

## “Your Reasonable Act of Worship”

Exodus 1:8-2:10 • Psalm 124 • Romans 12:1-8 • Matthew 16:13-20

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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This is Pope Francis, the current head of the Roman Catholic Church. He is approximately the 266<sup>th</sup> pope in the history of the church. I say “approximately” because there were some periods in history when things got a little complicated or confused and it gets hard to count. The pope is not the head of *our* church, as we are not part of the Roman Catholic Church, but he is an extremely important Christian religious leader, perhaps *the* most important Christian religious leader on earth.

Do you know who the *first* pope was? If you said “Saint Peter,” you are correct. Simon son of Jonah, by birth a Jew, called by Jesus to be a disciple and an apostle, a member of Jesus’s special group of twelve. Jesus gave him the name “Peter,” which means “Rock.” Unlike later popes, he was married – the Gospels tell us that Jesus healed his mother-in-law. After Christ’s resurrection, he became one of the most significant of all the apostles. Later books say that Simon Peter made his way to Rome, and led the church there. He is said to have been the first bishop of Rome. Since Rome eventually became the center of the Roman Catholic Church, that also makes him the first pope. The word “pope” comes from the Greek word “pappas,” which was an affectionate word for “father” – kind of like “papa.”

The critical passage in the Bible that establishes Simon Peter as the head of the church, according to the Roman Catholic Church, is that passage you heard a few minutes ago from Matthew 16. Jesus asked his disciples to identify who he was, and Simon Peter gave the correct answer: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” Jesus praises him: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter [*petros*] and on this rock [*petra*] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” In the original Greek, it is very clear that when Jesus says “I give *you* the keys of the kingdom of heaven,” he is talking *very specifically to Simon Peter*, and not to the whole group of disciples, even though they were present. In English, our word “you” can refer either to a single person or to a whole group of people, but in Greek, those “you”s are very different. This “you” is singular, not plural. Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom of heaven to Simon Peter, and *only* to Simon Peter. That is why, in Christian art, Simon Peter is often depicted holding a set of keys. These “keys of the kingdom of heaven” are a symbolic representation of the authority of Jesus Christ. Jesus, it seems, endowed Simon Peter with a particularly unique authority, that set him apart from and superior to all the other apostles. At least, that’s the traditional interpretation of the Roman Catholic Church. The idea with the papacy is that this symbolic authority – the keys to the kingdom of heaven – has been passed down from one generation to the next, in a more-or-less unbroken line of succession of popes, from Simon Peter in the first century to Pope

Francis in the twenty-first. We do not recognize the pope as the head of *our* church, but at the same time we cannot ignore the very clear fact that, according to the Bible, Jesus gave Simon Peter a special and unique authority that he did not give to anyone else: the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

Let's leave Simon Peter for now, and turn our attention to the book of Exodus. This is the first of several weeks that will cover high points from the story of Moses and the Israelites' escape from slavery. This is a familiar story – most of you have probably seen Cecil B. DeMille's epic 1956 film *The Ten Commandments* starring Charlton Heston and Yul Brynner, or the 1998 animated film *The Prince of Egypt*. Several hundred years have passed since the small group of Israelites settled in Egypt to escape a famine during the days of Joseph. Now they are many in number – so many that they are more numerous than the native Egyptians – and the Egyptian Pharaoh feels greatly threatened by their power. So, first, he enslaves them, making them build great cities for the Egyptians. Then, he orders that the baby boys among the Israelites should be not be allowed to live. This is some *serious* evil!

There has been much debate among biblical scholars as to which Egyptian pharaoh it was who oppressed and terrorized the Israelites. We have a *lot* of records from ancient Egypt, but none of them mention these events. The Israelites, however, recorded the circumstances of their miraculous escape from Egypt both in prose and poetry, and wanted it never to be forgotten. The pharaoh most often identified with the pharaoh of the Exodus is Ramesses II, who ruled Egypt for more than 60 years in the 13<sup>th</sup> century before Christ. Official records we have from the reign of Ramesses do indicate that there were two conquered peoples who “made obeisance to him,” and it is very possible that one of those was the Israelites. The book of Exodus says that the Israelites built the cities of Pithom and Rameses for the Egyptians. Archaeologists have not yet been able to identify Pithom, although that city is mentioned in other historical sources outside the Bible. Rameses, on the other hand, was identified by archaeologists more than a century ago; this is the city that Pharaoh Ramesses II made his capital. At its peak, more than 300,000 people lived there, making it one of the largest cities of Egypt. This city is in the very northern part of Egypt. The Nile River flows north through Egypt to the Mediterranean Sea, and splits into a large number of different branches, creating an extremely fertile region about 100 miles long and 150 miles wide. Ramses was located on the east side of this Nile Delta.

