

## “Holding Heaven’s Keys”

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Exodus 1:8-2:10

Matthew 16:13-20

Raise your hand if you have a key to this church building.

Chances are, if you have a key to the church you were given it because you have taken some kind of leadership role in the church. Perhaps you teach Sunday School, and need to come in early to prep for your lesson. Maybe you help with hospitality, and brew coffee in the morning or provide food for a funeral. Some, who have a deep affection for the worship space and are good at making things look *just so*, are given a key. Are you like Hyung Kune, good with technology and can set up AV equipment? You’ve got a key. Teach ESL class? You surely have a key. Are you handy? Can you plunge a toilet? Chances are, you have been given a key too. Session knows that over the years too many keys have been floating around, and while I agree that we need to develop a lock and key system that better balances volunteer access and building security, I am delighted that so many lay people have enough of a sense of responsibility to this church that they have been given keys.

When Simon Peter answered Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” with a confession of faith: “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God,” Jesus calls him by his name, Petros, Peter, which means Rock, and then tells him “on this *rock* I will build my church.” Jesus then hands Peter the keys to heaven, saying to him “what you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and what you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Now before you let so much power get to Peter's head, let me tell you a couple things. I have looked at the Greek and I have looked at some other English translations. Verse 19 can also read: "Whatever you bind on earth *will have been* bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth *will have been* loosed in heaven." In other words, instead of God and the angels rushing to do in heaven everything they see Peter do on earth, I think that Jesus sees that Peter will have the inclination or desire to do things on earth as they have *already been* done in heaven. I like to think of the line in The Lord's Prayer here: *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* So maybe Peter has figured out that *on earth as it is in heaven* part.

I also think that any of us can be Peter; any of us can be gifted with those keys. Remember, even though we recall Peter as a devoted disciple, he was far from perfect. He is kind of like that guy in the church who volunteers for the church choir and then realizes he doesn't know how to sing. He jumped out of the boat onto the water to walk on it just like Jesus did, and then he freaked out and started to sink. He is passionate but not very practical. He often speaks before he thinks about what he will say. After Jesus' crucifixion, this man who had many times declared his fierce love and commitment to Jesus denies to the authorities that he even knew the man, because he was so scared. And yet, Jesus chooses him, as he will also choose us.

Peter will not be the last to be given heaven's keys, and he was not the first one, either. For what Peter lacked in practicality, the Hebrew midwives had a double serving. These women were shrewd and quick on their feet. In Exodus, we hear of a time when the Pharaoh no longer had respect for the descendents of his advisor Joseph, whose visions and wisdom had spared Egypt from the famine that swept the land. As the Hebrew population grew, Pharaoh feared they might build an army and overpower him. And so he devised a policy that the Hebrews would become part of a slave caste, making their lives bitter with oppression and hard labor. Still, the

Hebrew population multiplied. And so, Pharaoh devised his program for genocide: each male Hebrew baby would be put to death.

Pharaoh's mistake was assuming that it was just the *men* he had to fear.

Turns out, the women in this story were Pharaoh's real downfall. Several women in this story must have held the keys to heaven, and what they saw as binded on heaven the bound on earth, and what they saw as loosed on heaven they loosed on earth. The midwives Shiphrah and Puah were directly told by Pharaoh to kill the baby boys. But they knew God had a different program than Pharaoh's program. God's program was for liberation, not for domination, and these women feared God. And so, they banked on Pharaoh's own racism: "Well, you know those Hebrew women. They aren't like the Egyptian women. They are vigorous and give birth before we can even get to them!"

How many times have we heard that or said that? "Well, you know how people from the South are." "You know how Koreans are." "You know how Latinos are." When I was a teenager in the South and took my first trip to New York City, I imagined I would like living in New York someday. But, I told myself, I could never date a New Yorker. They probably all have diseases," I thought. Fast forward 6 years, when I first met Chris, who was right out of Queens. The rest is history.

So the Hebrew midwives were very clever in tricking the Pharaoh into believing they could not possibly act fast enough to deliver the Hebrew babies into their death. But Pharaoh persisted, and commanded his people to throw the Hebrew baby boys into the Nile River.

Pharaoh persisted, and still, women who had the keys to heaven resisted. Another Hebrew woman gave birth to a baby boy and hid him until his cooing and crying could no longer be contained. Then, she put him in a basket, lined it so it would be waterproof, and placed him in the Nile. Her

daughter, Miriam, the baby's brother, watched from the reeds to see what would happen.

It turns out Pharaoh's daughter was also given the keys to heaven. She was bathing in the river and saw the baby boy crying. She could be called a race traitor, because even though she knew he was a Hebrew baby, one of Pharaoh's hated enemies, she protected the baby. And the baby's sister Miriam, who was clever and quick, offered their own mother as a nurse for the baby-- and Pharaoh's daughter paid this woman to nurse her own son. When he was weaned, he was returned to Pharaoh's daughter to live in the palace and she gave him the name *Moshe*, Moses, which means "to draw out of the water."

To understand how subversive Pharaoh's daughter was, imagine Ivanka Trump taking a Mexican child out of a detention center where he is staying with his mother, and then hiring his mom-- preventing her deportation-- to take care of him, even in a time when Ivanka's father, The President, commands lawmakers to "Build that wall!"

In just two stories, we see many people who hold holy keys: Peter, Shiphrah, Puah, Moses' mother, Miriam, Pharaoh's daughter. And baby Moses will grow to hold holy keys too, as he leads the Hebrew people toward God's liberation from Pharaoh's slavery. These are people who grasp some sort of vision of who God is and what God calls us to do to make earth a little bit more like heaven, a place of compassion and justice if this story is any reflection of what heaven might be up to.

I suspect there are some people in this church who have knowingly avoided getting a key to the church at all cost. They don't want to get called to let in the AA group, or to check on a leak, or to balance the checkbook, or any of that stuff. I will not ask you to out yourself. But you are not dummies; you know that with the possession of the keys, comes

great responsibility, and you are not sure you are ready for that just yet. Might as well let someone else do it.

“Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asked the disciples. Tough question. I think that many people in this room would struggle to answer that question. I also guess that one of the reasons that question is so hard is because once we answer it, we have to respond to it. ***If we know Jesus, our lives have to be different.*** We cannot go on living and accepting the world as it is; once we have been granted the keys to heaven, we have to work for the world as it should become, according to how we name God’s vision on heaven **and** on earth.

There are many heavenly keys out there, even here on earth. One just might have your name on it. Will you receive it? May God’s blessing be on you and whatever it is you might unlock. Amen.