being and unfounded hopefulness. There is a new Pharaoh on the throne.

But the Hebrews found that even through the new Pharaoh God was working His purpose out. For the Pharaohs of the Oppression were followed by the Pharaoh of the Exodus. The Exodus was followed, in due time, by entrance into the Promised Land.

America is shrinking in international eminence. But we are less than two hundred years old, and where did we ever get the idea that we were good enough, or wise enough, or sound enough to be a major power perpetually?

Secularism will prove hard for us, but perhaps out of this challenge we will become a leaner, more efficient church, more serviceable to Christ and the world, a church that will, instead of reflecting its culture, be a redeeming and cleansing force within that culture.

The individual ethic has impressive credentials. It has served us well and still has a place. But as we examine it critically we will come to see that this ethic has produced a competitiveness and selfishness among us that is no longer wanted or needed in today's world. As we work together on the problems that we have in common, it may well be that, under God, we will find each other in a new way.

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G. K. Chesterton said of H.G. Wells that whenever he met Wells he seemed to be returning from somewhere, never going anywhere. Christians have a sad way of communicating the feeling that they are returning from something. The new year calls us to look ahead. Instead of weeping copiously for old arrangements that used to be, let us recognize that the God of history is with us. That He leads us. And that He is faithful!

FOOTNOTES:

1. Jackson, George, The Prison Letters of George Jackson, p. 75, Bantam Books, 1970
2. Brown, John Pairman, The Liberated Zone, quoted in The Expository Times, p. 384, Vol. LXXXII, No. 2, September 1971, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh

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