

That Sounds Familiar: Moses and the Bulrushes

Exodus 1:8 - 2:10

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC

Rev. Pen Peery

June 14, 2015

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 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 our 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 oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick 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 boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, 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, 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 boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

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. The child's 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 the child's 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, who took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

I first heard this story, not from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, but at my grandmother's feet in Tazewell, Virginia. It was a little red book. I remember the pages being yellowed from its frequent use. I even have a faint memory of what Moses' mother looked like as she placed the basket at the banks of the Nile.

My grandmother loved to tell us this story...and all eight of us grown grandchildren remember what that little red book looked like. I couldn't tell you the number of times I heard it, or whether Grandmom would read it at our request or at her own initiative. But that is not the point. The point is, I remember.

Just like last week when we reflected on the story of Noah's ark, as I read this story as an adult, I am much more aware how frightening the events are that surround this well-known scripture. There is Pharaoh plotting to murder the Hebrew children. There is wretched slavery in Egypt. There is danger at every turn.

I would be interested in finding that old, tattered, red book of my Grandmother's to see if these darker parts made the storyline. My guess is that they did. However, what I remember feeling as a child was not fear about what might happen to Moses...but comfort in *knowing* that Moses was safe. After Grandmom would read us

that story, the basket that carried Moses down the Nile seemed less like a mother's desperate attempt to save a life and more like a place where I wanted to be: warm, safe, and secure.

This is a story about the powerful and deep force that connects a mother to her child. In a time and a place where the role of females rarely made history, it is remarkable that this account of Moses' first days are filled with women. The women in this story...from the two midwives, Shiprah and Puah, to Moses' mother and sister, to Pharaoh's own daughter each display a quietly fierce protection of human life. In so doing, each woman becomes radically obedient to God's will over that of the insecure Pharaoh. Every place where Pharaoh speaks of death, there is a woman to say "no, I will choose life."

What is perhaps most remarkable about this story is how far off-stage God seems to be. Consider how God is at work in this passage...

Rather than being direct, God works through a cosmic scope of events.¹

Rather than using the normal channels of power, God uses nameless women.

Rather than extinguishing the threat of Pharaoh, God exercises delightful irony by way of his daughter.

And the result is that the one who will lead God's chosen people out of slavery and into the Promised Land is spared.

It is a great story. But think about your own life. Think about your own struggles. Think about the events in our world that cry out for divine help. How do you wish God would act? I think if we are being honest, we would rather God have a more direct role in our lives and in the world.

Instead of working through cosmic events and minor characters, we would rather have a spectacular and immediate knowledge of God's presence. And aren't we a little concerned that given the importance of Moses, and in the face of a tyrannical Pharaoh, God would choose so fragile a means for deliverance as papyrus, bitumen, and pitch!

And yet, this is the way that God raised up the leader who would help liberate all of Israel.

+ + +

There is, of course, a New Testament echo of this story of Moses. The second act of this ancient story takes place in the gospel of Matthew as he describes the birth of Christ. The most direct action of God in the history of creation is born not in earth-shattering splendor, but through a strange confluence of cosmic events. The mighty rage of Herod parallels Pharaoh; the insignificance of Mary and Joseph reminds us of the minor role of Moses' parents; the reluctance of the wise men to give Herod what he wants echoes the playful defiance of the Hebrew midwives. In it all, the One whom we call Lord lies helplessly by...seemingly dependent on things "just working out."

These are the stories of our faith.

They are the stories that formed us and they are a deep well from which we can draw in the moments when we are thirsty to be reminded that there is something beyond ourselves.

The fact that these faith stories are filled with intrigue and mystery is the point...for we know that life is not a series of direct revelations, but a journey layered with joys and questions and fears. And we are accompanied on that journey by a God who works through all things to bring about good.

God's people in Israel needed this story. And, my guess is, many a Hebrew grandmother and grandfather told their grandchildren about Moses on the banks of the Nile. They told this story years later, when the people of

¹Fretheim, Terrance, *Interpretation: Exodus*, Westminster John Knox, 1994, p ??

Israel had been scattered outside of the land that God established for them through Moses; they told them when their temple - the center of their universe - was destroyed and their enemies were once again in control.

Years later, God's chosen people told this tale to remind themselves that they were claimed and they were loved and God was not finished working through unlikely people and events to bring about redemption. It was through remembering the stories of their past that God's people sustained their faith and their trust in a God who would not forsake them in the future.

