

## “Who? Me?”

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

August 23, 2020

Exodus 1:8 – 2:10 ~ Romans 12:1-8 ~ Matthew 16:13-20

What if I were to tell you ... that what you do this week could change the world? Would you believe me? Could you imagine it so? Would you stand taller with hope? Perhaps you'd smile politely, but secretly scoff?

Two women once made a decision ... they took a chance ... and they changed the world. It was simultaneously a small gesture and a heroic act. They disobeyed. And because of their act of disobedience God was able to rescue Israel from oppression. Their names are Shiphrah and Puah, and they have something to teach us all.

The beginning of Exodus starts on a chilling note. A ruler, wishing to solidify his political base, identifies a common enemy ... a scapegoat to blame for whatever current problems plague society. We've seen this movie before. In the thirties ... especially ... though not exclusively in Germany ... it was the Jews. More recently it's been, by turns, the undocumented workers ... the welfare moms ... the "undeserving" poor ... the Muslims. One of the chief manifestations of sin is our

penchant for defining ourselves over and against others ... and in the process denying others their essential humanity ... their status as beloved children of God.

This time around, it's the ancient Israelites. Had fear prevailed, we would not know the name "Moses" today. Had Pharaoh triumphed, the story of God's liberation of God's enslaved people could not be told. Had a number of women not acted out of compassion and courage, the extermination of a people would have been sharply felt by them ... but probably forgotten by history.

The closing chapters of *Genesis* narrate the story of Joseph and his family. Sold into slavery and despair, Joseph eventually finds himself ... through God's help ... in the halls of Egyptian power. An interpreter of dreams and a wily diplomat, Joseph helps lead Egypt out of a severe famine. He, his family and his people are rewarded for their service to the nation. But the rise of a new Pharaoh means that the memory of Joseph ... and the memory of how Israel had helped Egypt in its darkest hour ... is lost. Political memories are so very short, aren't they?

As the book of *Exodus* opens, Moses is born under the reign of a Pharaoh who couldn't be troubled to learn what had come before. This new Pharaoh enslaves and tries to eradicate a people who had previously helped save the nation. This new king fears these foreigners. He worries that they will trick the Egyptians ...

deceive them into losing their own land. He frets about their rising numbers and that this great multitude would return one day as an invading military force.

Pharaoh opts for a pair of heartless but ancient tactics ... slavery and genocide.

Impose grueling labor on a people and soon ... not only would they be reduced to cogs in a machine ... but the expectation of a better future would prove impossible.

Take the life of every baby boy and soon ... not only would a lineage be extinguished ... but the hopes of a people would also be dashed. Even the cries of loss would soon be muffled ... and a people no longer deemed useful would be erased.

But where cruelty seeks its victims ... courage and grace will also arise. And this is where that pair of midwives named Shiphrah and Puah come in. Pharaoh orders them to kill all the Hebrew baby boys that are delivered. (Ironically, as it is the girls ... who are apparently of no account to Pharaoh ... that he should fear ... as first these two women, and then three more ... Moses' Hebrew mother and sister and Pharaoh's Egyptian daughter ... who are his undoing.) But Shiphrah and Puah refuse. They do not kill the boys. They lie to Pharaoh, telling them that the Hebrew women give birth too quickly and deliver their babies before the midwives arrive on the scene. It's a courageous act of civil disobedience that changes history

In response, Pharaoh ratchets up the pressure, commanding "all his people" (not just the midwives) to toss each of Israel's infant boys into the Nile.

However, one boy would float in that same river and rise to lead his people out of the cruelty of Pharaoh's enslavement. Like Noah building the ark, Moses' mother carefully builds a small basket for her infant son, so that even as she casts him into the river ... in compliance with the command ... the infant will survive the deadly waters. With Moses' sister watching from afar and hoping for his protection, he floats right into the home of the same Pharaoh who would have had him killed.

Pharaoh's daughter recognizes Moses as one of the Hebrew children and ... instead of abiding by her father's clear orders ... she assures his well-being and eventually adopts him as her own son. Again, the courage and compassion of a woman exceeds the cruelty of political power and shortsighted fear.

The world will be changed. Moses will lead the Israelites out of Egyptian captivity. He will deliver God's law to the Israelites and bring them to the promised land. But we must never forget that it all started with two women willing to say "no" to an act of injustice. I doubt very much that they thought they were changing the world. But they were ... just by being faithful ... just by following the dictates of their hearts ... just by heeding the call of conscience. The work of these women counteracted the psychology of hatred and fear that motivated

Pharaoh. It was a gracious defiance because of the way it embraced life and blurred Pharaoh's attempts to draw lines of distinction between "us" and "them" ... between Egyptian and Hebrew ... between dominating and dominated.

