

A Lectionary 21 8.27.23

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Focus Statement: God uses all our work.

Well team, welcome to Exodus. Last week Joseph was forgiving his brothers and inviting them to Egypt, this week there's a new king, here's what happened in between. Joseph's entire family moved to Egypt, were successful, lived rich, full lives, died of old age, as did their children, their children's children, their children's children's children. Many generations passed, and verse seven reads, "the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them." You've heard echoes of these words before. Genesis twenty-eight, God said to Jacob his descendants would "be like the dust of the earth, [and] spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south." And before that, Genesis twelve, God said to Abram that God would make of him a great nation. And even earlier than that, all the way back in Genesis one, God created humankind and said to them, "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." These opening verses of Exodus tell us that these are a people with a past and a promise.

A people with a past and a promise that our reading for today tells us, the new king who arose over Egypt did not know. Did not know, or had forgotten, or had chosen to forget. This new king did not know all that these people's ancestor Joseph had done for them. Did not know they were people of God's promise. Did not know that through them all the nations of the world would be blessed. All the king knew, all the king cared about, was that there were a lot of them, and that they had the potential to threaten his power. And here's a little observation about people with power. And it seems like the more power one has the

truer this observation. People with power are always the most concerned with keeping and growing their current power, in exactly the form that it is in. The more power one has, the more risk averse they become, the more inward and immediate their focus.

That's a general observation, but it was certainly true of the Pharaoh. Exodus tells us that the thing Pharaoh was most concerned about wasn't the Israelites conquering his nation, it was that they would leave and he would lose his free labor. Who would build all the monuments to him if he couldn't make Israelite slaves do it for him? So when ruthlessly oppressing them didn't work, he decided to try genocide. And, I don't want to sound like I'm joking about this, but, if you're trying to sustain a workforce, killing off the upcoming generation of it seems like not the best long term solution. But so short-sighted, so self-sighted, was Pharaoh that this was the approach he took.

And, spoiler alert, it's not going to work. The writer of Exodus foreshadows what's coming in verse nine. It gets lost in translation, but the king uses the Hebrew word "ala", which means "go up," anticipating the Israelites going up out of Egypt. We actually get two hints this morning. The princess puns that Moses's name is because "I drew him out of the water." But Moses means "the one who draws out," hinting at Moses, not her, role in the story. But that's ahead, back to the king. So the king said, get rid of all the babies so they can't go up. And he told these two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to do this for him.

A couple things to note here. First, Shiphrah and Puah are the first named characters in this story. The king doesn't have a name. The writer of Exodus hasn't even used the term

“Pharaoh” yet, that first shows up on Shiphrah and Puah’s lips, he’s just the king. As the first named characters, we know they’re important. And this is the Exodus. We’re about to get Moses, “the one who draws out,” standing up against an Egyptian for beating an Israelite, storming into Pharaoh’s palace and demanding, “let my people go!” This is a book of bold declaration, and maybe we want that from Shiphrah and Puah.

But here’s the thing, dear people, Shiphrah and Puah in an impossible situation. Obviously, they don’t want to kill the babies but he’s the Pharaoh. If they “let my people go” him and refuse to do what he commanded, well, he’ll kill them first. Then there will be no midwives, and the babies will still be killed. So instead they did this really sneaky thing here, they punted. They said to him, Pharaoh, we’d love to do as you commanded us here, but its these Hebrew women. “They are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” And that’s the last we heard of them, and Pharaoh still told his people, ok, if you see Hebrew boy babies, throw them in the Nile. But. But I wonder what ripple effects Shiphrah and Puah’s words and actions had on the Israelites, and especially on the women. I wonder what courage and subversiveness watching how they worked demonstrated.

I wonder that, because chapter two starts with a man from the house of Levi who married a Levite woman, and then we never hear about him again. It is the woman, the text tells us, who conceived and bore a son, and “when she was that he was a fine boy”. Fine, fun fact here, being the same Hebrew word used in the creation story when God called everything good. “When she saw that he was a fine boy,” when she saw that he was made in the echo of all that God had called good, first she hid him, and then she placed him in a watertight

basket in the Nile River. And here's a detail of that little scene here. Pharaoh had said, throw the boy babies in the river, but he didn't specify how they were to be thrown in. One could argue, by placing the baby who would become Moses in a basket in the Nile, this woman is following the king's commands to the letter of the law. Boy baby, in Nile, just like the law said.

At which point we meet our fourth subversive character, this one Pharaoh's own daughter. She finds the baby, and the text tells us, she knows this is a Hebrew baby. Baby in river, she could tell someone has obeyed the letter of her father's law and entirely evaded the spirit of the law. And she couldn't overturn the law any more than the midwives or the mother could. But what she could do, what she did to, was pull the baby out of the river and raise him as her own. And here's the thing dear people of God. If any one of these women had not done these subversive actions, if any one of them had felt the powerlessness of their situation, or had pushed too hard the other way, had thrown it all away to make a statement, there would have been no Moses. Each of these women had to do their part, their small, bold action, for Moses not just to do what he ended up doing, but to have even survived.

Dear people of God, the beginning of the Exodus story shows us the undergirdings of change. It shows us the many seemingly small, insignificant acts of courage that have to take place in order for there to be transformation. When we're in the midst of it, when we're in the grind. When we're working and struggling and fighting against a world that seems so full of obstacles, it can be easy to ask the question, does any of this matter? Is the

work that I'm doing, the time I'm putting in, the risks I'm taking, the prayers I'm praying, is any difference being made at all? This story shows us that if there wasn't Shiphrah and Puah, if there wasn't a Levite woman who "followed the law", a daughter who certainly knew her father's demands and just sort of ignored them, and a sister who followed her brother and "just happened" to know a woman who could wet nurse, if any of these women hadn't done these actions, there would have been no Moses.

There's a poem that hangs in my office by my desk to help me remember this message. The poem is attributed to Archbishop Oscar Romero who quoted it in a speech, it was written by a man named Ken Untener. I think I've shared it with you before, I'll share part of it today. It opens, "It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view / The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision... This is what we are about. / We plant the seeds that one day will grow. / We water seeds already planted, / knowing that they hold future promise... We are workers, not master builders; ministers not messiahs. / We are prophets of a future not our own."

Do your part, dear people of God. Do it well and faithfully. Stand up in the ways you can stand up. Risk in the ways you can risk. Serve in the ways you can serve. You are the person for this stage of the journey. God will make sure the next person is in place, to carry the baby on to its next destination. Amen.