The River's Edge: Seeing What You Could Ignore

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Preacher: Daniel Dixon

[0:00] Healing is slow. It comes and it goes. A glimpse of the sun and then a flurry of snow. The first green shoots in a sudden frost. Something is gained when something is lost. Miracles are often inconvenient.

! Good morning everyone. My name is Daniel. I'm an elder here at the Table Church. And those lyrics come from the song Perfume and Milk by Florence and the Machine.
Florence wrote this song about a reflection on a traumatic experience in her life in 2023. Her journey towards healing and how that journey felt both miraculous and inconvenient.
Her healing wasn't a linear process. It didn't happen overnight. It didn't happen without also costing her something.
So I've had that song on repeat for probably the last five months and I couldn't stop thinking about it when I reflected on the sermon series that we began this year with.
[1:07] So from January up until Easter, we did a series on the book of Jeremiah called Surviving Saturday, Flourishing in Seasons of Exile.

The series was about living in the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter. About going from numb hearts of stone to feeling hearts of flesh that can experience God.
That can experience healing. That was a good series for me. I needed to hear us talk about grief and pain and loss and hope.
It was also a really difficult series for me. It was painful at times. Going from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh is a miracle.
But it is often inconvenient. I have a somewhat silly example for how that series felt for me. So if you've talked to me before or you follow me on Instagram, you know that I have a cat that I absolutely adore and obsessed with.
[2:19] Her name is Oh No. Like the phrase, Oh No. You can guess how she got that name. So most nights I wake up around 3am with her draped over my arm.

That's usually my right arm. And as I slowly wake up, my arm begins to slowly fall asleep. Until all feeling and sensation has gone with all of the weight of her cute body on my shoulder.
When she finally moves and I begin to get some feeling back in my arm, that process kind of hurts. There is a tingling, unpleasant sensation as the blood flow starts up again.
As my nerves start responding again. As my arm begins to wake up. And that feeling is what the last sermon series was like for me.
Kind of tingly. Kind of unpleasant. But also good. So now we're in a series called Everything We Carry.
[3:23] The stewardship of everything. And that feels like a natural place to go as our hearts soften. We have mourned and we have lamented on Good Friday.

We have survived Saturday. We have rejoiced in the resurrection of Easter Sunday. And now, it's Monday.
We go back to the world that we live in, that we work in, that we play in, that we suffer in. And stewardship is how we hold on to our hearts of flesh.
How we remember both our pain and our joy. How we carry resurrection into everything around us. And so far in this series, we've talked about how the ordinary, the mundane, is an instrument of revelation.
It's where God meets us. It's where we meet God. And last week, as we kicked off our giving campaign, Pastor Tanetta talked about stewarding our finances.
[4:30] How an anti-greed gospel is an anti-racist gospel. And so today, we're going to be talking about one way that our hearts of stone can stay cold.

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And how we can steward our hearts of flesh. So we're going to be talking about privilege. So privilege is a loaded word. There are probably some connotations and emotions that come up to you when I say the word privilege.
I know that for me, my first thought is of a certain type of privilege, of white privilege, which is a racial privilege that I have. And there's some emotions that come up too.
I feel some guilt about the different privileges I have, whether that be my education, whether that be my class, whether that be my gender. I have a sense of responsibility to do something with those privileges.
And some anxiety about even talking about that here. Because privilege isn't just a concept. It's a way to describe people's very real-life experiences.
[5:38] Privilege is something that touches everything. Every part of us. So there's not really an easy definition for it, but in its simplest form, privilege is about the ways that we experience the world around us and the ways the world experiences us.

Dominique Dubois-Gillard, author of the book, Subversive Witness, Scripture's Call to Leverage Privilege, has a couple of really powerful ways of describing privilege.
Saying, privilege is unfair, often unearned advantage, or preferential treatment. Privilege comes in many forms, and not every manifestation holds the same social currency.
Privilege is stackable, meaning that a person can possess multiple privileges at once. Many people possess privilege and can experience marginality at the same time.
Privilege can be embodied. It can be race, gender, physical ability. It can be positional, like through your job, or your role within a group. The mixtures of privileges that I hold mean that I view the world through certain lengths.
[6:57] And as a result of those privileges, even the fact that I view the world through a certain lens can be difficult for me to name sometimes. As an example, I don't often think of myself as being a white person.

