

Exodus 1:8-2:10 “Living Under the Pharaoh”

Here’s a quick recap for our series on Israel’s origins and how we are all part of God’s ongoing unfolding story: Most Bible scholars agree that the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, was brought together about 600 BCE during the Babylonian Captivity. Babylon was the ruling power in the region at that time, and the way they kept peace was to take the leaders out of the homelands they conquered and place them in the heart of Babylon so that the people in the territories were less likely to rise up and cause trouble. And if the rulers of Babylon made these captive Israelite leaders feel welcome and comfy, then maybe they wouldn’t even *want* to go back to their homeland. So the Torah was a way to inspire the Jewish people to get their heads out of Babylon and return to their religious and cultural roots. It challenged the folks who were getting a little too comfortable to stay true to their faith and work towards getting back to their homeland. It was a reminder to the Israelites about how God chose them, set them apart, and delivered them out of slavery so they could be a part of God’s ongoing story of salvation. So if you were captive in a land that wasn’t your own like these Israelites in Babylon, can you see how a story about God delivering people *out* of captivity would be especially inspiring?

Last week, we talked about how the house of Israel wound up in Egypt. Israel heard that Egypt had been storing up grain in preparation for a huge famine. When the famine finally hit, Papa Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to get grain. But when they got there, they found out that the governor of the land was their little brother Joseph who they sold into slavery when he was a teenager. Oops! And after a little bit of predictable drama, things worked out. Joseph forgave his brothers and thanked God that even though the circumstances leading up to this moment were bad, the fact that he was in a position to help save his family was a blessing. So he brought all these refugees from the House of Israel ... these Hebrews from the Land of Canaan ... into Egypt and they settled down in a place called Goshen. Well the Hebrew people were happy in Goshen, so they were fruitful and multiplied. And

everything was fine because Joseph and Pharaoh were tight ... like family. But after Joseph and his brothers and all of the original refugees died, a new Pharaoh came to power and started wondering, "Where did all these Hebrews come from?!" Then he got all anxious and thought, "They're going to outnumber us pretty soon and they're going to take over!" So the solution to his insecurity about all these Hebrews living in Goshen was to thin out their population. That's where we pick the story up this week.

I think one of the hardest things for us to relate to in this story is what it was like to live under a Pharaoh in the 15th Century BC. *We* don't live under a Pharaoh! We aren't ruled by someone who has absolute power over us and who is revered as a god. We have a choice when it comes to who our rulers are. We're not slaves. So yes, there's a cultural gap that makes it a little harder to understand how ancient people understood the world and how it's governed. But even though we're not slaves, there are times when we feel like our lives are shaped by powerful forces that are beyond our control. So try to put yourself in that mindset for a bit as we look at this morning's scripture. Try not to look at this as a cute story about a chubby little baby floating in the bulrushes, because I know that some of you who grew up in Sunday School are picturing a little baby in a basket on a flannel board! Am I right? No, just put yourself in a position of powerlessness for a minute. Think of what it might be like to live under an all-powerful Pharaoh who rules by fear and intimidation. A Pharaoh, who expects his orders to be carried out. And if the Pharaoh or any of his rulers or soldiers finds out you aren't carrying out his orders, you will die.

The first thing on Pharaoh's population control agenda was to tell the Hebrew midwives, "I want you to kill all the Hebrew baby boys." But then the midwives decided, "No. That's not going to happen," which was outrageous because one does not just disobey the Pharaoh. This was not a democracy. Pharaoh was king of the most advanced, powerful, and influential Empire of that time and place. No one, especially Hebrew midwives, said, "no" to Pharaoh. But, this is exactly

what happened. The women honored God and quite honestly feared God a lot more than Pharaoh, so they ignored his executive order.

