

“Journey to Freedom: Creative Cattywampus”

Exodus 1

September 13, 2020

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

As some of you already know, I served a historic church in Hillsborough, NC for about 8 years. Hillsborough was once the capital of North Carolina and our church sat in the heart of the downtown area. The church was surrounded by one of the oldest cemeteries in North Carolina. Right outside the sanctuary door you could walk among the ancient oaks, pecan trees and grave sites, reading the names and whatever else was carved on the tombstones. You can learn a lot of history by walking in historic cemeteries. I discovered early on in my ministry in Hillsborough that all the headstones in historic old cemeteries face the same way; the belief being that when Christ comes again to earth in all his glory, as the book of Revelation promises, the dead would rise up to meet him. Therefore, the deceased needed to be facing in the right direction in order to see his coming. Hence, all the tombstones face in the same direction.

Fred Craddock, retired professor of preaching at Chandler School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia, and one of our finest Presbyterian preachers who is now deceased, shares a story of one of his visits to a similar small town cemetery. He says: “I like cemeteries. I like to see if several of the deaths occurred in the same year and wonder if there had been an epidemic or a natural disaster. I was reading the markers in one particular cemetery, and I found one section with a huge stone bearing the family name

and a lot of burial plots on either side that stretched out for some distance. In this large family section, there was a most unusual thing. All the graves lined up. There were small graves for infants and children, and there were adult graves, but there was one grave in which the marker and the slab indicated that the grave was at a right angle. All of the other graves were lined up in a row, but this one grave was crosswise, or, as we used to say “cattywampus.” At that angle, it actually took up three burial plots. I was pondering this when a stranger walked up beside me. I asked him, “Are you from around here?” “Yeah,” he said. “We actually belong to the church here. I knew that fellow there. He was also a member of this church. I knew him well – all my life.” “Well then, why is his burial at an angle?”

“The family wanted it that way. That was the kind of guy he was. He was crossways with everybody all the time about everything. We never knew him to be pleased about anything at home, in the church or even at his workplace. The family decided they wanted his burial to be a witness to his orneriness. The family said if God wants to straighten him out then God can straighten him out. But he left here just like he lived. Cattywampus.” Crosswise with the world.

It has occurred to me that sometimes the Church of Jesus Christ is called to be cattywampus with the world/our culture. Not the ornery, mean kind of cattywampus, but the kind that refuses to go along just to get along and not disrupt the status quo, especially when it is contrary to God’s will for humankind and all of creation. Sometimes, God calls us to challenge the status quo; to be at odds with culture and the powers that be. To risk for the sake of God’s kingdom here on earth. This morning we

will consider two women who were cattywampus for the sake of God's kingdom and they were willing to stand up to the destructive power of the Pharaoh of Egypt. Today we begin a series of sermons focused on the narrative stories of the Old Testament book of Exodus.

Prayer for Understanding: Astonishing God, whose purposes are often accomplished in unexpected ways, release in us the gifts you have entrusted to us that we may realize the power, love, and self-discipline that make life and service in Christ's name, meaningful. Help us to use whatever faith we have to accomplish great things for the furtherance of your world here on earth.

Before I read the first chapter of Exodus, allow me to set the context: As our Exodus story begins, the Hebrew people have moved to Egypt during a time of famine. Joseph, the youngest son of Jacob, has been sold into slavery in Egypt as a result of his older brothers' jealousy. Joseph was the pampered baby of the family which created resentment among his older siblings. Joseph's time in Egypt, however, was blessed by God and he worked his way into high standing within the Pharaoh's court. So, Jacob and the rest of the family move to Egypt to avoid starvation. Life is good for Jacob and his descendents. And then things change. Joseph and his generation die and a new Pharaoh rises to power in Egypt who did not know Joseph and his family and the good fortune of the Hebrews changes.

Read Exodus 1

As with any good story the first chapter generally introduces the characters of the story and the plot. I invite you to draw your own parallels with our own day and time.

First, the characters.

