

27 August 2023
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
Jessica Tate
Pharaohs and Midwives
Exodus 1:8-22

Our second scripture reading is from the beginning of the book of Exodus. Exodus tells the grand story of ancient Israel's move from slavery under Pharaoh to covenanting with God at the holy mountain of Sinai — by way of a burning bush, dramatic plagues, crossing the Red Sea, and journeying through the wilderness. This grand story is what biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann calls "the powerful, compelling center of Israel's defining memory of faith."¹

This is a core story.

This morning's text is a prologue of sorts, offering background that builds toward that compelling climax.

Listen for God's word to you today.

Exodus 1:8-22

8Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. 9He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. 10Come, 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."

11Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. 12But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. 13The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites. 14and 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.

15The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 16"When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live."

¹ Brueggemann, Walter. An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination (p. 53). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition. Also, Brueggemann, Walter. Journey to the Common Good, WJK, 2010, p. 2.

17But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. 18So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" 19The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." 20So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. 21And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.

22Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

This is the Word of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God.

Humans are a mixed bag, aren't we? We are capable of some of the most kind and courageous acts imaginable and we are capable of unspeakable cruelty.

It's no wonder these verses and the story that follows are central to the Jewish understanding of faith. It's a story for the ages.

In short, what happens after the verses I just read is that Moses' mother defies Pharaoh and hides her pregnancy and her infant son until he is too big to do so any longer. Then she slips him into a reed basket and puts him in the Nile River. Her daughter Miriam hides among the rushes and watches her brother float down that river, only to be discovered by Pharaoh's daughter who assumes this must be one of the Hebrew children her father has ordered be drowned. In defiance of her father, she plans to keep the child and raises him as her own. Miriam shows herself and offers to get a nursemaid to care for the baby. When Pharaoh's daughter agrees, Miriam fetches her mother (Moses' mother) to come nurse her baby. Moses, a Hebrew boy, is raised as Egyptian royalty. Later, he will be called by God in a burning bush. And he will become the courageous leader who leads the people of Israel out of Egypt and out of slavery.

Pharaoh is the villain in the story, whose desire for power and fear of losing it leads to great cruelty and his heart repeatedly hardens to the suffering of the Hebrew people.

Along the way there are plagues ranging from bizarre to grotesque and an epic chase scene where the Red Sea miraculously parts and the Hebrew people escape the

pursuing Egyptian soldiers. And ultimately, there is a celebration, led by Miriam, with song and dance and praise to God for leading the people from a life of bitterness to a life of possibility.

Walter Brueggemann says this story should be understood as a particular story with a particular people in a particular situation, BUT ALSO as a story that is an example of how God acts in the world in relationship to God's people in a variety of circumstances and contexts. This is why it has become a core story in the Jewish faith.² This is why it is a core story in our Christian understanding of who God is.

It is a story of God keeping God's promises.

God promised the people of Israel they would be fruitful and multiply and we see that promise coming to pass as the people of Israel are multiplying so quickly as to be perceived as a threat.

It is a story that shows how serious God is about life.

God grants the Israelites offspring in the harshest of conditions. God shows favor to the midwives and blesses them with families.

Life doesn't only mean the blessing of children, it also means God acts *against* death-dealing forces in the world. God is FOR LIFE. For the creation of life and against those forces in the world that hinder the flourishing of life.

It is a story about God hearing the cries of the suffering and responding to save them.

The people of Israel cry out because of their suffering. Their suffering becomes public. The Lord hears their cry and is moved to bring about salvation.

The Lord does not act in isolation, though, but uses human agency to bring about this salvation.

The human hero in the story is Moses as the spokesperson and leader of the Hebrew people. He gets best actor for this one.

But we have a whole cast of supporting actresses, without whom the story would not take place.

- Shiphrah & Puah, the midwives, who defy the pharaoh's command to kill newborn children and then deceive Pharaoh directly when challenged.

- Moses' mother, who hides her pregnancy and — I have to think — wraps her child in prayer as she pushes him into the river in hopes of a life for him.

² Brueggemann, Walter. An Introduction to the Old Testament, p. 54).

- Pharaoh's daughter, who harbors this baby and decides to raise him as her own, even though the child is one of the children her father would have killed.
- Miriam, who risks interacting with pharaoh's daughter and in so doing likely confirms that the child is a Hebrew boy. But her risk pays off as she and her mother come to care for the child as the servants of pharaoh's daughter.

These five women dream and act beyond the confines of the world as it is on behalf of the world as it should be. Their actions make possible a future for Israel and enable the emergence of a leader in Moses. I suspect they did not know how important their actions would turn out to be. I suspect they just did what they knew to be right and the Lord used their courage for God's saving purposes... and their actions reverberate through generations.

Humans are capable of the most kind and courageous acts imaginable. We see that in these women.

At the very same time, humans are capable of unspeakable cruelty.

The villains of this story are Pharaoh and the Egyptians, to be sure.

Biblical commentator Terence Fretheim says Pharaoh becomes a symbol for anti-creation — for the forces of death that take on the God of life.³

Pharaoh has immense power and is caught in his lust for power and control to the most brutal of ends. We get some glimpses in these early verses as to how he becomes fearful, anxious, and cruel.

