

August 23rd, 2020

Exodus 1:8-2:10 “Choosing Life Over Death”

I was happy to have a three week break from the pulpit. It gave me the time I needed to help my parents. And it was good hearing the Word proclaimed by three of our “home grown preachers.” Thank you. This week, I want to turn to the Hebrew Scriptures for a while. We spent the Spring and early Summer studying the words of Jesus, but I think it’s important to remember that we’re part of an even older tradition that provides valuable lessons about how the Kingdom of God works, and how it might be lived out “here on earth as it is in heaven.”

For the next two months, the Old Testament readings from the lectionary come from the Book of Exodus. The Exodus is the story of how God’s people were freed from slavery while living as captives in Egypt. They weren’t always captives though. How the Israelites came to live in the land of Egypt is an interesting story. Three weeks ago, Georgeanne told the story of how Jacob earned the name Israel. Jacob had 12 sons including Joseph who was number 11 in the birth order. He was one of “those kids” and when I say, “those kids” I mean, his brothers got so fed up with him being Jacob’s favorite kid that they sold him to slave traders who eventually took him from Canaan to Egypt. The cool thing is that Joseph eventually became an influential leader in Egypt because he was a good communicator and a skilled opportunist. When his family back in Canaan experienced a famine, they were invited to seek refuge in Egypt so they wouldn’t starve. Pretty generous considering what his brothers did to him. The problem is, when Joseph eventually died and new leaders came to power, the Egyptians decided to make these Canaanite descendants of Israel slaves. And so for four hundred years these slaves strengthened the Egyptian Empire by building huge cities and monuments. Imagine that. Using slave labor to build a nation. So that’s where we are this week. This scripture begins the origin story of Moses, who is the one God would eventually call to deliver the children of Israel out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. This story sets us up the first power-encounter between God and one of the most powerful Empires in history. This is where we get to see the major differences between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdoms of the Earth. And it all starts with a baby in a basket. Or does it?

The Pharaoh in power at the time of Moses’ birth was Seti I. He was selfish, insecure, and “ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites.” He was one of those rulers who wanted to make Egypt a great nation, but he did it at the expense of these people that the Egyptians labeled the “Hebrews.” By the time Seti I became Pharaoh, the Hebrews were getting too numerous. So Seti decided to issue an

executive order that, for a time, every boy born to a Hebrew woman would be put to death. Because he was Pharaoh, he had the right to make this executive order. Now ... contrary to what some political pundits might say nowadays, as a nation in the 21st Century, we are not ruled by a Pharaoh. We elect our rulers. Pharaohs in ancient Egypt came to power mostly by family succession or by coup. Citizens of Egypt did not have any direct power in matters of state ... or anything really. So no ... technically and constitutionally speaking, we do not live under a monarchy like the Egyptians did. With that, I do want to say that what we *do* share in common with the Egyptian Empire circa 1300 BC is that we, like them, are part of the Kingdoms of the World. And I say this because in God's estimation, there are only two kingdoms: The Kingdom of God and the Kingdoms of the World. So even though we are not ruled by a Pharaoh, we don't get the luxury of saying we're the "good guys" just because we hold elections. Human beings, past and present, have mostly lived under the rulers of the earth. These rulers are also humans, although many of them, like the Persian Kings, the early Roman Emperors, and Kim Jong-Un have claimed to be gods. Scripture tells us that all humans have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. That includes rulers of nations and empires, which means there is no such thing as a perfect Earthly Kingdom or Nation. This becomes painfully obvious during times when the Kingdom of God is trying to break through as it is now. And the times when the Kingdom of God breaks through the most is when powerless, vulnerable people become pawns of the rich and powerful. God doesn't like it when this happens. It happened during Israel's time in Egypt, it happened when Israel was being held captive in Babylon and it happened during Rome's rule in the Middle East during the time of Christ. Throughout history, we see very clearly that God favors the underdogs.

How do people get to be underdogs though? Is it laziness? Bad genes? Poor choices? Natural selection? Most of the time, it happens because the rulers of Earth's Kingdoms get too hungry for power and wealth. Even democratic nations elect representatives who make decisions in response to powerful corporate interests rather than the needs of the people. When that happens, we see the gap between the rich and the poor and the powerful and the powerless get wider and wider. That's where we get the underdogs. And then these leaders turn around and try to get us to swallow the myth that somehow we are all in this struggle together ... that we're *all* underdogs even when that message is being broadcast on the biggest television sets in the biggest houses on the planet. Meanwhile, those who are *really* struggling – single parents, the chronically ill, students in underfunded schools, and the poor in general go unheard. And here's what's sad. How many of us can really control any of this? Even though we have a vote, most of us are not terribly powerful when it comes to our ability to influence the rulers of the

world. And to complicate matters, at some level we all benefit from these unjust systems that are in place. Because whether or not we feel comfortable with this idea or not, most of us at some point in our lives have been in positions where we've been both the oppressor and the oppressed. We are one of the wealthiest nations on earth. And honestly, I'm not complaining because I'm a beneficiary of that privilege.