A new king rises over Egypt who did not know Joseph. The writer does not give this new king, the Pharaoh of Egypt, a man of great power and wealth, a name. To name a person gives them power, according to the Hebrew people. This no name king is driven by fear of the “other.” He is afraid that the Hebrew people, who are of a different race and religion, will multiply and eventually outnumber and conquer the Egyptians by siding with their enemies. The Pharaoh begins to peddle fear in order to maintain the status quo and his oppressive power. So, this no name king or Pharaoh sets taskmasters over the Hebrew people to oppress them with forced labor. When they complain about how horrific their life is, the king doubles down on their work load – the idea being that if the Hebrew slaves expend all their energy in just surviving, then they will not have time to revolt. Systemic oppression is put in place because of the fear of a king who believes that if the Hebrews are fruitful and multiply, they will eventually overcome his position of power.

But the more the Hebrews are oppressed, the more they are fruitful and multiply. These are words straight from the first chapter of Genesis, describing God’s intent for creation: “God blessed humankind, and said to them – be fruitful and multiply and till the earth, and be caretakers of all of creation.” That created order is defined by mutuality, diversity, fruitfulness, community. That is what God intends for all creation. But the king of Egypt is introducing another life destroying and life diminishing

purpose into God's created order which is characterized by prejudice, oppression, injustice, abuse – all that threatens God's created order, anti-creation. And the no name Pharaoh, motivated by his fear of losing power and wealth, makes the lives of the Hebrew people bitter and the Egyptians were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on the Hebrews. As oppressive as the Egyptians are, we the readers know, that what they are doing is contrary to what God wills for creation.

Terrence Fretheim says in his commentary on Exodus: "Under a regime of slavery, subjects become objects. As the oppressors dehumanize others and violate their rights, they themselves also become dehumanized. Once a situation of violence and oppression has been established, it engenders an entire way of life and behavior for those caught up in it – oppressor and oppressed alike."

So far we have not yet heard from God. Where is God in all of this oppressive and destructive drama?

Determined to stop the fruitfulness of the Hebrew people, in order to completely humiliate/demoralize/dehumanize them, the Pharaoh orders the Hebrew midwives to murder the Hebrew baby boys at birth. The irony is that the no name Pharaoh will be ultimately destroying his own work force. That is what systemic oppression does – it eventually destroys all of creation. And then, we are suddenly introduced to two Hebrew midwives – and they are named – Shiphrah and Puah – who fear (or in the Hebrew, the word means to serve or to worship) God. Ah, God. The first mention of God in this drama. Somehow Shiphrah and Puah know that it is God's will to bring forth life and not destroy it. Shiphrah and Puah do not do as the king orders. The

story is begging us to answer the question, “Who will you serve? The Pharaoh who is opposed to God’s vision for creation, or God?” Shiphrah and Puah answer that question with their actions – with their creative disobedience to systemic, life destroying oppression.

A midwife’s primary role is to usher in life, regardless of status, race or any other defining division – to assist, guide, protect life. To sit with the mother bringing forth life during those long hours of hard labor, to wipe their sweaty faces, to help ease the pain where they can, to hold their hands, to offer words of encouragement and hope, to keep before the mother a vision of the new life she will soon hold in her arms. To hope, to envision, to comfort, to be present, to guide and to care. A stark contrast to the ways of the Pharaoh and his system of oppression. Ultimately these two women outsmart all of Egypt. They will not bend to the Pharaoh’s will. Understanding that all of life is sacred, they engage in creative disobedience and will not kill the babies as ordered by the Pharaoh. They have courage.

Maya Angelo writes: “I am convinced that courage is the most important of all the virtues. Because without courage, you cannot practice any other virtue consistently. You can be kind for a while; you can be generous for a while; you can be just for a while; or merciful for a while, even loving for a while. But it is only with courage that you can be persistently and insistently kind and generous and fair.”

Through the actions of Shiphrah and Puah, two Hebrew midwives, we are reminded of God and God’s intent for creation in the midst of the abusive king’s oppressive system of slavery of a people. And the writer reaches out to us over the

centuries and asks the same question of us which he surely asks of his readers during his own day and time: Who will you choose to serve? The Pharaoh and his version of reality which is characterized by an oppressive system which diminishes and destroys life; systemic oppression which is motivated by his own fear, or will you choose to serve the God of creation who calls us to live fruitfully in community? And how exactly will God enter this cosmic drama between good and evil? We will discover that answer as we journey with these Hebrew people from slavery to the promised land and hear their story in the weeks to come. For now, may we be grateful to two Hebrew midwives who chose to exercise creative cattywampus.