

**Proper 16A, August 23, 2020, St. Anne's  
Exodus 1:8–2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1–8; Matthew 16:13–20**

If I told you that you could do something this week that would change the world would you be hopeful and excited? Or would you just smile politely and wonder how *long* my sermon is going to take? I rather suspect that most of you would fall into the ‘smile politely’ category – although hopefully not too many of you are already looking at your watch and wondering how long I’m going to talk for! Of course, the truth is that you **ARE** going to change the world with what you do or don’t do this week. Of course, probably not in any **big** way - although the reality is none of us know what the consequences of any of our actions will be. Our lives are all interconnected, and every action can ripple across time and space to ultimately affect the lives of millions. We call that the butterfly effect. So named from the illustrating story that says that a butterfly flapping its wings on one side of the world can cause hurricanes on the other. *Small* actions can add together in ways we don’t expect to cause *big* changes in the future.

I had an experience of the butterfly effect some years ago when I became the Rector of St. Anselm’s out at UBC. I was trying to find a way to engage with the UBC students and I decided to start holding Sunday evening dinners for them. The dinners started small but gradually attendance built. And over the years a community of students was built, made up of an interesting mix of young people. One of the side-effects of forming the group was that some of the young men and women started to *date* each other. In fact, 3 of the couples that formed as a result of the ministry got married, and at this point there are at least 5 children born to these couples. Now, of course, when I *planned* that weekly dinner it never occurred to me that I would change any of their lives by introducing them to their

future *spouse*, nor that I might impact the *world* through the resulting birth of people who might otherwise never have been born.

I was just trying to find a way to help the students connect to **God!** But it's an example of the ways our actions can have consequences, both good *and* bad, that we never expected. When the outcome is *negative* we sometimes refer to it as 'The Law of Unintended Consequences'. Which is - when efforts to fix **one** problem results in the creation of **new** problems.

Today's Old Testament reading has examples of unexpected and unintended consequences- both positive and negative - caused by the actions of the characters in the story. *Pharaoh's* actions are full of examples of the "Law of Unintended Consequences". Pharaoh wants to solidify his *power* and so he identifies a scapegoat to blame for the problems currently plaguing his nation. Sadly, this is not a move confined to **Pharaoh**. In trying to use the Hebrews as scapegoats Pharaoh is acting out of deep-seated *fear*. And the irony is that his fear-based actions are, in large part, *responsible* for actually *producing* the very things he's trying to avoid. His attempts to control the Hebrew population lead instead to its exponential increase! Females are of no account in his worldview and so he ignores the baby girls in his genocidal plans, but it's the *women* who thwart his plans and help bring about his downfall. His plan to turn the Hebrews into slaves and keep them from escaping the land, moves God to commission Moses to bring the people out. **Nothing** works out the way Pharaoh had hoped and planned!

But Pharaoh is certainly not alone in this experience. Sadly, if we're honest, I suspect we can **all** remember times when our own actions, especially those founded in fear or anger, resulted in making a situation *worse* rather than better.

Certainly I know I've been there – looking back with 20/20 hindsight wishing I'd done something differently. Of course, most of us don't have the ability, or thankfully the **desire**, to act on our fears in the horrifying way *Pharaoh* chooses to, or on as *public* a stage as the one in this story! But the principal is the same none-the-less. When **we** follow the path of fear or anger or the desire to control the outcome, we are pretty much **never** following *God's* plan. And unintended *negative* consequences are almost **guaranteed**.

But this story doesn't just have examples of negative unintended consequences – it's also full of examples of people changing the world for the *better* just by following their conscience and doing the **right** thing. Take the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah for example. Pharaoh orders them to kill all male Hebrew babies. But these two 'no-account females' refuse to obey *mighty Pharaoh* and they **don't** kill the boys. And when called to explain, they lie to Pharaoh and using all his own prejudices against him, tell him that the Hebrew women are vigorous like animals and so they deliver the babies before the midwives can arrive. And so the boys are saved and Pharaoh has to try a different plan.

This courageous act of civil disobedience changes history - for one of the boys that ends up being spared from Pharaoh's genocide is **Moses**, who grows up to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian captivity and bring them to the Promised Land. And it all starts **here**, with women willing to say "no" to an act of injustice. I doubt very much they thought they were changing the world. But they *were*, just by being faithful and heeding the call of their conscience.

**None** of us *knows which* of our actions could be the one that results in some major change down the road. Maybe you'll give encouragement to a person who then

sees something in herself that she hadn't before, so that she in her own turn befriends someone *else* who was on the verge of giving up on life.... Or maybe you'll choose to stand up to someone who's acting in anger and help make a situation better rather than worse and *that* will ripple forward.... Or maybe you'll be moved to volunteer to ...read to kids at the local library and one of those kids will discover a passion for language and will grow up to be a great author.... or... who knows.

The things we do this week, and *every* week – our actions, decision, choices – **will**, in fact, ripple out with consequences both foreseen and unforeseen - for good **or** for ill, for the health **or** damage of the world. The question isn't *whether*, but **what**. *What* will **you** do this week and what *kind* of difference **will** that make in the world. Some of these actions may be big, bold, and courageous. Others may be small, hardly noticeable. And yet they **all** have the *potential* to ripple out, affecting countless lives. In today's reading, Shiphrah and Puah, two ordinary and seemingly unimportant people quietly stand up to a bully and tyrant, and in doing so set in motion actions that ripple across history. Who knows which actions it will be *today*, this week, this year that tip the balance towards major change.

So what **will** you do when I tell you that what **you** do this week **will** change the world? Will **you** choose to act out of courage, or fear? To act to change the world for the better, or for the worse? Because make no mistake – for better **or** for worse, you and *your* actions, today and *every* day, **will** change the world!