So how in the world do we relate to the story of the Exodus? Well, let's start with Baby Moses in the bulrushes. But let's not focus on Moses yet. He'll get his opportunity later. Let's focus on the people who kept Baby Moses alive. The story opens with the Pharaoh, King Seti I, instructing the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill all the Hebrew baby boys that are born. But Shiphrah and Puah, quietly refuse. Next, we meet a mother who hides her baby away and then places him in a basket and sets him floating on the Nile River. Next, we're introduced to the Pharaoh's daughter, who finds the baby and takes pity on him. Finally there's the baby's older sister, who speaks to Pharaoh's daughter and arranges for the baby's biological mother to be his wet nurse until he's old enough to be adopted and named.

So the only reason this baby lived, this baby who was given the Egyptian name Moses, who led his people out of slavery, was because of the *saving actions of many*. Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives, refused to follow Pharaoh's orders. They chose life over death, the God of Israel over the god of Egypt. The baby's mother also chose life. She hid the baby away, put him in the river, and had faith that someone would find him. Pharaoh's daughter found the baby, realized it was Hebrew – yet she also chose life. And the baby's sister lingered around the waterhole of the slave drivers to watch over her baby brother's life. This is a story of salvation that required many people. Some of them were nobodies: Hebrews, slaves, women. One of them was somebody: Pharaoh's daughter. And it was only because of their combined efforts that the baby lived.

We need to hear this because, domestically speaking, most of us are nobodies. Most of us don't have the ear of our elected leaders. For all the petitions and campaigns we might sign or support, we don't appear to be able to change government policies that make life tougher on the poor but make it easier for big business to turn massive profits. Sometimes we go to the polls with a sick feeling in our stomachs as we vote for the candidate who we believe lies to us less than the other. In our context, despite this equitable-on-paper system that we've devised are still little people with very little power. As little people, it is easy to be discouraged. But this story should encourage us. It shows that the actions of little

people, no matter how small, can have enormous impact. We don't know what the impact will be, but when we fear God more than Pharaoh, when we choose life over death like these women in our story, then we too will make choices which are part of God's plan of salvation for us. So we need to hear this story as the little people that we are.

But we also need to hear it because, internationally speaking, we are big people. We are wealthy beyond measure, often at the expense of others. Our houses are the biggest in the world. Our wardrobes are overflowing with cheap clothes made in garment factories where working conditions are potentially lethal because there are no labor laws to protect the workers. Our fancy phones are manufactured from rare materials mined in the Congo where people from the traditional lands have been herded into urban slums. We live in this land because we assumed control from the original inhabitants by conquest and deception. Our comfort and wealth rides on the backs of countless invisible oppressed people, past and present, in ways that it's difficult to even imagine. And here's the hard truth that we don't want to face up to or even admit - We can't opt out of all these systems of power that grant us privilege and control our lives! I have a cell phone! I have clothes made in India and Bangladesh. I can't opt out of this system, because I depend on this system! *We* depend on this system! But we *can* make choices. And that's exactly what this story shows us.

Pharaoh's daughter was born into the wealthy ruling class. She had handmaids and attendants. Her house was built from bricks made by Hebrew slaves. Her clothes were woven by Hebrew women. Her wealth was built on the backs of others. Just like us. But she bucked the system. She took part in God's saving action. She took an enormous risk and chose life. So this story shows that God's call to choose life over death extends to all of us. Midwives and slaves, women and children, and even the powerful who benefit from the status quo. We are all invited to work, in ways big and small, against the powers that destroy people's lives. The God of the Israelites is much, much bigger than one nation, one people, one clan, and God invites all of us into the work of liberation time and time again.

Whether our actions are big or small, national or local, individual or corporate, this story shows that we cannot know what ripple effect they might have. None of the women in this story knew that her actions would lead to the Exodus. In the same way, we cannot know what God's plan is, or who's going to be the next to be set free. But when we let our hearts of stone be moved by compassion; when we fear God more than we fear Pharaoh; when we act not out of fear, but out of love, then we too will have a role to play in God's unfolding story of liberation.