

Birth of Hope

sermon digest

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Exodus 1:8-22; 2:1-10

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Political memory can be so short-lived, can't it? Especially when it meets up against some immediate self-serving goal. It seems only yesterday we were talking about Joseph's rise to stardom. Soaring at a dizzying speed to food czar of Egypt, this foreigner became second in command; and his "success" was phenomenal. In just a few years' time he managed not only to save the nation from the harsh effects of famine, he managed to gobble up the life's savings, livestock, and land of Egypt's farmers. People were fed; Egypt's coffers swelled; and Joseph became a hero credited with saving the nation, thank you. Joseph and his family grew and flourished and, as happens to all of us over time, died.

And then, an abrupt shift. Well, maybe not so abrupt. We're speaking, after all, of a 400 year interval of time. "A new king arose over Egypt," Exodus tells us, "who did not know Joseph." Whether he was simply unlearned, unprepared for the job, or whether his memory dimmed for other reasons, we're not quite sure. Perhaps, Rabbi Arthur Waskow muses [*Freedom Journeys*, 21], people had just had enough. Perhaps after generations of being landless, Egyptian farmers just wanted their land back. Perhaps they gathered at the local store and shared bitter memories: "My granddad says his granddad said they owned a sweet forty acres where the Nile bends." Perhaps they were just tired of living off the government's meager dole and wanted their land, their livelihood back. Perhaps their years of muttering had grown to a heartfelt grumble, and perhaps the grumble was now growing to an earth shaking rumble. What was a king to do?

Ah, yes. A diversion, a really good diversion would be helpful. Where to find one? Where better than among those guys over there—those *Hebrews* living off to themselves? They're foreigners, aren't they? They speak a different language, don't they? They bow down to a different god, don't they? And poor as they are, you know they won't go get lawyers. Let's go after them. "Look at them," the king told his people. "They breed like rabbits. There's so many of them they're more numerous and more powerful than we are." And then, a brilliant stroke of genius. Remembering invaders pushing into the country to the east in recent years, the king ratcheted up the alarm: "Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." And you know what? It worked! People quit pointing their finger at the king, and started putting their nation's priorities at the forefront. "Fear of others," Princeton Seminary Professor Dennis Olson suggests, "can be a powerful source of unity" [*Workingpreacher.org*, 2008]. Besides, blaming someone who can't defend him or herself is considerably less risky than going up against the king.

"Therefore," the storyteller in Exodus tells us, "they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them" (1:11-14). Three times in such a short space, the writer speaks of the Egyptians' oppression and twice of their ruthlessness. They made the lives of the Israelites bitter with hard service in the brickyards and fields. Rather than breaking the Israelites, however, the bitter treatment the Egyptians poured out upon them seemed to descend on them like fertilizer. "The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites" (12).

Their strategy clearly wasn't working. So what now? Perplexed, the king looked around for a new tool. And his eyes fell on the midwives. Not exactly among the elite, were they? They were just *women* and *Hebrew* women at that. True, the midwives were women; and maybe they weren't among the upper crust of society. But maybe the king just didn't know the value the Israelites put upon midwives. Or just maybe he didn't know who he was dealing with. *Shiphrah* and *Puah* they are called (15). They are the first people assigned names in Exodus; and they are the *only* people assigned names, other than Moses, in our extended passage today. Why is that? Is their importance, after all, equal to that of Moses? Is it because of the trust invested in them and value assigned to their service by their own community? Or is it just a really good opportunity for the storyteller with a twinkle in his eye to give witness to a God who moves in mysterious ways? And if it is the latter, why, I ask you, *why* does he make almost no mention of that God? Shiphrah and Puah's story makes no mention of a special appearance by God. There is no burning bush or a staff that turns into a snake. All they seem to have is a deep-seated *fear* of God (v. 17)—fear, you might say, in the sense of a deep reverence and awe—reverence and awe that comes from knowing that Pharaohs come and go. They may wax and wane; they may be gracious occasionally but

demanding and stingy often. Yet put up against the God of promise, they do not hold even a candle.