I think of myself often as a person, as what normal looks like, as what I subconsciously expect the rest of the world to look like too.
There's a scene from the TV show Arrested Development that I think describes this well, where one of the characters remarks about the cost of a banana, saying, I mean, it's one banana, Michael. What could it cost? Ten dollars? To which the other character says, you've never been in a supermarket, have you? Privilege distorts our view of the world and keeps us distant, leading us to often be loudly and confidently wrong about things.
And the world experiences me differently too, because of my privilege. As someone with privilege for my gender, I have most certainly been in meetings where I said basically the exact same thing as a female co-worker, and I was listened to in a way that she was not.
[8:14] So I feel privileged that I was able to begin thinking about some of these questions at a really early age. So when I was three, my family and I moved to Kenya for two years, where my parents worked at a school in Nairobi.

We lived there for a total of four to five years. And when we moved back to the U.S., we spent a couple of days in Paris as part of a long layover there.
At one point, we were on a train, and I turned to my dad and I said, with all of the directness and the naivety of a five-year-old, Dad, why are there so many white people here?
My father, having packed up our entire life into boxes and carried them from Kenya to Paris, was exhausted and jet-lagged.
He contemplated a few answers that might satiate the curiosity of a child. And then, either out of exhaustion or wisdom, simply said, Daniel, you know that you're white too, right?
[9:22] Now, I had blonde hair as a kid. That should have been a shock to me, but apparently it was. I was caught off guard by that statement from him. Now, at that age, I didn't have the word privilege in my vocabulary.

I didn't know what colonization was, what white supremacy was, ableism, or patriarchy. But I did know that there was something different about my family and I compared to our neighbors.
I knew that I could travel between Kenya and the United States in a way that many of my friends couldn't. And I wondered why that was. I knew that I saw malnourished children my age, and I wondered why that was.

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I knew that some of my friends lived in very large homes, and that some of my friends lived in temporary homes. And I wondered why that was. And as I grew up, I began to understand that my father's instinct to point me towards self-reflection, towards my own privilege, was much more of a clue to answer those questions that either he or I realized at that time.
And although I'd begun to understand where my various forms of privilege came from, I felt much less certain about what to do with privilege. Was I supposed to ignore it, like I saw so many other people doing?
[10:52] What was I supposed to do with the feelings of guilt that came up? How was I supposed to hold the pain and suffering that I have experienced in my life, while not downplaying the preferential treatment, the unfair, unearned advantages that I also have experienced?

So we're going to explore those questions today in the book of Exodus, a book of liberation, and a book about privilege.
And our guide to this journey is going to be the daughter of Pharaoh. So we're going to go to Exodus 1, 15, 2 through 10. We're going to hear her story.
The scripture will be on the screen. It's also in the Church Center Notes app. The first part is going to set some context, some background as to what's happening in Egypt at the time, and then we'll see from Pharaoh's daughter how she stewards her privilege.
So Exodus 1, 15 starts, the king of Egypt says to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shifra and the other Pua, 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.
[12:15] But the midwives feared God. They did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, so they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, why have you done this and allowed the boys to live?

And the midwives said to Pharaoh, because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.
As an aside, this is a straight-up lie from the midwives to Pharaoh. It is an act of civil disobedience. It is an act of resistance. And so God dwelt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very strong.
Because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.
Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son. And when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months.
[13:26] When 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.

His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him. The 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. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying. She had compassion towards him.
This must be one of the Hebrews' children, she said. And then his sister came out and said to Pharaoh's daughter, shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse this child for you?
And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, yes. So the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, take this child and nurse it and I will give you your wages.
[14:33] So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter. She took him as her son. She named him Moses because she said, I drew him out of the water.

So let's look at Pharaoh's daughter. In the text, she doesn't have a name.
She's just the daughter of Pharaoh. We don't learn much about her other than the fact that she is a daughter of royalty. So that means she is a person of privilege in some ways, but also not in other ways.
She's a woman in a patriarchal society, but she does have embodied privilege as an Egyptian and positional privilege as being part of the royal household.

