Invitation to the Table

International educator Sir Kenneth Robinson (no relation) tells about a six-year-old girl in a drawing class. She rarely paid attention, but that day, she was focused, so the teacher went to her and asked, "What are you drawing?" and the little girl said, "A picture of God."

The teacher said, "But nobody knows what God looks like." And the little girl smiled and said, "They will in a minute."

Kids will take a chance. If they don't know, they'll have a go. They're not afraid of being wrong.

Robinson said, "If you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original. If you're not prepared to be wrong; and by the time we're adults most people have lost that capacity."

We become afraid of being wrong, and we run our businesses that way—and we run our churches that way: we stigmatize mistakes. And most education systems are run so that the worst thing you can do is make a mistake. The result is that we're educating people out of their creative capacity, and many brilliant, highly creative people think they're not.

Robinson concludes: "We have to be very careful to see our creative capacities for the richness they are and our children for the hope that they are. Our task is to educate the whole person."

And that'll preach. I'd choose today's epistle reading and I'd use the J.B. Phillips translation: *"Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all God's demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity."*

I don't know what the little girl's picture of God looked like; but at this Table a loaf and a cup remind us of one who bears a strong family resemblance.

Our Communion Hymn is #392, "Draw Us in the Spirit's Tether."

Pastoral Prayer

- Pete: Pete Kennemer, Room 1062, Baptist Health Medical Center—Little Rock, 9601 Baptist Health Drive, Little Rock, AR 72205.
-

Transforming God, in Jesus Christ you have come to us as the Messiah, your anointed and expected One—God with us, God for us. In him a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. He is Son of the living God, equal with you, and yet he gave that up to became flesh—to share our humanity. In him you meet us in grace, not as an idea to be grasped but as a savior to be followed.

In Him we see you. Help us to greet you as you truly are, not as we imagine or wish. Free us from our tightly held assumptions. Open our hearts to receive you full of mercy, full of truth, full of the cross-shaped love of Jesus.

Give us grace not only to speak his name, but to walk in his steps. Mold us into a people who live what we confess: that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God; and we accept him as savior to justify us and as Lord to lead us.

Amen.

Breaking the World's Mold

EXODUS 1:8-2:10 (NRSVUE) *Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. 9He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. 10Come, 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." 11Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor… 15The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 16"When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live." 17But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. 18So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this and allowed the boys to live?" 19The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." 20So God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very strong… 2:1Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. 2The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. 3When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. 4His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. 5The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. 6When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. 7Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" 8Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. 9Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. 10When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."*

***

ROMANS 12:2 (J.B. PHILLIPS NT) *Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity.*

***

The Word of God for the people of God!

Let's do some interactive word association. I'll start a phrase, and you finish it. OK? Here's the phrase: "Life is _____."

St. Erma—Bombeck—wrote, "If life is just a bowl of cherries, why am I always in the pits?" And Scot Peck opened his best-selling book, *The Road Less Traveled*, with this:

> "Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly understand and accept that life is difficult, then life is no longer difficult."

He followed up with:

> "The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are most likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers."

We arrived in Cairo just after midnight, and by the time we were checked into our

hotel, it was almost 3:00 AM. Dawn came very early! I got out of bed and pulled back the curtain and saw the sun peeking up between the Pyramid of Khufu (the Great Pyramid) and the Pyramid of Khafra, those monuments to narcissism and hubris built on the backs of slave labor. Later that morning as we climbed up the narrow passage to the burial chamber, I was imagining the residue of human blood, sweat and tears sealed between the stones.

Today, America is mired in debates about monuments to narcissism and hubris. Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann[1], describes how our culture clings to Egyptian ways: endless work with less pay, more and more production with fewer tools, while the profit flows up toward the top.

Brueggemann notes that Pharaoh's empire was fueled by a "myth of scarcity"—a perpetual fear of not having enough. Presbyterian pastor and psychoanalyst, Kenneth Kovacs describes that myth of scarcity: "...resources are, or are perceived to be, scarce, scarcity yields anxiety, anxiety of not having enough leads to accumulation, pathological accumulation leads to monopoly, and the need to maintain monopolies inevitably leads to violence."

In the 47th Chapter of Genesis, Pharaoh dreams that there will be a famine in the land. So, he gets organized to administer, control, and monopolize the food supply, and the principle of scarcity is introduced into the world economy. For the first time in the Bible, someone says, "There's not enough. Let's get everything." And the pattern is established: those who have the most are the ones who are most afraid there won't be enough.

