

When Conscience Calls

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Exodus 1:8-22 & 2:1-10

The Israelites Are Oppressed

Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians subjected the Israelites to hard servitude and made their lives bitter with hard servitude in mortar and bricks and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live." But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this and allowed the boys to live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." So God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live."

Birth and Youth of Moses

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him

three months. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

Conscience and Courage: Seeking Justice for the Children

First of all, let's situate the story we just heard within the Hebrew Scripture narrative. You may recall that the last time I preached, the passage was about a man called Jacob.

Jacob went on to have twelve sons and one daughter, Dinah. His favourite child, however, was a boy called Joseph. Some of you may know Joseph's story from the musical *The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. Or the book of Genesis (the Book is always better!).

The long and short of his story is that after a series of adventures – and, if you enjoy the musical, some truly excellent song and dance routines – Joseph eventually becomes the right-hand man of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. His father Jacob, also known as Israel, and the whole family are welcomed to settle in Egypt, since there is famine back home. And with Jacob's death, the book of Genesis comes to a glorious close. But then comes Exodus. Four hundred years have passed since the time of Jacob and Joseph. The Israelites are still living in Egypt, and they have multiplied into a large nation.

And then a new Pharaoh arises. And he becomes afraid of them because of their sheer numbers. Fear can do terrible things to a person's conscience. And so the

Pharaoh subjects the Israelites, also known as the Hebrew people, to hard, forced labour.

This Pharaoh does not know Joseph, the passage tells us. He does not know his history. The Pharaoh is ignorant – a dangerous situation for any leader. He is also greedy. The passage describes a rising attitude of hoarding, as Pharaoh builds whole cities of storage facilities to hold grain. Why does he need so much? I suspect that again it is fear: fear of insufficiency, fear that someone else might have what he wants. This Pharaoh has no courage.

He sees the Israelites – the descendants of Israel, or Jacob – as taking up valuable space and consuming valuable food. So he forces them into harder and harder labour to oppress them.

The Egyptians become “ruthless” toward the Israelites, the text tells us. Slavery begins. Pharaoh isn’t just using the ‘foreigners’ for his own construction purposes. He fears them, especially as their numbers grow.

Does this sound familiar? I imagine Pharaoh’s people wearing red ball caps emblazoned with **MEGA**: Make Egypt Great Again! I can’t help but think of the hunt for undocumented immigrants in the United States that is happening now. Not that fear of foreigners doesn’t happen here, too. It’s as if we sometimes forget that most of us are also descendants of immigrants—or colonizers.

But back to the Pharaoh, who now attacks that last bastion of what is sacred. He orders the Egyptian midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill the Israelite baby boys at birth. Deceptively. Slyly. Who would know? Babies died during the birthing process all the time in those days.

Oh, those women. These two women have given their lives to helping babies live. How can they possibly kill a baby? But how can they possibly disobey Pharaoh and live?

But this is where the story becomes really powerful.

Because these two ancient women, whose names – Shiphrah and Puah – we have remembered for generations, stand there in that Nile valley and decide, in an act of great courage that almost surpasses understanding, that they will follow their conscience and disobey Pharaoh.

Why? Because, as the text says, they “fear God.”

Now to fear God in the biblical sense does not mean to cower in terror. It means to be filled with overwhelming awe and wonder! It means to take seriously God’s call of love as we face decisions and challenges in our lives. To fear God has the paradoxical effect that we fear human power much, much less. To fear God is to claim courage.

So the women engage in a dangerous subterfuge. They lie to Pharaoh when he questions them about why Hebrew baby boys are being born, telling him that they always arrive too late because the Hebrew women are so strong.

What does Pharaoh know? He does not know Joseph. He does not know the people he lives among. And what does a man know of childbirth? But sadly that doesn’t stop Pharaoh. Instead, he takes things even further.

How Racism and Oppression Spread

He has set the stage for what comes next. Do you see the way racism and oppression deepened, little by little, one stage at a time throughout this story? Pharaoh began by placing the Israelites into forced labour. As far as we know, nobody objected. Then he worsens their situation. He becomes more “ruthless.” Again, we have no record of anyone standing up and opposing him.

He has permission, it must seem, to go further.

So he calls on the midwives to kill the babies and pretend their deaths were natural. They refuse, but there’s no outcry.

And so, finally, Pharaoh loses his patience and commands that all the Hebrew baby boys be put to death. Outright murder.

And still, silence. Nobody seems to have the courage to speak up. Nobody dares. All seems lost.

