

11th Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

Exodus 1:8-2:10

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 labour. 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 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 labour. 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, 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 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 for 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 she took him as her son. She named him Moses, 'because', she said, 'I drew him out of the water.'

Pharaoh was a pitifully incompetent leader. One of those tyrants that tends to self-destruct under the weight of their own ineptitude. Such politicians have a tendency to resort to distraction techniques to divert attention away from their lack of leadership. And that's exactly what Pharaoh does at the beginning of the book

of Exodus. He manufactures a fake national security crisis in order to place the blame on a third party. The tyrant convinces his constituents that they need to subjugate and oppress the Israelites, because they are becoming too numerous and, if left unchecked, they might become more powerful and the Egyptians might lose their privileged place in society. It's a decision that is not based off of truth or logic or basic common sense. Instead, it is a decision based off of fear. And fear can make people do terrible things. Fear tends to lead folks in the opposite direction of God's intention for righteousness and justice.

But the fear-fueled oppression of the Israelites does not have the result that Pharaoh intended. Instead of them decreasing, they increase. They flourish to the point that scripture tells us that Pharaoh ordered them to be treated ruthlessly and shrewdly. But nothing seems to be working. So our wicked tyrant takes his cruelty to the next level. Just when you think a politician like him can't sink any lower, he crashes like a bulldozer through the boundaries of basic human decency. Pharaoh resorts to infanticide in order to solve the crisis that he himself has created. He tells the Hebrew midwives to murder the Hebrew boys in his own version of "ethnic cleansing."

However, Pharaoh's plan is both foolish and counterproductive. It's foolish because he expects the Hebrew women to cooperate with killing their own kin. And it's counterproductive because if he succeeds in killing all of the Hebrew boys, then he's not going to have any slaves to do the hard labor of building his country's infrastructure. But again, as we've stated, dictators like Pharaoh are not guided by logic or common sense. They are guided by fear and fear obscures reality and makes people do foolish stuff.

But Pharaoh's fears do him no favors. In fact, he is tricked by the very people he's told to kill the babies. Two of them, we are told, were Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah. If anyone ever has twin daughters, I think it would be a tremendous complement to name them Shiphrah and Puah because then they would be named after two very brave women that stood up to a vicious dictator. They defiantly refuse to carry out the orders of their unhinged tyrant. After a while, Pharaoh starts to wonder why his orders are not being obeyed. He demands an answer. He summons Shiphrah and Puah and they feign innocence with the comical lie that the reason they can't kill the Hebrew boys because the Hebrew women are far more vigorous than the Egyptian women and give birth before the midwives even have a chance to show up! And, you know what, Pharaoh is just stupid enough to believe it because, miraculously, he lets them go free of punishment.

But, still unsatisfied with the results, he takes his infanticide a step further. He sends out a royal decree that commands every Egyptian to take any Hebrew boy they find and toss the infant into the Nile.

And, in a brilliant, beautiful example of irony, one Hebrew mother does exactly that!

Moses' mother was a desperate woman who decided to take a terrible risk in order to possibly save her child. Her desperation is the desperation of immigrant parents who risk everything to bring their children to this country in order to secure safety for them. Her desperation gives birth to a plan that is fraught with risks. What if the basket begins to leak? What if the vessel gets caught in the reeds? What if it tips over? What if it goes unnoticed and the child dies of exposure? Whether we're talking about a mother thousands of years ago in Egypt or a mother in 2019 in Guatemala or El Salvador, we know that their desperate decisions are made simply because they have no other choice.

And so, she floats her beloved child in a basket made of papyrus. But as she tearfully watches the child float away, she knows that she has done her best to stack the deck in her son's favor. She instructs her daughter, Moses' sister, to follow at a distance to watch for the child's welfare as best she can.