+ + +

Every once and while I read an article – or an email that someone has forwarded to me – that seeks to verify the details of the stories of the Bible. Whether it is archeological evidence of Noah's ark, or the precise consistency of the bitumen and pitch needed to keep Moses' basket afloat, or a sudden Middle East cold snap that may have created patches of ice in the Sea of Galilee upon which Jesus could walk (that one was particularly creative...) – we have rendered Scripture into a science experiment.

Over time – and in our easy embrace of the information age in which we live, I think we have lost an appreciation for the power of story. To the modern mind, the idea that God might be working through insignificant people and in insignificant places to bring about our deliverance is a difficult jump for us to make. We have been conditioned to find truth in facts and figures and things that we can prove rather than in the folds of a story.

As if to address this trend, a number of years ago, Tim Burton produced a quirky movie called "Big Fish." The central character is a man named Edward Bloom - a classic Southern story-teller, and the movie opens with Edward's son Will learning that his father is dying of cancer. What we find is that Edward and Will have a difficult relationship, based mainly on Will's anger at his father for spending his life telling stories that (Will believes are nothing but an attempt to) cover up the truth about his "dull existence." And, to be fair, most of the stories that Edward spins are a far stretch.

As the movie progresses, we have a chance to hear many of Edward's fantastic tales. They are full of coincidences that are hard to believe and characters that are hard to imagine. It is easy to see how Will could dismiss his Father's stories as complete fiction. And yet, the more stories we hear, the more we are able to see a deeper truth that can only be captured in a story.

The movie ends with Edward at his father's bedside late at night after he has had a stroke. Both father and son know that the end is near, and they are scared because they don't know what is coming next. Later into the night, Edward wakes up, looks at his son, and says: "Will, tell me how it ends." Fighting the urge to panic, Will responds, "I will Dad. If you help. Just tell me how it starts." And with a twinkle in his story teller's eye, Edward responds, "It starts like this..." From there Will tells a marvelous tale that takes his father through the many stories he had told over the years. And as his father takes his last breath, the story has Edward in the arms of his son on the banks of a river and surrounded by the special people in his life.

+ + +

In the face of not knowing exactly how things will end, what we have to hold onto are the stories of our faith. I am not suggesting that this dramatic account of Moses' birth is a far-flung tale any more than I am suggesting that anything else we read in the Bible is simply a story. But I do believe that in our thirst for things we can prove, we have – unfortunately - divorced story from truth...and when we do that I think we miss the wideness of God.

How can we prove that God claims us as his people? How can we prove that God desires a fullness of life for each of us? How can we prove that God is squarely against evil and the abuse of power? How can we prove that an empty tomb means Jesus is alive and active in the redemption of our world?

I suggest that spending our lives worrying about how to prove these questions of faith will wear us out and leave us dry. Instead, I think that our time is better spent remembering and retelling the stories of our faith, which speak of a truth that we do not have to prove.

What we do here, in this place, is tell the story. We gather, each of us broken, hungry, and in need of grace, and remember the ways that God has filled us. Our stories stretch back to before the time of Moses, and they point forward to times we have not yet seen.

We gather here – in this place called church, and in this time we call worship to tell the story of our faith. We talk about what we claim to be true. To be real. To be right. And in case you haven't noticed, our story is sometimes at odds with the story of the world.

In the face of over-indulgence, we give our gifts to God

In the face of pressure to conform to world, we pray "thy kingdom come."

In the face of competing claims on our allegiances, we confess that Jesus is Lord.

In the face of cynicism and despair, we sing "Allelulia!"

In the face of evading responsibility, we say "God forgive us."

In the face of fear, we say "On the third day he arose again from the dead and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father almighty."

+ + +

In January of 1950, on the heels of two devastating wars and when the world was beginning to comprehend the threat of nuclear weapons, William Faulkner gave a short acceptance speech upon receiving the Nobel Prize in literature. He said, "I believe that humankind will not merely endure: we will prevail...because we alone among creatures have a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance."

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we believe that, too.

And we know the source from which that spirit of compassion and sacrifice and endurance comes.

It is not us.

But the God who created us.

The God to which all of the Scripture and all of lives bear witness.

The God who promises to be with us – unto the end of the age.

+++

Amen