

Sermon: August 23, 2020 – Exodus 1:8-2:10

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

I'm going to start our exploration of today's reading from the book of Exodus, by fast forwarding to the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Three snapshots from the life of Jesus:

- 1) According to the gospel of Matthew (2:16-18), immediately following Jesus' birth, his family heard of a plot by Herod to have all the male babies in the land killed. They escaped, by going to Egypt until things had settled down.
- 2) Following a ministry that threatened to overturn the present social order, Jesus was sentenced to death by the state, with collaborators within his people, even within his trusted circle of disciples.
- 3) Though the state thought its plans had won the day, we, as Christians, assert that Jesus was not silenced. Resurrection won the day, and his Spirit lives on in each person who takes up his message of hope, peace and inclusion.

At times, even though he had a circle of followers, I tend to see Jesus as a lone wolf, one God-focused person advocating change and upsetting the status quo. But in the account of Pharaoh and the midwives, we see a story from long before Jesus – perhaps 1300 to 1500 years earlier – that demonstrates the actions of a God who was and is and always will be deeply committed to human safety and human dignity. Clearly, the gospel writers wanted us to see the connection between Jesus and these earlier events, crafting their recollections of Jesus in such a way that their audiences would immediately hear the echoes of God's long-standing concern for the oppressed, and the continuity between their faith history and the ministry of Jesus.

The first scene of today's reading opens with a Pharaoh and a problem. The Hebrews, the human engines that drove the Pharaoh's economy, were getting too numerous for the Pharaoh's liking. We know, from countless experiences in today's world, the fear and outrageous behaviour that happens when a dominant culture and its self-centred leaders start to notice that things aren't as homogenous as they used to be, and in this case, Pharaoh does the math. Not enough Hebrews = not enough muscle to do the back-breaking and menial jobs that need doing; too many Hebrews = potential enemies if an armed conflict breaks out, and the best way to solve this, in Pharaoh's mind, was to kill all of the male children.

Lest this just be a detail in a far-away ancient story, please pause with me for an uncomfortable moment, as we bring to mind with heartbreak and horror, the number of times up to this day that a threatened ruler has resorted to genocide. While our story this morning *becomes* a hero story, it *begins* with the bleakest, most chilling edict one can imagine: kill their babies. Keep enough of them alive to do the work, but let them live in terror. And just as Jesus' life begins with a fearful ruler plotting the death of infants, so does this story of the beginnings of Moses' life, from the book of Exodus.

Pharaoh had a plan but he needed collaborators. Not understanding the deep connection between midwives and mothers and babies, but knowing that a midwife would have better opportunity than anyone to carry out his barbarous plan, he summons Shiphrah and Puah to his court. In its original Hebrew text, there are strong sexual overtones to this whole scene: Pharaoh's language to the midwives includes some not

too subtle seductive language from the big man toward these foreign women, and his plan to keep the Hebrew girls around rather than the boys, is also dripping with sleaze.

The midwives will have none of it. Rightly fearing for their lives at disobeying Pharaoh, they don't refuse to his face but manage to come up with a wonderful excuse: "these Hebrew women are so vigorous – by the time we know a woman is in labour, she's already had the child and is back to work!" Whether there's even an ounce of truth to that, we do not know, but what we do experience here is a fine early example of civil disobedience. "The Law", i.e., Pharaoh's command, is that the infant Hebrew boys be extinguished, but the midwives answer to a higher authority: the God of Sarah and Abraham, their guard and their guide. And in their actions, we honour those who have not buckled under to racist, xenophobic or homophobic laws or practices, whose resistance has made all the difference: Viola Desmond at a Nova Scotia theatre, Rosa Parks on an Alabama bus, Jessica Gordon, Sylvia McAdam, Sheelah McLean and Nina Wilson in Saskatchewan founding "Idle No More." Sometimes the resistance is big and official and formal but more often it starts with a Shiprah or a Puah or a Rosa or a Viola saying, "I won't do that."