Of course, this story could have been otherwise. As I mentioned, variations on the story of Israel's enslavement in Egypt have been repeated throughout the ages. An unimaginable number of people have lost their lives due to fear and hatred. Too many even today do not have a Moses to lead them through and out of impossible situations.

Part of the difficulty of reading this story of God's eventual deliverance of Israel through Moses is the underlying reality in the back of our minds that so many others have not been saved. Today, refugees around the world might wonder where their Joseph or Moses is. Where are the dreams that will blaze a path through their famine? Where is the leader who will guide their nation to the promised land?

Andy Andrews wrote a little book called *The Butterfly Effect*. For those of you who may be unfamiliar with the term, it is used in chaos theory to describe how small changes to a seemingly unrelated thing or condition can affect large, complex systems. The term comes from the suggestion that the flapping of a butterfly's wings in South America could affect the weather in Texas ... meaning

that the tiniest influence on one part of a system can have a huge effect on another part. Taken more broadly, the butterfly effect is a way of describing how, unless all factors can be accounted for, large systems ... like the weather ... remain impossible to predict with total accuracy because there are too many unknown variables to track.

In his book Andrews catalogues the extraordinary impact of simple and courageous efforts. Except when you go back, you can never really tell which efforts made the biggest difference. For instance, should Norman Borlaug, who developed high yield, disease resistant corn and wheat be credited with saving two billion lives from famine ... or should Henry Wallace, the one-term U.S. Vice-President, who created an office in New Mexico to develop hybrid seed for arid climates and hired Borlaug to run it. Or should we credit George Washington Carver, who took a young Henry Wallace for long walks and instilled in him his love of plants. Or should it be Moses and Susan Carver, who adopted the orphaned George as their son. Or should it be ... Well, you get the idea. Andrews points out how interconnected our actions are ... creating an unforeseen butterfly effect that can ripple across time and space to affect the lives of millions.

Who knows? Maybe one of our teachers will give encouragement to a student who will see something in herself that she hadn't before and in turn befriend another

student who was on the verge of giving up on life. Or maybe one of our children will stand up to the neighborhood bully and not only help the one being bullied ... but also the bully ...who never had anyone care enough to stand up to him before ... and in turn he'll go on to be a police officer who protects the vulnerable. Or maybe one of our retirees will be moved to volunteer to read to kids at our library ... and one of those kids will discover a passion for language and will grow up to be the poet laureate. Or maybe....

The things we do this week ... our actions ... our decision ... our choices ... will, in fact, ripple out with consequences foreseen and unforeseen ... for good or for ill ... for the health or damage of the world. That question isn't *whether* ... but *what* ... *what* will we do this week to make a difference in the world? Some of these actions may be big, bold, and courageous. Others may be small, hardly noticeable. And yet they all have the potential to ripple out ... affecting countless lives. In today's reading it's Shiphrah and Puah ... quietly standing up to a bully and tyrant. Who knows who it will be ... this day ... this week ... this year.

It would not be out of line to ask where God is to be found in this story of hate, oppression, death, and defiance. The first mention of God in this story is not until verse 17, which speaks of the midwives' fear of God. Already, the story of oppression is well underway. God seems to remain in the background as abuse and

oppression grow. Unlike the later chapters of Exodus ... in which God takes direct action against Israel's opponents ... this story reveals God's workings to be more subtle and indirect. In the work of the midwives, Pharaoh's daughter, and Moses' mother and sister, God's agency aligns and intertwines with human agency to accomplish salvation.

I'm reminded of a story that is told of a Zen Buddhist monk who was a guest teacher at a Christian monastery. He was there to initiate the monks in a Zen practice that is used to provoke "great doubt" and act as a test of the student's progress in Zen Buddhism. They were given a Koan ... which is a paradox to be meditated upon that forces them to abandon ultimate dependence on reason and compels them into gaining sudden intuitive enlightenment. One of the Christian monks balked, and asked why this was necessary. Wouldn't it be better to quietly wait for God to speak to them? The monk simply smiled and said, "We think that God has already done enough ... the rest should be left to us."

The Apostle Paul says that we all are members of the body of Christ, each with different gifts, yet all one in faith and with the same potential for God to use us to change the world ... and that beloved is key ... we all have the same potential for God to use us to change the world.

May we pray?



Be with us, Lord God of Moses and Jesus, when new kings arise and our comfortable Egypt collapses. When our world seems to come apart and unravel let us recognize the opportunities to discover in new ways who we are and where our true home waits. Be patient with us when we confuse bondage with security ... when we are enslaved to what is less. Make us brave when the darkness comes and grant us the courage to search for the more that awaits us. Amen.