August 23, 2026
"R is for …"
Exodus 1:8-22 / Romans 12:1-8
Pastor Tim

In true *Sesame Street* fashion, the Calvary letter of the day is R.

If worship today was an episode of *Sesame Street*, I would at this point turn the pulpit over to Elmo and friends to lead us in a delightfully cheery, cheery and danceable song all about the letter R—you know, highlighting a whole bunch of words the letter R makes possible.

And then, you can well imagine, the math-loving Count von Count might count for us the number of letters in the word, say, "ridiculous." (IN BEST COUNT VOICE!) R – I – D – I – C – U – L – O – U - S. 10 letters in the word "ridiculous."

And finally, an appearance by MY all-time favorite, Cookie Monster—RAVAGING (see what I did there?!) a fresh batch of oatmeal RAISIN cookies.

Instead, you're getting this sermon. (IN BEST ELMO VOICE!) Sorry to disappoint.

So instead of *Sesame Street*, we find ourselves in Egypt.

The Israelites, as God had promised, have indeed been fruitful and multiplied. And the new king of Egypt, the new Pharoah, is not happy.

Rewind a bit in the story and we note that Joseph—son of Jacob and Rachel, grandson of Isaac and Rebecca, great-grandson of Abraham and Sarah—had managed to rise up within the ranks of Egyptian politics; functioning as the Pharaoh's second-in-command after correctly interpreting the dreams of the Pharaoh.

We also note in our narrative rewind that it's Joseph, in response to widespread famine, who is largely responsible for the gradual impoverishment and enslavement of the Egyptians. And for the concentration of Egypt's wealth and the Pharaoh's land-grabbing power.

Joseph and his family settle in Egypt, but it is their descendants whose freedom will eventually be taken away, after Joseph dies and a new Pharaoh assumes power.

Like I said, the new Pharaoh is not happy. As you heard Carl just read for us: "The Egyptians subjected the Israelites to hard servitude, and made their lives bitter with hard servitude in mortar and bricks and in every kind of field labor. They were RUTHLESS in all the tasks that they imposed on them."

R is for … ruthless.

And it is in that context that we meet Shiphrah and Puah. If you did not know before today who Shiphrah and Puah were, are, you do now. And you should.

Enslavement is not enough for the Pharaoh. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. We know full well that where power is threatened, violence is often unleashed.

The Pharoah, operating from a place of fear, means to control the Israelites by killing off their newborn boys—a strategy that will be echoed by King Herod in anticipation of Jesus' birth, as that story goes.

But enter Shiphrah and Puah. And remember.

Two Hebrew midwives, and apparently midwives to ALL the Hebrew women. In spite of their Semitic names, it's not actually clear from the text whether they are Hebrews themselves, or Egyptian women serving the Hebrews. The Israelites.

And so we are left to consider the story in both circumstances, each providing a different layer. Either way, the Pharoah shares his new strategy to Shiphrah and Puah.

"When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live."

But Shiphrah and Puah have a strategy of their own. Their allegiance lies elsewhere. Fearing God, not the Pharoah, they simply "do not do as the king of Egypt commanded them." They do not do as the king of Egypt commanded them.

They let the boys live.

Let that sink in! Let this EXTRAORDINARY act of civil disobedience sink in. Let the EXTRAORDINARY risk they are taking sink in—claiming agency within a profoundly imbalanced social and political power dynamic.

Let their EXTRAORDINARY courage sink in. Just as the Pharaoh's RUTHLESSNESS is echoed by King Herod some two millennia later, so Shiphrah and Puah's REFUSAL is echoed by the magi, those astrologers from the East who traveled a great distance—led by a star in the sky—to pay tribute to the newborn Jesus, but who then defy King Herod's order to return to him and so reveal Jesus' location.

Instead, they go another way. Shiphrah and Puah go another way.

R is for … refusal.

David Daube calls their refusal to comply with the Pharoah's instruction "the oldest record in world literature of the spurning of a governmental decree." That's Shiphrah and Puah, y'all. Inspiring a long and ongoing line of nonviolent non-cooperation with the powers that be.

And so R is also for … resistance. Resisting Empire. Fearing God and not the Emperor, the Pharoah, Shiphrah and Puah hatched a plan—again, a creative and subversive strategy of their own to resist the Pharoah's strategy.

Like Rosa Parks long after them, they didn't just wake up one day and decide NOT to give up their seat on the bus. In the famous words of Frederick Douglass, "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

When confronted by the Pharaoh, they explain their defiance using deception—suggesting that the Hebrew women "are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." Pharaoh's a man, right—he has no idea!

As the great African American pastor, scholar and civil rights activist Howard Thurman noted, "Deception is perhaps the oldest of all techniques by which the weak have

protected themselves against the strong. Through the ages … at all of the stages of activity, the weak have survived by the fooling of the strong."

God is pleased. Shiphrah and Puah are blessed with families of their own.

But Pharaoh moves on to plan B, because that's what Emperors and emperors do. We know this. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Absolute power concedes nothing without a demand.

Immediately following our text this morning, the Pharaoh recruits all Egyptians—no longer just the midwives—to implement his strategy. Codifying into law that all Egyptian citizens are required to "throw Hebrew boys into the Nile" to drown.

Imagine. Actually, we don't have to imagine the evil, the horror, the complicity.

A precursor to the enslavement of Africans in this country, where ordinary white folk were effectively deputized to do the slavemasters' bidding. Baited with relative privilege to keep the racial caste system in place. Racism prioritized and normalized.

A precursor to Nazi Germany. Enough said.

A precursor to current Texas laws, for example, allowing and empowering private citizens to file civil lawsuits against anyone who performs, aids or abets an abortion, or who manufactures, distributes or mails medication abortion pills to Texas residents.