Pharaoh, sensing that his strategy needs to go wider, puts his genocidal decree out to everyone, not just the midwives. And while some would have carried out these evil orders, the numbers of the Hebrew nation kept increasing. Among those who escaped the plan, was Moses, a child who would grow up to lead the people out of this place hard labour – resurrected, as it were, from enslavement to freedom.

This second scene, of baby Moses in a basket, has been known to me as a sentimental Bible stories since childhood. But there's nothing sentimental about this story: it's the heart-wrenching of this mother, and every birth mother since then whose circumstances were so dire that they gave up a child with hopes that the child would have a better life. Left on the shore in the bulrushes, secretly supervised by his big sister Miriam, the baby Moses is discovered by a maid in the Egyptian court, and delivered to the daughter of the Pharaoh.

What a wonderful intertwining of actions and ironies working together for good: the daughter of the same Pharaoh who demanded the murder of Hebrew boy babies, rescues and raises one. When a wet nurse is found by Miriam, who volunteers to find such a woman, lo and behold, it is the boy's birth mother. If we fill in the blanks, we can picture mama Jochebed singing Hebrew songs to baby Moses, teaching him things about his people that he would not learn from the Egyptian court. As my friend Jeff would say, this is one of those places where coincidences are much more, "God-instances." As we see this terrible story turned on its head, let us wonder: how often have we seen good assert itself amidst evil? How often have our own lives had interventions that turned things around? How often have our actions of kindness or advocacy expressed God's great intention for life, and made a noticeable difference in the life of another? How often, is God's commitment for life and light and love working behind the scenes, often with many helpers? And, unfortunately, this one: how often have I seen and heard these groundswells in favour of justice, and been put off because they challenge my position of privilege, rather than listening to the voices of justice and having my heart and my actions changed by those voices?

To me, it's helpful to see the continuity between the call for social justice in the Hebrew Scriptures – in these scenes of women saving their people, in the Exodus from Egypt, in the bold proclamations of the prophets - and the call for social justice that we hear and see and experience from Jesus. In all of this, we experience the lived presence of God. But there's one more thing that I hope we can hear in all of this.

There are many characters in these back-to-back scenes in Exodus 1 and 2, and from other parts of the Bible or from the history records, we know most of their names. But in this account, only three of them get named: the baby Moses, and the two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. What does it mean, that Shiphrah and Puah are honoured in this way, and not just unnamed role players? To me, it's somewhat of an “insert your name here” kind of moment, a reminder that nobody needs a title or position to be engaged in positive change. In his book, *Living the Resurrection*, Eugene Peterson (the same person who gave us *The Message Bible* translation) encourages each person and each community of faith to embrace their ability for discipleship. In his writing about our responsibility, together, to be people of the resurrection, (p.95) I hear an encouragement for each of us and all of us to *own* our human capacity to enact change, rather than leaving this to the “experts” or the “professionals.” Pharaoh Ahmose would be remembered by the *history books*, but the ones commemorated by name in our *faith history* are Shiphrah and Puah. These women in many ways were the midwives of the entire people of Israel - midwives of the Israelites' journey from bondage to freedom – midwives, even, of civil disobedience in the name of a greater good. Even in the face of genocide – a scourge that remains present in our world – the saving power of these two women was immense, and they and the entire nation were blessed.

In this episode from our early faith history, and in the ongoing presence of Christ, we are called to pay attention to a world where Pharaoh still expects us to do reprehensible things in the name of economic health and racial purity. We are being continuously engaged by a God who believes in our power to change and be changed: trusted to reach deep into our character, to take a stand, make a difference, prove that the way things are is not the way things need to be.

The disempowering, targeting, and limiting of some, diminishes the humanity of all. And so we receive this call to attentiveness and action, with thanksgiving to the Holy One who wants all of humanity, in fact all of creation, to have freedom, and agency, and life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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