

## **We Know What We Are Supposed to Say**

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Exodus 1:8 – 2:10 | Matthew 16:13-20

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In his debut novel, *Rules of Civility*, Amor Towles reflects on one of the most iconic scenes in New York City, a scene that will be familiar to many of us, the strange juxtaposition of St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue directly across from the massive statue of Atlas holding up the world. He writes:

*"Could there have been a more contrary statue to place across from one of the largest cathedrals in America? Atlas, who attempted to overthrow the gods of Olympus and was thus condemned to shoulder the celestial spheres for all eternity — the very personification of hubris and brute endurance. While back in the shadows of St. Peter's was the statue's physical and spiritual antithesis, the Pieta — in which our Savior, having already sacrificed himself to God's will, is represented broken, emaciated, laid out on Mary's lap.*

*"Here they reside, two worldviews separated only by Fifth Avenue, facing off until the end of time or the end of Manhattan, whichever came first."*

This stark juxtaposition of worldviews confronts us again in today's Lectionary.

Not only do we know the Old Testament biblical passage, we've seen the movie. In Exodus we hear the story of a Pharaoh who "knew not Joseph." Honestly, that doesn't mean that many years and many Pharaohs had necessarily come and gone between the rise of this Pharaoh and the one served by Joseph. Absolute rulers have a tendency to forget the service of those who have outlived their usefulness.

I think I've mentioned that Walter Brueggeman once said that the primary function of functionaries in the court of a king is to flatter. "You, O King, are the wisest of the wise." "You, O Ruler, possess the strength of ten thousand men." "May you live forever, O Pharaoh." Absolute rulers prefer a chorus of praise over the counsel of the wise, often to the detriment of their countries. And, oh my, that is the case here.

This Pharaoh, like virtually every other absolute ruler in history, was motivated by fear, a gnawing anxiety, specifically the fear of losing control. Threats to his power lurked everywhere. Brothers and sisters were not friends but rivals. Uneasy rests the head that wears the crown, said Shakespeare. You can't get much sleep when you're always looking over your shoulder.

Stories are told of how his most trusted servants would not only make-up King Henry VIII's bed each night with new linens; they would strip down the bed to a wooden frame, reconstruct the mattress to insure the goose down and the cloth covering were new. Their

concern was not the king's comfort, but the king's safety. They were looking for any possible threat, a knife in the mattress, a poisoned needle in the hay.

Keeping control is anxious work. The greater the control, the more the anxiety.

So, we're not surprised to read in Exodus that the Pharaoh had become anxious because the Children of Israel thrived in Egypt and grew in numbers. And, while Pharaoh enjoyed the benefits of the free labor of his Hebrew slaves, he feared their strength. So, he commanded the midwives of Egypt to kill new-born boys. And when the clever midwives subverted his plan, he "gave this order to all his people: 'Every boy that is born you must throw in the river, but you may allow the girls to live.'"

The author of Exodus is setting the scene for the birth of Moses, the deliverer. But today I want to stop our story right here, because I want us to notice what we might call *Pharaoh's worldview*: Control, dominance, intimidation, violence, the threat of violence, and the means to cause suffering; these are the elements of power for Pharaoh. Their use consolidates his position and calms his fears. He breeds this worldview through his realm.

The Pharaoh's minions share his worldview, whether through imitation or intimidation; his subjects grudgingly or with fervor worship and serve Pharaoh's brutality. Might may not make right, but it sure gets things done. And the Pharaoh's followers think it's better to depend on the crumbs that fall from his table than to risk going hungry. Some of the crumbs can be really nice too.

What Atlas doesn't seem to understand is this: it is his worldview and not the world that crushes him and wears him out. It is his anxiety that drives the Pharaoh and reinforces his cruelty.

He dare not lose his grip. There are other would-be Atlases and Pharaohs waiting in the wings, watching, ready at the least sign of his weakness to take what he can no longer hold. Isn't it fascinating that Atlas won the one thing he wanted - absolute control of the whole world - at the cost of having to carry that burden for eternity?