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But in our introduction to her, she is defined by that privilege, by that dominant system. She is just the daughter of Pharaoh. But throughout the course of the story, she stewards her privilege and because she does so, the people of Israel are freed from Egypt and she experiences a personal transformation as well.
[15:44] The first thing that we see here is that her act of stewardship happened in an ordinary place and her ordinary routine on an ordinary day.

Stewarding our privilege starts by having our hearts and our eyes open in the ordinary places and moments of our lives. The story starts with her going down to the river to take a bath.
When we talk about the mundane, the ordinary being an instrument of revelation, this is it. This is part of her regular life.
But as part of her regular life, she sees something out of place. She notices something new. And it's in that ordinary place that Pharaoh's daughter teaches us that, while privilege distorts our view of the world, making us think that bananas cost $10, speaking truthfully, naming things for what they are is a starting point for stewardship.
So she knows that this is a Hebrew child. She doesn't shy away from that fact. She also knows about her father's genocidal campaign.
[17:03] She knows that this child should not be alive. That her father, the most powerful man in society, wants this child dead.

So she could pretend that she didn't see this child. She could just go about her day, take her bath, and go back to the palace. Or she could say, hmm, no idea who this child is, probably not a Hebrew child, going to go on with my life.
I don't know what's going on. Or maybe she can gain some favor in the eyes of the Pharaoh by alerting the guards to know that she is truly Pharaoh's daughter.
But instead, she speaks truthfully. She names things for what they are. Caitlin Curtis, who is an indigenous woman from the Potawatomi people, talks about this truthfulness in an interview she did on her book, Native, where she reflects on having ancestors who are white and ancestors who are indigenous.
So in the interview, the interviewer asks her, how do you hold those two identities? How do you navigate that? And she says, my answer to that question lies in the work of decolonizing, of giving voice to the parts of me that have been silenced by whiteness, while also being aware of the privilege that I carry every day.
[18:31] It is my responsibility to listen to black and brown indigenous peoples, to understand that the white privilege I carry means I need to pay attention.

Or as I say in the book, keep watch over my life and my story. I need to take an active role in speaking the truth. We steward our privilege when we keep watch over our lives, when we speak the truth about ourselves and about our communities.
And after she speaks truth, Pharaoh's daughter moves towards compassion. Privilege keeps us distant from the world around us.
Through compassion, stewarding our privilege draws us closer to the world around us. But Pharaoh's daughter doesn't have to do anything here. Again, she's Pharaoh's daughter.
she could simply command one of her mates to take the child. She could turn the child over to another family. She could pretend that that never happened. But her compassion moves her to become committed.
[19:44] Committed to the survival of that child. She chose to get involved. She chose to be committed to the well-being of someone else.

But she doesn't stop at compassion. When Moses' sister suggests that she find a Hebrew woman to nurse the child, Pharaoh's daughter quickly agrees and then goes on to say that she will pay for Moses' mother to nurse the child.
Now there is somewhat divine irony in this arrangement. She's paying for the survival of a child who was supposed to have been killed. And the money for that is coming straight from her father.
She is funding the revolution and she's doing it on Pharaoh's dime. There's an organization that I've learned a lot from called Resource Generation that works with folks who have wealth and class privilege.
And when I was reading this story a term that they use sometimes came to mind. They sometimes use the term class traitor to describe the work that they are doing. And Pharaoh's daughter was

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being a class traitor in that moment.
[20:59] She's betraying Egypt. She is betraying her father. She is betraying the dominant system whose wealth was built on the stolen labor of the Israelites. She is joining an underground resistance of the Hebrew midwives.