There were, so the Bible tells us, two very courageous Israelite women. Their names were Shiphrah and Puah, and they were midwives. They defied Pharaoh's order to kill the baby boys. They even lied about it; they told Pharaoh that “the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” God did not object to this – indeed, the Bible says “God dealt well with the midwives.” God *approved* of what they did. There are times when circumstances and human decency *require* people to hide the truth in the face of evil – like the many courageous people who helped Jews escape the Nazis during the Holocaust, or, here in our own country, the people and churches who hid escaped slaves along the Underground Railroad. Shiphrah and Puah's allegiance was to *God*, not to Pharaoh, and their unwillingness to take part in this act of genocide might well be the earliest known case of civil disobedience anywhere in the world.

One of the babies they rescued was the son of a man named Amram – who was descended from Levi, the brother of Joseph – and his wife Jochebed. They hid their child for three months; then, when they concluded they could hide him no longer, Jochebed put her baby boy in a basket and hid him in the reeds along the river, praying for a miracle. Sure enough, none other than the *very daughter of Pharaoh himself* found the baby, and resolved to raise him herself, despite her father's edict. But she needs help. Miriam, the boy's older sister, offers to find an Israelite woman to nurse the child. Who does she find? Her own mother! So, as one of my Bible commentaries says, “Jochebed

may be the only woman in history to be paid for nursing her own child"! Pharaoh's daughter names him "Moses," which is similar to the Hebrew word for "draw out," for she *drew Moses out* of the river.

We're going to leave Moses in the household of Pharaoh's daughter for the time being. Let's turn now to the New Testament, once more to the book of Romans. Paul has been explaining some very complicated matters, but here he starts telling the Christians in Rome (and, by extension, us) how to live. The keynote is in the opening two verses, which now read as follows: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." I stumbled when I read that first verse. I'm accustomed to reading "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your *spiritual* worship." That's what the original NRSV said in 1989, and the RSV before that in 1952, and is also basically what the Authorized Standard Version said back in 1901. The change from "spiritual worship" to "reasonable worship" in the NRSV Updated Edition felt new to me, until I realized that way back in 1611, the King James Version had also used the word "reasonable." What I thought was a "new" translation wasn't "new" at all. My confusion led me to the original Greek. I gotta tell you, I wish I could teach all of you Greek – how many times have you been in a Bible study where someone says "my Bible says this," and someone else says, "well, *my Bible says this*," and it devolves into a question of which translation do people *like* better, as opposed to which is more *accurate*? No translation is perfect; even those that try to be very literal take some interpretive license here and there. So in the Greek, the word is *logikos*. What English word does that sound like? *Logical*. Exactly. The root word is *logos*, which literally means *word* and more generally refers to *reason*. There's nothing explicitly *spiritual* here at all! "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your *reasonable* act of worship." It involves our *mind*. *Reason*. *Thinking*. This leads directly into the next sentence: "Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the *mind*, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." Paul is stressing the fact that an active, vibrant, real Christian faith involves our *mind*. *We read*. *We think*. *We reason*. *We learn*. *We grow*. We let what we learn and discover about God's Word and God's will *change* us. We don't just accumulate facts; the goal isn't to win a Bible trivia game; the goal is to *transform our lives from the inside out*, as we learn the ways of God and endeavor to walk ever more steadily and faithfully in God's ways. We've got the Bible, this precious set of books that we can read *in our own language*, thanks to some courageous Christians who fought – and, in some cases, *died* – to give us that right several centuries ago. We've also got *tens of thousands* of works on theology and spirituality. Some of those are a lot better than others, a lot more thoughtful, a lot more helpful, and it takes some wisdom to sort out the wheat from the chaff. We try to pick some of the better ones and share them with you here at the church; we try to offer quality studies for people of all ages year after year, to help people learn and grow in the faith. There's a new class starting in a few weeks!

Consider it an invitation. "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." I've got a whole stack of books from across the centuries that I want to read, because I want to keep growing, keep renewing my mind, keep learning how to present my body as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, my reasonable act of worship. How about you? What are you doing to renew your *mind*, to discern the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect?

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