A precursor to the current mass deportation of immigrants in this country, where Immigration and Customs Enforcement, for example, is rapidly expanding its 287(g) program to literally deputize local police and sheriff's departments to do ITS bidding.

We don't have to imagine the evil, the horror, the complicity.

It would seem that Shiphrah and Puah's bold act of refusal and resistance is doomed to failure. The battle won, but not the war.

But not so, as the story continues.

In the very next chapter beyond our reading, a Hebrew son is born, apparently destined to be thrown into the river. But, like Shiphrah and Puah before her, another woman—his mother, later identified as "Jochebed" (YOKE)—joins the subversive refusal and resistance.

She hides her son for a few months, then makes the heartbreaking, excruciating, impossible decision– IMAGINE!—to put him in a basket and place him among the reeds at the river's edge.

Leaving his life to chance, or perhaps divine intervention, she is THAT desperate. Because that is how Empire works. Empire asserts power and control. Steals agency and choice. Breeds desperation.

But resistance to Empire is resistance to Empire.

None other than the Pharoah's daughter comes down to the river and finds the boy in the basket. And in her position of privilege, she rescues the baby, finds and pays his own mother to nurse him, and eventually adopts him. And names him Moses, or Mosheh.

That guy. Resistance to Empire from WITHIN the Empire.

Now let's be clear, here. This is not exactly a happy ending. This is not a JUST ending. Moses is effectively stolen away from his birth mother, like enslaved African children stolen from their families. Native children stolen away from their families and sent to white boarding schools, and adopted by white families.

But the story, nonetheless, remains a story of resistance to Empire. Part of the ongoing story of resistance to Empire. And in this and so many cases, resistance by women—women with and without privilege. Intersectionality matters. Intersectional justice matters. Intersectional solidarity matters.

Empires do not fall on their own. And they do not fall without solidarity between those who benefit from their existence and those who do not. History repeats itself when we continue to blame and scapegoat and target each other, to "other" each other—instead of directing our attention, and our resistance, where it belongs.

On and to the Empire itself.

And so the point here is that Shiphrah and Puah, two NAMED women of humble status in an utterly oppressive context, grease the wheels of change through their refusal to do what the king of Egypt tells them to do. At great risk to themselves.

Within the context of relentless cultural, religious, political, institutional sexism and patriarchy—within ancient Israel and within the biblical canon—it's a notable WONDER that we even know their names. They could just as easily have been recorded as two nameless midwives—long forgotten, like so many other women on whose shoulders the struggle for justice and radical social change stands.

But as it happens, it is squarely on their courageous shoulders that the whole trajectory of the Israelite civil rights movement stands. The Exodus and the escape from slavery in Egypt. The long and painful journey to the Promised Land.

As Kat Armas writes, "Pharaoh thinks men pose a threat to his power, but he overlooks the real threat: God is using the women to set the scene for liberation. Enslaved to patriarchal ideology, Pharaoh disregards the women's power and character. But scripture does not.

And she goes on, "The story reveals with pointed irony the fallacy of the patriarchal lie that men are more valuable than women. When Pharaoh decrees twice that the girls shall live, he is intensifying the very power—namely, the women's power—that will eventually lead to his undoing."

R is refusal and for resistance. Thanks be to God!

Which brings me to our other reading, from … well, as it happens … Romans. So sure, R is also for Romans.

We find in Paul's letter the compelling metaphor of one body with many members to describe what he calls the "body of Christ." To describe that all members of the one body serve different functions, that all are necessary to the overall health and well-

being of the body. This to confront dissension and division within the fledging Christian community in Rome.

But I want to focus otherwise this morning, specifically on verse 2: "Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

R is for renewing. R is for renewal.

The truth is that we CANNOT participate in refusing and resisting Empire, making way for the very kindom of God, unless we first allow our minds to be transformed by renewal. We CANNOT participate in refusing and resisting Empire in the world AROUND and BEYOND us unless we refuse and resist Empire WITHIN us. Within our own minds and hearts and bodies.

That is what Paul's talking about here. Non-conformity to the ways of Empire—"to this age." Or as other translations put it, "to the pattern of this world."

Empire is defined, above all, by fear and division. Sound familiar? The kindom of God—both within and without—is defined, above all, by love and community.

Love and community: that IS the will of God. That's what Paul describes as "good and acceptable and perfect." The "will of God" is realization, manifestation of the kindom of God. The "will of God" is not a mystery to be solved, as so many churches and Christian leaders would have us believe, but a gift to be opened and embraced and shared.

Friends, I don't need to tell you that we live in a world where it can be SO hard to open or sometimes even SEE the gift, much less embrace and share it.

In the midst of the daily or at least near-daily onslaught of sowed fear and division—within and without—it is a spiritual discipline—in fact, it is our shared divine calling—to cultivate love over fear, within and without. Love for ourselves, our neighbors, our enemies, and so for our God.

It is a spiritual discipline to NOT conform to fear, and instead allow divine love to renew and so transform not just our minds, but our hearts and our bodies. To OPEN our minds. To SOFTEN our hearts. To STRENGTHEN our bodies.

Fear is easy, love is not. And so R is also for resilience. Our capacity for resilience to the constant assault of Empire and Empire's ways and Empire's messaging is strengthened by the constant, intentional, disciplined renewal of our minds, our hearts, our bodies.

Through worship. Through prayer and meditation. Through silence and study. Through life-giving, love-sharing, community building.

So there you have it. The letter of the day is R.

R is for renewal, which BUILDS resilience, which EMPOWERS refusal, which EMBOLDENS resistance. And which, as active members of the one, interconnected, interdependent body of Creation, along Dr. King's long arc of the moral universe, leads to … revolution.

Nothing short of the very kindom of God.

May it be so, within and without.