And yet

And yet. All is *not* lost.

As you heard, another baby boy is born. And the most remarkable thing happens. His mother hides him for three months. Then she places him in a basket by the river amongst the reeds and sets her daughter, Miriam, to watch.

Another woman arrives – a princess, if you will. Pharaoh's daughter! And she scoops the baby up. She knows he's Hebrew. And yet, she makes a decision for life for him. She takes one look at that child and decides to exercise her conscience and defy her own father for the sake of this child's future.

See the courage?

And then the girl Miriam steps forward – imagine the courage of this child – the princess charges her with finding a nursemaid for the foundling, whom she names Moses.

Of course Miriam knows a woman whose breasts are full. Of course. She knows the baby's mother. *Her* very own mother. And so Moses is returned to his mother, this so-called anonymous nursemaid, to be raised under the protection of Pharaoh's own family.

It is one of the most remarkable stories of conscience, and human agency and courage in the entirety of scripture.

A Network of Women

In fact, the story of these women — the Hebrew and the Egyptian women — offers us one of the oldest examples in Scripture of a network working together to undermine an unjust system.

I believe Pharaoh's daughter knew exactly what was going on. I believe this was not coincidence that she was the one who found the baby. I believe that Moses' mother knew somehow — maybe she had heard whispers — that she could trust this princess.

And I believe every person involved in this story made a difference. The rich and the poor. The slave and the free. The Egyptian and the Hebrew. The young and the old.

Shiphrah. Puah. Moses' mother. Miriam. Pharaoh's daughter. Each one bringing her own gift, her own courage, her own piece of the puzzle. Together, they work to save a child. They cannot know that this tiny child will one day lead his people out of slavery. They only know what is in front of them.

A baby. A life. A moment when they must decide what they will do.

They are bridge-builders and peacemakers. They are companions and co-workers. And they are like us.

Our Time

Jesus says, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness [justice], for they shall be filled.*" May we so hunger and thirst. We too face fears, but we have the power to create a present, and hopefully a future, bound to the justice and peace of Christ for the children of our time.

Because, my friends, babies are still dying. And we need to choose courage. We need to choose life.

We know our own history with residential schools — for indigenous children, for children caught up in the foster care system, for children with disabilities. We know the many that died before we began to speak up.

And many children are dying in terrible and preventable circumstances all over the world. Think of Sudan. Think of the children of Ukraine where over 700 have died since the start of the war.

Think horrifically of the 22,000 children killed in the bombing of Gaza so far. And more in the rest of Palestine. That's more than all the children living in the United Counties of Leeds and Grenville. To lose all those children would mean every school would be empty, every crib, every playground, every parent's arms.

Yet it is reality in Palestine. Just as one concrete example, right now, the last remaining Christian village in the West Bank (Taybeh) is being terrorized by illegal Israeli settlers while the Israeli military stands by — to protect the settlers, not the villagers. And in a place called Qusra and other places in the West Bank of Palestine, there are gangs of settler thugs besieging and attacking Palestinian homes with children inside while the Israeli military again looks on. Israeli human rights groups are speaking up, as are Palestinian. This situation has become so dire that even the US Ambassador to Israel raised his voice and called the Israeli attackers "terrorists."

So I wondered, what do we do, if we want to follow the ancient women whose story we heard today? And as I wondered, a petition arrived from the United Church of Canada inviting all of us to raise our voices for the children, and in

particular against the fact that Canada provides military equipment to the Israeli army.

If you would like to be part of that, part of this network — there's a link in the newsletter to an ecumenical petition to Parliament. It does not mean we feel any less compassion for the approximately 40 children killed in Israel over the last three years, to stand up for the approximately 22,000 Palestinian children. One is too many anywhere.

Because I think here at Wall Street, that we do like to raise our voices for children. I see the evidence in this community of how much children matter, particularly those who are at risk. Think of the children that OK Kids supports in Kenya. Think of those of you involved with Queen Care, supporting local mothers.

There are sadly any number of situations in the world where our voices are needed. But we start with one thing. It's like Mother Teresa said when asked how she got started: "I picked up one person. And then the next."

We remember what Jesus said, in Matthew 25:40 *"Whatsoever you do to the least of my own, you do it to me."*

I hear an invitation in that.

To listen for that still, small voice of conscience.

To allow ourselves to be filled with the awe and wonder of God.

And then, when the moment comes, to have the courage to reach for that tiny basket amongst the reeds, and together, choose life.

Amen.