She is focused. She is practical. She is committed. This is subversive. She didn't have to pay Moses' mother.
She could have easily found someone else. Or, as a member of the royal household, she could have used the power of command and coercion. But instead, she reaches deep into her pockets, deep into her father's pockets too, and commits to a sustained act of economic redistribution.
This was an act of conspiracy. That's what this is. Pharaoh's daughter is joining the conspiracy of saving lives. What do you think would happen if Pharaoh found out that not only had his daughter ignored his command, but she was using his money to keep that child alive?
She didn't just use her privilege for good at little to no risk for herself. she took a subversive and potentially life-threatening act.
[22:23] Privilege makes us defensive and focused on preserving the systems that developed and sustained that privilege. By stewarding our privilege, we can join the conspiracy of liberation and betray the systems that developed and sustained our privilege.

privilege. The call to stewardship for privilege is not just about using it for good. It's about becoming traitors, becoming traitors to your privilege, betraying the systems that gave it to you.
That's what Pharaoh's daughter teaches us. And then, just as quickly as we meet her, Pharaoh's daughter leaves the story.
for the rest of Exodus, she's absent from that conversation. Where did her compassionate and conspiratorial witness take her?
Exodus doesn't answer that question for us. But then, later on in the Hebrew Scriptures, we get a hint into what might have become of her. A short line in 1 Chronicles 4.18 reads as, these were the children of Pharaoh's daughter Bithiah, whom Merid had married.
[23:45] So, within some Jewish rabbinic traditions, they interpret this as saying that Pharaoh's daughter left with the people of Israel. So, when Israel left Egypt, they didn't leave alone.

They were joined by what's called a multitude of people, including Egyptians. Egyptians. They also walked away with a lot of Egypt's money. If you go back to that story, they walked away, they plundered the Egyptians basically as they left.
And some rabbis taught that Pharaoh's daughter was one of those who left with the people of Israel. And there's a notable difference in how she's described in 1 Chronicles compared to when we first meet her in Exodus.
In Exodus, she is Pharaoh's daughter. She is defined by the dominant system. In 1 Chronicles, she has a name, Bethiah, which means daughter of God.
She is no longer defined by the dominant system that gave her privilege. She is no longer a child of emperor. She is no longer just Pharaoh's daughter. She is a daughter of God.
[24:58] She has left Egypt in her heart, in her mind, and in her body, and is now on a journey with the people of God in the wilderness. That ordinary moment at the river on the way to Abath didn't just lead to her using her privilege.

It led to her transformation. It led to her own freedom. It led to her being part of the collective liberation that God invites all people into.
Privilege keeps us spiritually dead inside. Stewarding our privilege invites us into collective liberation, into a new life with God and with each other.
The only word I can think of to describe that is a miracle. I came up in the charismatic church where we use terms like miracles all the time. that may not be a term we use often here at the table, but I don't see how you can go from Pharaoh's daughter to a daughter of God without a miracle happening.
I don't know how you can do that without the intervention of a spirit that is filled with love and compassion that reflects the God who created all of humanity in her image.
[26:21] There's a piece of art that I turned to as I was thinking about this sermon that depicts this scene at the river. It shows Pharaoh's daughter, it shows her maids, which as an aside, any of her attendants could have easily betrayed Pharaoh's daughter.

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They could have turned her in at a moment's notice and gained their own privilege, their own status, and they kept their mouths shut in this conspiracy. This artwork from a 16th century artist depicts that moment at the river.
The story of Exodus is a story of liberation, but it doesn't start with Moses. It doesn't start with Moses when he fights back against the Egyptians.
It doesn't start at a burning bush. It started with a group of women together in an act of care and conspiracy.
So what does it look like to steward our privilege in our ordinary lives here in Washington, D.C.?
[27:32] To be part of this conspiracy of collective liberation. So one of D.C.'s nicknames historically has been Chocolate City, which is a reference to the historically majority black population, reference to Howard University being here, and a depth of rich culture and history.

It's also been a place where many people from various diasporas have come. D.C. has one of the largest Salvadorian diasporas in the United States. And at the same time, D.C.
is a city full of privilege. D.C. has one of the highest levels of income inequality in the entire nation. and has experienced rapid gentrification as waves of people, like myself, have moved here for work.
D.C. recently has been targeted heavily by the current administration's immigration agenda. So how do we steward privilege well in the midst of that?
Like Pharaoh's daughter, we are called to move closer to those around us, rejecting the distance that privilege creates. practically speaking, this might look like prioritizing shopping at black-owned businesses.
[28:52] This might look like learning Spanish so you can better know and support your neighbors. It might look like paying attention to where you live and understanding where you are called to join the conspiracy.