Commanded to kill all the male infants born to the Israelites, the women engage in civil disobedience, the first of many staged throughout the Bible. Acting in a manner not unlike the Apostles who will many years hence stand before the Sanhedrin with the unequivocal defense, "We must obey God rather than any human authority," (Acts 5:29) Puah and Shiphrah, weak and compliant women that they are, ignore the king's orders. Later they will assure the king that the Hebrew women, fading, compliant violets that they are, simply birth their babies too fast for them to get to them. The king turns, then, to incite the whole nation into the business of murder: "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live" (22).

As is often the case with tyrants, the king was not as insightful as he thought. First of all, his policy of wiping out Hebrew males meant that he was wiping out his own work crew right when he needed them most if he were going to maintain an edge over his neighbors. Fear is like that. Fear can literally wipe out clarity of thought and vision. Fear can be a nation's own worst enemy.

Beyond this, the king's inordinate fear of Hebrew males meant that he turned a blind eye to the women. True, he may not have known Puah and Shiphrah and the resolve of which they were capable. One cannot help but ask though, did he not know his own daughter? A Hebrew mother, looking into her newborn's face, saw him to be a "fine" (*tob*) baby. Hiding him for a time, she made a little basket (*teba*) or ark (*teba*) and placed it among the reeds (*sup*) of the Nile and left her daughter to keep watch. Finding the baby, Pharaoh's daughter recognized him as a Hebrew, and moved with deep compassion, flaunted her father's command, saved the baby's life, and eventually gave him a common Egyptian name, "Moses," meaning "son." Isn't it truly ironic that the king's dismissal of women became his greatest stumbling block? Puah, Shiphrah, and the three women whose names we do not know, including his own daughter, foiled the king's cleverly laid plan. Isn't it delightful that, of all things, the courage of five *women* birthed hope in the face of such bitter injustice?

The storyteller, to be sure, does not have a nice sprinkling of God throughout the story. He tells of no visions, no clear and unmistakable divine voice. Nevertheless, the hints are there—hints that what is going on with this baby is not just about the baby but about the reliability of the God of promise. Remember the Hebrew words carefully worked into the story? They are reminders, lest Israel be plagued with the same memory issues that plagued the king. The adjective describing the "fine" baby (*tob*) is the word used in the creation story for God's joyful assessment that creation is "good." The Hebrew women's troublesome reproductive capabilities? Referred to by the writer when he says "the Israelites were fruitful and prolific," they recall God's command at creation (Gen. 1:28) and God's promise to Jacob at Bethel (Gen. 35:11). The baby's ark or basket (*teba*) recalls God's deliverance in the flood, and the reeds (*sup*) anticipate the waters through which Israel will pass to freedom. In other words, Walter Brueggemann observes,

These people, regarded by the empire as nameless slaves, in fact have a powerful shaping pedigree.

This treasured past carries power and protection that the empire does not recognize and cannot in the end control—*New Interpreter's Bible I, 701.*

The story of the women responsible for Moses' deliverance should give us pause. The seeming hiddenness of God acting to fulfill God's promises and deliver Israel into a future with hope may be more like our own experience than we would like to admit. More often than not, we, like Puah and Shiphrah, act without crystal clear directions. Our only gauge for action: the reliability of the God of promise and the recognition that time and time again, God has been on the side of those who are despised, who seemingly lack any access whatsoever to justice. Just as was the case with Puah and Shiphrah, the odds for success may seem overwhelmingly small. With them, we may feel that what we have to offer is so minimal that it cannot make a difference. The reverence and awe with which they held God, however, and their determination that there could be no shortcut around courageous action, secured a baby's future and in securing his future, opened the door to Israel's future with hope.

We may feel overwhelmed. We may feel inconsequential. If, however, we desire to be where God is, we will consistently and with deep determination commit to putting ourselves and our efforts into the task of working with God to birth hope, freedom, and justice in the midst of the chaos of this world that God loves.