And right across the street lies the antithesis of this worldview. Literally, the exemplar of the opposite of Atlas's worldview lies graven in the lap of his mother Mary. *According to the Pietas life is exemplified by a man held in loving human arms, having given everything he has for others. This, we might say, is the worldview of the Christ.*

"Who do people say that I am?" asks Jesus.

Some say you are the representative of my cultural and political values. Others say that you guarantee me everlasting life if only I repeat the magic words. Some say that you are really just a convenient empty vessel into which I can pour my own ideals. Others say you are the head of an otherworldly religion and that the whole of life is like the boarding area for a plane and we're just waiting for our flight.

“Who do you say that I am?”

Well, we all know what to say.

Just like St. Peter did. “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.”

But what does that mean? What does that mean, not in a religious book, but in my life?

In Matthew’s gospel we have only part of this conversation between Jesus and his disciples. But if we look at Mark’s version of this same conversation (Mark 8:27-38), we find a fuller sense of what it means to make what has been called, “The Great Confession,” i.e. to confess that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Jesus says, “If anyone would come with me, he must deny himself and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What does it profit a person to gain the world and to lose his own soul?”

If ever there’s been a clear statement of the alternative to the worldview of Atlas, this is it. The trick is to hear what Jesus actually says rather than immediately in our heads to convert it into a nice little religious jingle.

This is a matter of life and death. Jesus is deadly serious here, so much so that when Peter disagrees with him, “Lord you shall certainly not give up your life like this, shamed by the whole world,” Jesus lashes out with the words he learned to speak in the wilderness of temptation, “Get Thee behind me Satan.”

If we didn’t know it before, we know it at this point in the gospels. The worldview of Atlas had been dangled before Jesus to tempt him when the devil took him up to the top of a high precipice and showed him all the kingdoms of the world spread out before him with all their power and wealth and splendor, and the devil said to Jesus, “All of this I will give you if you will bow down and worship me.”

Jesus’ rejection of the worldview of Atlas was swift then and swift now when the tempter rears his head in the words of his friend and disciple Peter. “Get Thee behind me Satan. Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.”

I don’t think it had ever dawned on me before studying these two texts this week, but Jesus is presenting his worldview here, his whole philosophy of life.

G. K. Chesterton once said that the most interesting thing about any person is his philosophy of life, her worldview. Well, I don’t know if our philosophy of life or worldview is the most *interesting* thing about us, but it may be the most *important* thing about us, and it is something we have a hard time coming to terms with.

It’s something even the church has had a hard time coming to terms with throughout its long history. We know the church has throughout its history tended to give lip service to the worldview of Jesus while it preferred to invest in the worldview of Atlas. And, maybe, here is the grandest irony of all. Certainly, no less a philosophical genius than Soren Kierkegaard

believed this was true, and no less a literary genius than Fyodor Dostoyevsky thought so, and even the greatest Reformed theologian of all time, Karl Barth, suspected it is true too. But let's leave the worldview of the church to one side for now, shall we.

Today I would prefer to keep my focus on a much more humble subject, the individual human being. You. Me. I am certainly not qualified to interrogate anyone specifically about their worldview. But maybe I could ask just a few very general questions, a few simple, maybe even simplistic, questions.

Who is stronger, the person who can lift the world on his shoulders and fight off all those who would threaten to pry his hand from the prizes he grasps? Or the person who dies at the hands of others, refusing to curse those who spit on him or to return evil for evil?

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Who is wiser, the fellow who lives in terror that someone will succeed in stripping away his power to control circumstances and other people? Or the man who faces each moment with clarity and calm, unafraid to lose anything and everything, even his own life?

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Let's make it simpler still. Which path is true? The one that says power lies in control and possessing? Or the one who holds life gently, loosely, not as a possession, but as a gift to be shared?

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Amen?