As she follows the basket, she comes across none other than Pharaoh's own daughter bathing in the river. Pharaoh's daughter notices the child, and - this is important to note - realizes that it is a *Hebrew* child. If she were to obey her father's wishes, she would have drowned the child right then and there. But she doesn't. She defies her father's command of violence and responds with compassion and pity. Then, conveniently, Moses' sister pops out of the bushes and ask Pharaoh's daughter if she would like to find a Hebrew mother to nurse the child. Pharaoh's daughter agrees and even offers to pay Moses' mother for taking care of her own child.

Let's just pause and take a moment to realize just how pathetic of a character Pharaoh is right now.

A) Pharaoh has conjured up a fake national security crisis to promote his agenda of violence.

B) Pharaoh's attempt at oppressing the Israelites has only led to them to increasing in number.

C) Pharaoh has been fooled by two Hebrew midwives who have lied to him about the reasons that the Hebrew children are not being slaughtered.

D) Pharaoh's own daughter has defied his orders and is working against his agenda.

E) Pharaoh is now literally paying an Israelite woman to care for her own Israelite son.

Y'all, Pharaoh ain't doin' well! Despite his rage, despite his violence, despite his royal edicts, his agenda is being sabotaged. And it's not just being sabotaged by anyone. It's being sabotaged by five strong, defiant women.

Two Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah.

One Hebrew mother.

One Hebrew sister.

And *his very own daughter*.

And, friends, we all know the ending of this story. Pharaoh does not emerge victorious. He and his army die as a result of nothing more or less than his penchant for economic violence and social injustice.

My dear friends, I'm acutely aware that so much around us seems to be falling apart. I, like many of you, am exhausted by the cruelty, disheartened by the anger, and fed up with the nonsense. I'm tired of feeling like the loud voice of hatred and division is constantly drowning out voices of so many other folks that are calling for an end to the chaos, an end to the cruelty, and an end to the violence.

But then this story gives me hope. This story tells me that the days of Pharaoh's reign are numbered and the days of God's reign are NOT!

Because, when you think about it, if Pharaoh, with all of his self proclaimed power, can be so easily thwarted by five women (one of whom is his own daughter), then we must admit that his power, all this time, was nothing more than a facade.

This story reminds me that hope can be found in the simplest and smallest acts of defiance.

So when you think your small voice of Christian witness is drowning in a sea of despair, remind yourself that, in the end, it is Pharaoh and his army that drown in the bottom of the Red Sea.

When you think your acts of kindness and compassion and justice are not going to make a difference in the end, remember what two Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah could accomplish by outsmarting Pharaoh.

When you think all is lost and that you have no power to change the course of things, remember the courage of Pharaoh's daughter who defied her father's obsession with oppression.

When you think that Christian faith has no place in challenging the tyrants of the world, read the book of Exodus, and be uplifted by its story that tells us that God's ultimate design for creation will not be thwarted by the likes of men like Pharaoh.

So, Pharaoh can brag all he wants to about being the chosen one, but you and I know who the *real* chosen one is. The real chosen one is a Hebrew boy who was born under very similar circumstances to Moses. A young Hebrew boy named Jesus Christ. You see, like Moses, Jesus was born during the reign of another cruel tyrant. This one, thousands of years after Pharaoh, was named Herod. And Herod, too, ordered Hebrew children to be slaughtered. And, because of that, Joseph and Mary fled - of all places - to Egypt to escape Herod's violence. All of this is chronicled in Matthew's Gospel.

But that young Hebrew boy, this "new Moses," escaped Herod's cruelty and lived a life of peace, justice, compassion, radical hospitality, and unrelenting justice; you know, all the things that men like Pharaoh and Herod despise. And, eventually, that man, Jesus Christ, was unjustly put to death and then resurrected by God so that the cruel tyrants of the world wouldn't have the final word. God and God alone will have the final word and you and I, as Christ's disciples, are called to follow *that* word and not the words of the Pharaoh's around us.

So friends, remember that when everything seems to be unraveling around us that God's kingdom refuses to be unraveled by the likes of Pharaoh and Herod. There is much work to be done. But none of the work we do is done in vain. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly. Stay the course.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of God's children say, "amen."