First off, we learn this is a new king — who doesn't know Joseph. That's not a throwaway line. That is an ominous foreshadowing. Joseph had, over years, built up trust and power with the Egyptians. With that legacy gone, the people of Israel are vulnerable.

The narrator may also be inferring just how important relationship is in how we treat one another. Not knowing Joseph means this king has no connection, no care or concern for the Israelite people. One commentator says, "the difference in knowing has profound effect on the doing."⁴

How easy it is to allow suffering to go on unchecked when it's a nameless, faceless person to whom we have no connection.

³ Fretheim, Terence. Exodus: Interpretation Bible Commentary. WJK, 2010, p. 27.

⁴ Fretheim, p. 27.

- If it was my sister who was over-prescribed pain medications and caught in the grip of addiction, I would be deeply invested in the drug crisis in our country.
- If it were my relatives who fled the only home they had known because of unthinkable violence, and traveled through rainforests and deserts with their children only to be stymied at every border, I would be lobbying tirelessly for coherent immigration reform.
- If it were my children waking up crying in the night because gunshots ring out in such proximity and their little hearts grieve of family and friends and neighbors shot dead, I wouldn't shrug and say, "oh well, we have a right to guns in this country." How easy to allow suffering to go unchecked when it's a nameless, faceless person to whom we have no connection.

The new king did not know Joseph. He has no connection to the people of Israel, except as immigrants to his country. And he is scared to death of them.⁵ He is worried about a demographic shift — a shift that will give the Israelites more power and Pharaoh less power. So Pharaoh conspires to put the Israelites in their place, dealing shrewdly with them and forcing them into labor.

I should note that there is no evidence that the Hebrew people posed a real threat to Pharaoh. Nancy Bowen notes, "Though we know history has no shortage of methods for dealing shrewdly with those we think might be against us."⁶

Pharaoh's selfish scheme doesn't work and the Israelites continue to multiply. The Egyptians come to dread the Israelites. And they impose even harsher tasks upon them.

This is a good reminder of what people mean when they say oppression hurts everyone. Those subject to brutality are harmed, that is obvious. But what we also see is that Pharaoh and the Egyptians live in constant fear. Rather than being quelled by the ruthless brutality, the fear ratchets up.

It's still not enough, so the king calls to the Hebrew midwives — Shiphrah and Puah (I love that these two midwives have names and we don't know the name of Pharaoh) — he tells them to kill all the male children. The policy is quite literally against his own interest because it destroys those who would be the next generation of workers.⁷ But it shows how deeply twisted Pharaoh's thinking and soul have become. He has now progressed into ethnic cleansing.

⁵ Brueggemann, *Common Good*, p. 9.

⁶ Bowen, Nancy. *Exodus*. The Discipleship Bible. WJK, p. 77.

⁷ Brueggemann, *Common Good*, p. 10.

And it still does not work to curb the vigor and number of the Hebrew people.

Walter Brueggemann writes the tentative conclusion of what we learn from Pharaoh is that “those who are living in anxiety and fear, most especially fear of scarcity, ...[this] causes the formulation of policy and of exploitative practices.⁸ We don’t need to look very hard through history or today’s newspaper to see this dynamic played out.

Humans are capable of unspeakable cruelty.

When I was taught how to study scripture in order to preach it, I was taught to ask a series of questions that included:

What does this text teach us about God?

What does this text teach us about humanity?

What does this text teach us about the relationship between God and humanity?

So, here is where these characters and this core story teach me about God, about humanity, and about the relationship between us.

**God is always on the side of life and against death-dealing forces in the world.
God is always on the side of life and against death-dealing forces in the world.**

It teaches me that humans living in fear and anxiety are capable of unspeakable cruelty. It leaves me wondering what do we do with our fear and anxiety? How can I keep it from slipping into actions that — wittingly or not — harm others?

This story teaches me that humans have capacity for immense kindness and courage. And it leaves me wondering what we can do with our human agency to be about God’s work in the world? How can I use what opportunities I have to act with courage and kindness, to confront the pharaohs of our day with a new kind of kingdom?

We have opportunities each and every day to put our actions in alignment with God’s intention for the world — for justice, for peace, for freedom — and against death-dealing forces like cruelty and greed and violence. And just like the women in this story, we can use the opportunities and resources we have to push against the pharaohs of our day.

- Sticking up for someone being left out or teased at school.
- Using the power and influence we have in our professions toward God’s ends and against the norms of our culture.

⁸ Brueggemann, Common Good p. 7.

- Investing our money in ethical ways.
- Getting proximate to people whose situations are more precarious than our own by volunteering at Saturday suppers or Excel Academy or with our refugee committee or Free Minds book club.
- Voting our values over our pocketbooks.

Just like the women in this story, we can use the opportunities and resources we have to push against the pharaohs of our day and push FOR God's Promised Day.

I was also taught that every sermon should preach the Good News. So here's the Good News from this text, as best I understand it:

God is already out there.

Having heard the cries of the suffering, God is out there working toward salvation of all creation.

We can be part of that! Our actions matter in alleviating suffering and bringing about God's Promised Day.

When we act in alignment with God, scripture tells us, babies are born, lives are saved, bushes burn, and seas are parted.

Lives of bitterness give ways to lives of possibility.

Thanks be to God.