

“At the River”

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August 23, 2020

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

The lectionary gives us a story this morning that has such richness, such power, such meaning even for our times today, that I barely even need to preach a sermon on it. The story is so well-written, it nearly preaches itself. When we read the text yesterday in our Zoom church bible study, I could see light and wonder dance on the faces of those who heard this story which is familiar, yes, but still is so chock-full of amazement that you simply can't hear it enough.

We begin with a cast of characters who, within just the few words that describe them and their actions, awaken faces and characters we have known, revered, and feared. Pharaoh-- the story tells us off the bat that years had passed, and this king didn't know Joseph and how he had saved Egypt from ruin-- was noticing how the Israelite people had grown in numbers. This simple fact terrified Pharaoh, perhaps in a way that some sectors of white Americans fear the changing demographics of this country. By 2045, it is expected that non-Hispanic whites will be in the minority in the US. In their fragility, some suspect that their status, power, and ease of life will shift when they are no longer the dominant group. And so, to cling to and hoard their power, they support ideas like building a wall, separating children from their parents at the border, and making it harder for neighborhoods that aren't white to vote easily.

As for Pharaoh, he put forth a program of forced labor, to keep the Hebrews from rising up; if you work them hard enough, he thought, they will have nothing left in them to resist. Still, the Hebrew population kept growing, and Pharaoh saw he wouldn't be able to control them much longer. So he made their tasks even more impossible. But when that didn't work, Pharaoh instructed the Hebrew midwives to kill each newborn, male baby born to the Israelites.

Funny thing that Pharaoh didn't count on-- boys who become men aren't the only threat towards unrighteous leaders. The five women mentioned here really own this story. The Hebrew midwives resisted Pharaoh's edict by telling him, "Oh, you know those Hebrew women. They really aren't like your Egyptian women. These Hebrew women are so vigorous, they just push those babies out before we midwives can even get to them. They are basically just like animals." Of course, these clever midwives were playing Pharaoh's own racist assumptions against him. Still, he commanded his own people to take any Hebrew baby boy, and drown him in the Nile.

And so, when Pharaoh's own daughter came to bathe in the river, and saw that basket float beside her, heard that cry from inside, and looked and realized this was a Hebrew child, she knew what had to be done, what the law required, what her father insisted upon. She was supposed to reach over, tip that basket, until the infant rolled out into the Nile and the waters pulled him to his death. But she didn't.

I don't know whether Pharaoh's daughter stood in principal against her father's policy of genocide, or if-- when confronted face to face with this vulnerable piece of humanity, felt a wave of compassion flood over her. I think for many of us, it is hard to grasp the impact of human suffering unless we are met face to face with it. One example of that is that we may take mask-wearing casually, until we know someone personally who was hospitalized, or worse, from COVID-19, and then the importance of wearing masks becomes brutally real. We ignore the federal cuts to programs like SNAP, which gives food stamps to hungry families. But come Thanksgiving, we happily donate canned foods or even a turkey to feed a hungry family. So maybe Pharaoh's daughter saw the baby and thought, "There's not much I can do to stop my father's maniacal genocide. But to help one child? Well, that's something I *can* do." Or maybe she just thought a Hebrew baby would make a cute project she could show off around the palace. Who knows? The fact remained that she defied her father's rules in a way that allowed God's plan to move forward.

And all this time Miriam, Moses' sister, who had been watching for what would happen to her brother from behind the reeds, popped out and announced, "I know a Hebrew woman who could nurse the baby for you." Pharaoh's daughter agreed, and so then Miriam brought her own mother forth; she would get paid by the palace to nurse her own son. I wonder whether Pharaoh's daughter recognized how subversive this suggestion was, and in a moment of conspiratory alliance with Miriam, agreed to let this happen.

I wonder what songs Moses' mother sang to him, what legends she told him of her people and of Abraham and Sarah's God. I wonder what it must have been like for him, then growing up in Pharaoh's palace-- with a different language, different status, different gods. On some level I suspect he gained some of the tools he needed to confront an unrighteous ruler by living under that person's roof. As he grew into adulthood he would have to navigate what it would mean for him, being shaped by both oppression and privilege, two cultures that were in such opposition.

W.E.B. De Bois wrote of what it was like for him, as a black American, living as a black man in a white-dominant culture. He said, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost."¹

¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Strivings of the Negro People" in *The Atlantic*, August, 1897

We will stay with Moses for several weeks in the lectionary, and will see how these two selves get reconciled into a clear calling and vision for liberation for God's people. But he struggles to get there, as we will see.

Moses' name, given by Pharaoh's daughter, means in Egyptian, "to beget a child." But in Hebrew, the name means "to draw out." Moses was drawn out of the water thanks to the clever and subversive actions of 5 women, who acted as agents of God's redemption. The river was supposed to be the tool of his execution; instead it was the source of his liberation. We see a reflection of that years later, when Moses leads his people right through the waters of the red sea into their freedom. While those same waters swallow up and drown those who wanted to enslave and kill, they clear the way for those who yearn for freedom and fullness of life. I see in this story a mirror in which we will later see Jesus looking. Jesus, as an infant, made an opposite journey-- from Bethlehem into Egypt, because Herod tried to kill him and all the Hebrew, male babies, out of fear one would lead a rebellion against him. The cross where Jesus hung, which was made as a tool for execution, became for Jesus the vehicle for salvation-- not just for him, but for all who die and rise with him into the glory of the resurrection.

What we might take from all this for that is of use to use today-- besides the appreciation of a most remarkable story-- is that things are so much more than what they seem. Two girls, whom Pharaoh overlooked as potential threats-- in just a few short actions and choices, subverted the capacity of Pharaoh's oppressive reach. A hired hand, who meant nothing more to the Egyptians than a pair of milky breasts, actually got to nurture and prepare the one who would grow to free an entire people from slavery and inspire countless movements for liberation to come. That one child, meant to die, set the path towards renewed life for many. And what seems to point us to our death, by the power of God's persistent nudging towards life, becomes our salvation and our resurrection.

Sometimes it feels like the world as we know it is pressing in on us. Pharaoh's paranoia repeats itself in today's oppressive leaders. We are held captive, not by slavery, but by a pandemic, which has revealed how entrenched we truly are in our divided status markers, where some labor and toil and still don't have what they need to survive, while others enjoy the comfort and ease of wealth. Some mothers, some fathers, have to make impossible choices for their children. That is what the world gives us today.

Do not be conformed to this world, Paul warned the church in Rome. As a people, we can decide to listen to and accept Pharaoh's edicts and reasoning. It's certainly out there. But as people who try to listen for God's voice and be changed by it, we cannot accept the world as it is or as it was. We must strive for what is good, what is acceptable, what is perfect, and put our bodies as a living sacrifice to help bring *that* forth.