Pharaoh hires Joseph to manage the monopoly, and when the crops fail and the peasants run out of food, they come to Joseph. And on behalf of Pharaoh, Joseph asks, "What's your collateral?" They give up their land for food, the next year, they give up their cattle. By the third year of the famine, they have no collateral left but themselves. And that's how the children of Israel became slaves to Pharaoh.

By the end of the chapter Pharaoh has all the land except what belongs to the priests, which he never touches because he needs their blessing. The myth of scarcity is introduced into the biblical narrative, creating a debate between the creation narratives' liturgy of plenty and the myth of scarcity—a debate that tears us apart still.

Brueggemann claims America clings to this Egyptian model through predatory, corrupted capitalism, consumerism, and the ruthless drive to accumulate wealth, even at the expense of our neighbors. He summarizes: "It is not accidental that the best graphic portrayal of this arrangement is a pyramid (on the back of a dollar bill)."

And today's Lectionary readings outline how God works to break that mold. The story is fascinating, not only in its plot, but more especially in its character development. Note how the narrator moves deftly from Egypt's vast, sprawling construction projects, to two small women, Shiphrah (meaning "beautiful") and Puah ("fragrant flower"). Parents should name their daughters after them. They "fear God," but they also have spunk, sass, courage. The initiate history's first act of civil disobedience!

The Bible rebukes empire, but in clever, sneaky ways. Why didn't Shiphrah and Puah kill the babies? "The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; they're so strong they give birth before we can get there." Was that really true? Maybe. Doesn't matter. They were heroic. Instead of blaming and feeling impotent in the face of massive power they did what they could. Heroes are like that.

[1] Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2014).

Thoreau reminded the world that "I was just obeying orders!" is not a valid defense. God's great heroes through history have blatantly disobeyed unjust laws. Three Hebrew youth thrown into the fiery furnace for disobeying Nebuchadnezzar's law to bow down before his golden idol; Peter, brought before the Temple police for teaching Jesus despite being ordered not to do that, said, *"We must obey God rather than men."* (Acts 5:29)

Small people changing the world: Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on the bus; four black college students sitting at Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina; a Baptist minister from Memphis, leading a march across the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, Alabama; a German pastor named Deitrich, defying Hitler; breaking the world's mold, following the pattern set by Jochebed, Moses' mother, hiding her son. Even Pharaoh's daughter! Rameses II, greatest of the pharaohs (and Bruce Epperly points out that it's no accident that this was the time God showed who's really God!) Rameses had 59 daughters! This one knowingly took into her home a Hebrew boy Pharaoh had been ordered killed.

When Moses's mother can no longer manage, in a moment of poignant sorrow and yet unquenchable hope, she places him in a basket and sends him down the Nile. The Hebrew word for basket, tevah, is used only one other time in Scripture: Noah's ark! Like the ark, this tevah had no rudder or sail, it floated randomly; yet, was God's hand in it somehow? I'm tempted to say Yes! But maybe it's better just to let the question linger–because there are times when most of us would fill in our opening phrase with, "Life is improvised."

How does one hide a child—keep him quiet for three months? Even now, there are moms weary and near despair, trying to work from home while also teaching. Even now, there are marginalized families also in despair! What is God asking of the church when life is so unsure for so many?

Bruce Epperly reminded me of Pope Francis' first trip away from Rome after his consecration. He went to Lampedusa, a Greek island where hundreds of Libyan immigrant bodies had washed ashore. He had an altar made from the wrecked boats of migrants and spoke of the place as a symbol of "the locked door between the worlds of affluence and poverty." His sermon was intended, writes Epperly, to "awaken the consciences of those who have forgotten how to weep over the plight of the poor."

Life is improvised. Life is unsure. Life is difficult. But for those who ask, "How can a loving God allow suffering?" God's answer is Shiphrah and Puah and Jochebed and an obscure one of 59 daughters of Pharaoh and Peter and Rosa and Deitrich and Martin and Pope Francis, all of whom risked it all, not for personal gain, not for the benefit of Pharaoh, but for the greater good.

"…surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily distracts, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith…" Hebrews 12:1-2 (NRSVUE)

The question is, will we join that parade?

Pray with me.