So like I said, a starting point for stewarding privilege is speaking truthfully and I'd be remiss if I didn't name the reality that we are on stolen indigenous land.
This is the land of the Piscataway, the Kanoe, the Pohatan, the Nanticoke, the Chesapeake.
Privilege distorts our view of the world, telling a story of America that was conveniently empty of people, cultures, and languages.
I'm reminded of that heavily this year as we get closer to July 4th and the 250th anniversary events being planned. Stewarding privilege can look like learning more about the indigenous peoples of this land and insisting on their living memory.
There's a tool called Native Land that shows on the screen here. You can use to learn about the indigenous peoples of any place you've lived, whether it's here or wherever you lived before you were here.
[30:08] Another practical offering here is that there is a self-guided tour that you can take throughout D.C. that highlights indigenous history in this region, which is a piece of history that is often forgotten here.

And then I want to turn to our community, our church. So every year our pastors and our elders come together to reflect on our church's vision.
we put together something called a vision of ministry to describe some particular areas we want to focus on. So this statement on the screen was one of the ones that we wrote earlier this year.
It's part of a larger open question that we have around how do we de-center whiteness in this church? How do we center the margins in our community?
And to be honest, even as someone who is part of writing this, it is easy for me to read that statement and react with some passivity.
[31:16] While these are all things that I care about, there is a subtle sense that my role as a person of privilege is to be hands-off, to listen and learn.

And while it is true that my response should be to listen deeply, to humbly learn, that alone is not sufficient. Stewarding privilege is about joining the conspiracy of liberation, not just cheering it on from the sidelines.
So for me, as part of this community, I want to grow in my own ability to de-center whiteness, to name the ways that I have racial privilege in this community. To recognize the ways that that has shaped this church, the ways that whiteness has historically shaped the table, and to become a traitor to those privileges as we center the margins.

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There's so much more that can be said about privilege. It really does touch so much of who we are. I want to invite folks to reflect on the privileges that you might have, how you might be called to be a traitor to those, to betray the systems that gave you those privileges.
So as we begin to transition to a time of communion, to a time of reflection, I want to just briefly say something about the giving campaign, the commitment campaign that we're doing.
[32:49] So commitment is probably one of my least favorite words. commitment is if you're familiar with attachment styles, I am what is called an avoidant, which means that for me commitment is like my kryptonite.

As an example, you already know this about me, I have a cat, I love my cat, I fostered her for about three months before I finally admitted that she was just my cat. It was not a fostering relationship anymore, she was just my cat.
It was clear like the first day that I got her, and like three or four months later I'm like, I don't know, am I going to keep her, am I not going to keep her, I don't know what I'm going to do. And I feel that aversion to commitment sometimes here at the table and myself.
So I feel out on the Sunday mornings where I time my walk here so I arrive at 10.33 just in time for worship to have started and just in time to avoid chit chatting in the lobby.
I feel out on the days where I take my seat and then leave as soon as service ends because I am busy, have something to go to. I live 10 minutes away, I don't have to leave right away.
[33:58] But there's that urgency that comes up that I create. I feel it when we talk about sustained giving. Like Pharaoh's daughter, I often feel like I'm standing at the river's edge.

So when Pharaoh's daughter stood on the river's edge, when she saw Moses in the water, she didn't know what would happen next. But she still spoke truthfully.
When Moses' sister invited her into conspiracy of compassion, she didn't know what would happen next, but she still risked her life and her position.
And when the people of Israel left Egypt, she didn't know what would happen next, but she still journeyed with them into the wilderness. She committed to the work of truth-telling, the work of compassion, the work of conspiracy, and the work of collective liberation.
compassion, the work of the work of the work of compassion, the work of compassion, the work of birth of I don't know what this current giving campaign has in store for the table.
[35:19] But this subversive lesson of Pharaoh's daughter tells me this. I am called to steward my privilege and the unknown, to be committed to the work of truth-telling, the work of compassion, the work of underground subversive conspiracy and resistance, and the work of collective liberation.

So as we go from here into a time of communion, I invite you to reflect on the work that you're called to of telling the truth, the work of compassion, the areas where you might fund the revolution on someone else's dime, and the work of collective liberation.
Thank you.

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