So the Pharaoh heard about this and sent for two Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah. He asked, “What are you doing? Why are you not carrying out my order?” And the answer the midwives gave him was classic. They said, “Listen, this isn’t our fault. These Hebrew women? They’re so tough that they have their babies without us. They don’t need us like the ... uh ... less vigorous Egyptian women do. There’s nothing we can do about it.” Wait a minute. These women ... these Hebrew women ... just gave the ruler of Egypt ... the ruler that used force and subjugation to keep his empire in power ... they gave him *attitude*? The fact that Pharaoh didn’t just kill them on the spot was stunning. These women courageously spoke to power. The result? “God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong.” So Pharaoh figured that if he couldn’t intimidate these Hebrew midwives, he’d bring *everybody* in on this population control plan. He issued another executive order for *anyone* who came across a Hebrew baby boy, to throw him in the Nile River.

This is where the story shifts to another brave Hebrew woman. This woman gave birth to a baby boy and managed to hide him for three months. When she couldn’t hide him anymore, she did what Pharaoh ordered and put him in the Nile River. She just did it very gently and made sure the baby had a water-tight, floatable basket to help him along. The baby’s older sister, Miriam, did something brave and risky too ... she followed the basket and waited until it eventually floated to Pharaoh’s palace. That’s when one of Pharaoh’s brave daughters picked it up knowing full-well that this was a Hebrew baby boy! She didn’t seem too concerned about her dad’s insecurities or his gruesome orders because she ignored them too. She even ended up hiring the baby’s biological mother to nurse him and eventually took this baby as her son ... a son in the household of the Pharaoh who wanted him dead! And Pharaoh’s daughter named the baby a good Egyptian name. We know him as ... Moses, the great liberator of God’s people. Some of our

women who are taking the Just Women Bible study have covered this already, but isn't it just amazing that in a tradition that's often criticized for being too patriarchal, it was brave women who made the foundational story of the Jewish Faith possible?

Okay, again ... let's go back to Babylon and look at the intended audience for this story. Even though the story of the Exodus was ancient and part of the Hebrew people's spiritual and cultural DNA ... this Torah ... this written collection of Israel's story told from different traditions ... was brought together during a time when the captives in Babylon needed some inspiration. So you're captive in a strange land? Listen, we've been there and with God's guidance, we made it out. We know this because we know Moses' story. And folks, if we did it then when we were slaves, we can do it now too. These brave women from different walks of life resisted power and got the ball rolling for Israel to get out from underneath Pharaoh's oppression. These women are the ones whose saving actions allowed Moses to lead his people out of slavery. They chose life over death even at the risk of their own lives. You ... can ... too.

When we commit to following Jesus, we commit to being part of a larger family and a larger story ... we are *all* children of Abraham now. So these stories that we read aren't just the stories of some ancient people whose lives we can barely get a handle on because we're so far removed from their culture. Sure, we don't know what it's like to live in captivity in a strange land like the exiles in Babylon. Sure we don't know what it's like to live under a self-proclaimed god-ruler like Pharaoh. We see examples of it in the world (hello North Korea), but most of us in this room really don't know what that's like. But I'd say most of us can relate to what it's like to feel helpless. To feel trapped. To feel discouraged. To feel powerless in a system where it seems that our voice doesn't matter. But this story should encourage us. That's why it's here in the Torah. It shows that the actions of little people, no matter how small, can have an enormous impact. We don't know what the impact will be, but like the midwives and like the baby's mother and

sister, when we honor God over Pharaoh, when we choose life and love over personal comfort, then we too will make choices that reflect God's desires and plans. So on one hand, we need to hear this story as the little people that we are sometimes.

On the other hand, we've got to acknowledge that we're also "big people," especially when we look at where we are on a global scale. We're one of the wealthiest nations on Earth. What we have in our homes big or small is so much more than what the large majority of the world's population has. That's where Pharaoh's daughter comes in. She was a member of the powerful elite. She 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. But here in this story written by the Israelites ... the ones who were being oppressed by the Egyptians ... we've got an unlikely hero in Pharaoh's daughter, a blood relative of the chief oppressor. She was a willing and voluntary part of God's saving action. So the Exodus story tells us that we are all needed: midwives and slaves, women and children, *and* ... the powerful, too. We are *all* invited to work, in big and small ways, against powers that seek to destroy people's lives. The God of the Israelites is much, much bigger than one nation, one people, one tribe, one family. God invites all of us into the unfolding story of God's liberating salvation. All of us, big or little, somebody or nobody, rich or poor, are invited to step forward and choose life.

