

“Journey to Freedom: Whom Will You Serve?”

September 20, 2020

Exodus 2

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

This morning’s scripture reading is the second chapter of the Old Testament book of Exodus. To set the context: The Hebrew people migrated to Egypt in order to avoid starvation caused by a famine in their own homeland. Over the course of several generations a brutal Pharaoh takes the throne over Egypt and this Pharaoh is driven by his twisted/distorted fear of the “other” – people who are of a different race and religion – namely, the Hebrew people. To maintain his power and the status quo, he ruthlessly enslaves the Hebrew people, forcing them into hard labor which “makes their lives bitter.” The Pharaoh is motivated by his perceived loss of power so he uses his power to terrorize and dehumanize the Hebrews. The Hebrew people become objects in his power game. The Pharaoh personifies all that is opposed to God’s creative purposes for humankind, “to be fruitful and multiply.” In Chapter One of Exodus we are introduced to a cosmic battle between God and the Pharaoh, good and evil. At the close of Chapter One, the Pharaoh, so paranoid about his loss of power because of the fruitfulness of the Hebrews, orders the Hebrew midwives to kill the Hebrew baby boys as soon as they are born. But two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, courageously stand up to the Pharaoh and his life destroying policies because they worshipped and served God and they refused the Pharaoh’s murderous order. This cosmic battle is now about to become, not just about the “sons of Israel”, but about one “son of Israel” – Moses.

## Prayer for Understanding

### Read Exodus 2: 1-10

Almost ten years ago, in the fall of the year, I received a phone call a mother never wants to hear. I was serving as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Milledgeville, Georgia. I was in Office Depot buying a few office supplies when my cell phone rang. It was my daughter-in-law's mother, calling to share the news that my son, who was a law enforcement officer, had been shot after pulling over a driver in a routine traffic stop. As it turns out the car he stopped belonged to another man and had been stolen by a homeless man and his girlfriend. My son was airlifted to the Greenville hospital where he underwent several surgeries, as I was driving from Georgia to Greenville, not knowing what I would discover once I arrived at the hospital. My son survived, and my family is forever grateful to the medical professionals here in Greenville. My son continues to serve his community as a law enforcement officer. Even after ten years, when I share this story my heart grips with the remembered terror of that day.

I share this story because I can empathize with Moses' mother. I have felt the terror which probably gripped her heart when the Pharaoh of Egypt ordered all the Hebrew baby boys to be thrown into the Nile and killed. Any of us who have experienced a life-threatening event involving our children, or those we dearly love, can understand her paralyzing, soul ripping fear. And it simply does not matter if you are white, brown, black, Hebrew or Egyptian.

Moses' mother hides her son for three months. When she could not longer hide him and from the death warrant which the Pharaoh had issued for all Hebrew baby boys, she creates a straw basket in order to place him in the river, hoping that he will not drown but somehow live. The Hebrew word used for "basket" in this story is the very same word used to describe Noah's Ark, found in the book of Genesis. I don't believe that the word usage here is coincidental – it is intentional. God commanded Noah to build an ark in order to save creation. Is Moses' mother creating an ark to save her son and ultimately all of creation from an evil Pharaoh? Is Moses' mom turning her son over to God, trusting in God's promises to Noah for life and new life? As I was driving through the night to arrive in a Greenville hospital to be by my son's bedside, all I could do was pray and turn over my son's life to God, remembering that my God and my son's God was a God who promises life and new life. When we let go of our children, doing what we can to protect them, but ultimately having to entrust them to God's care, we can never be sure where that little basket will land. The irony is that Moses' mother did as was commanded of her by the Pharaoh – she put her baby boy in the Nile, releasing him to the terror of the watery chaos (the same watery chaos Noah experienced?) – but she created a basket to hold him and protect him from drowning, plastering it with love and prayers.

As fate would have it – or maybe God's providence? – the Pharaoh's daughter goes down to the river to bathe. She sees the Hebrew baby boy, hears his cry and takes pity on him, drawing him out of the river in order to provide for his daily needs. The very same words which the writer of Exodus will use to describe God's actions in Chapter Three – God will see the misery of the Hebrews as they labored bitterly in their bondage, God will hear their cries/groans, and God will take pity on them and draw them

out of slavery, providing for their daily needs. The Pharaoh's daughter will embody the basic human values such as compassion, justice, courage and the active subversion of cruel and inhuman systemic policies. The Pharaoh's daughter will act in concert with the Hebrew midwives, bringing forth life in the midst of oppression and suffering. The Hebrew midwives and the Egyptian princess are agents of life and blessing in God's created order; engaged on the side of life against a ruler who is driven by fear, selfish power and brutality. They risk their lives for the sake of life. What they do for Moses, Moses will grow up to do for Israel.

Read Exodus 2: 11-25

Moses will embody the future of Israel. He enters into the conflict with the Egyptians when, as an adult, he encounters an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave. He kills or strikes the Egyptian, buries him in the sand and flees to the land of Midian – the wilderness where the Israelites will also find themselves after fleeing from the Pharaoh, later in our story. While Moses is wandering in the wilderness of Midian, he encounters a beautiful young woman, Zipporah, and they marry and have children, integrating an “outsider” into the community. Is God letting us know that God will use even “outsiders” to further God's will for all of creation? Moses says: “I have been an alien residing in a foreign land.” Moses can add foreigner to his list of characteristics which include being born to Hebrew slaves, raised within the Pharaoh's court by an Egyptian princess, murderer, fugitive, sheep herder. Not a list of accomplishments which we would believe God would use to further God's purposes for the world. But God has plans for Moses, which we will begin to discover next week. For now, it is enough to know that God will choose whom God will choose to do God's work in the world.

I have another Fred Craddock story for you. Dr. Craddock tells of the encounter with an old man in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, as he is on his way to a speaking engagement. He sat down next to this man in a local diner, grabbing a quick lunch before heading out. Upon learning that Dr. Craddock was a minister, the old man shared his story: I was born not far from here across those mountains. My mother wasn't married when I was born so I had a hard time. When I started school, my classmates had a name for me, and it wasn't a very nice name. I used to go off by myself at recess and during lunchtime because my schoolmate would bully me. When I would go into town, I would feel every eye burning a hole through me, wondering who my father was. When I was about 12 years old a new preacher came to our church. I would always go in late and sit on the back pew and then slip out early. But one day the preacher said the benediction so fast I got stuck walking out with the crowd. Just as I got to the door, I felt a big hand on my shoulder and I looked up at the preacher as he asked me, "Who are you, son? Whose boy are you?" I felt the old weight of shame and all my shortcomings come over me. It was like a big black cloud. Even the preacher was putting me down? But as he looked at me, studying my face, he began to smile, "Wait a minute," he said. "I know who you are. I see the family resemblance. You are a child of God." The old man looked across the table at Fred Craddock and said, "That was the most important single sentence ever said to me. That's the day I was born! Regardless of my past, of my family lineage, I was suddenly somebody – a child of God. And that was more than enough." As Dr. Craddock was leaving the diner, he remembered that the people of Tennessee had elected an illegitimate son, Ben Hooper, to be their governor on two different occasions. The man Fred Craddock had just shared a meal with was an older Ben Hooper.

God has no illegitimate children. God gives us a name and a destiny. With that name, you will be what God makes you. You will do what God does through you. But God calls and does not coerce, so its up to you – just as it was up to Moses, as we will begin to discover. Who will Moses serve? Who will we serve? And it really doesn't matter what we have been or done before. God works through persons who have no obvious power – midwives, mothers who fear for their children, Egyptian princesses, and Moses. And what seems like a hopeless time, suddenly becomes filled with new possibilities.