



Proper 16 / A

*"Finding and Claiming Your Power"*

23 August 2020

Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

With this morning's story from the Hebrew Scriptures, we begin the powerful Moses saga that recounts the story of the Exodus, the formative event of Judaism.

As the tale begins, the Hebrew people have been living in Egypt for about 400 years. A new pharaoh – one who did not know the origins of the enslaved Hebrew people - ascends the Egyptian throne and begins to rule the powerful country. Because slave labor is vitally important to the well-being and economy of his nation, the new pharaoh becomes concerned that the Hebrew slaves, who are more numerous than their Egyptian overlords, could rise up to overcome their masters or escape. So one hardship after another is heaped upon the backs of the slaves to keep them in their place and reduce their numbers.

When none of his harsh tactics accomplish their goal, the pharaoh hits on a new and especially heinous plan. He calls in the two midwives who assist the Hebrew women during childbirth and orders them to kill all new-born, Hebrew males. But these two women - Shiphrah and Puah - weigh their fear of the powerful pharaoh against their fear of God. And God wins.

The midwives resolve to do what is in their power to do: they boldly choose not to cooperate, but to disobey the pharaoh and stand with God on the side of the oppressed and powerless.

When called on the carpet by the pharaoh, Shiphrah and Puah are quick-witted. "Why have you let the male children live?" the pharaoh demands to know. The two women's reply? Because the Israelite women are so strong that by the time the midwives can get to them, they have already delivered their babies themselves! They get away with this deception; after all, what does a pharaoh know about childbirth? And in their decisive, courageous, faithful actions, the midwives become the first to assist in the birth of the Israelite nation.

For taking this risk, God rewards these two heroic women and the Hebrew community continues to grow in numbers and strength. In desperation, the pharaoh issues a new command of genocide, ordering that every newborn Hebrew boy be drowned in the Nile River.

A Hebrew woman, named later in the text as Jochebed, gives birth to a son, but this mother is not about to throw her baby boy into the river. She manages to hide him for a while, which, as every parent knows, must have been pretty difficult given the amount of control one has over a newborn's vocal cords!

One day, Jochebed tucks her three-month-old son into what is translated as a basket, but interestingly is the same Hebrew word used to describe Noah's ark. She places the waterproof basket gently among the protective bulrushes in the river. Then she tells his five-year-old sister, Miriam, to stand watch over the boy from the river's edge.

Imagine Miriam's fear when she hears voices coming her way and realizes it is the pharaoh's own daughter coming toward the river! From her hiding place she sees the young woman, accompanied by her maidservants, enter the water and begin to bathe. The Egyptian princess sights the basket and sends a maid to bring it to her. And when she opens it, she instantly sizes up the situation: "This must be one of the Hebrew children."

I wonder how many dead babies this young Egyptian woman has seen washed up on the shore? What is it that makes her decide to defy her father and save this

particular child's life? We don't know for sure, but for some reason she is taken by this infant and makes the decision to save him, knowing full-well that she is embarking on a dangerous, and perhaps deadly, path.

At this moment, little Miriam takes the initiative and becomes part of this dangerous plan. Emerging from her hiding place, she asks the pharaoh's daughter if she would like her to bring a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby. How quick-witted and courageous for such a young child!

Picture that meeting between these two young women of different races, religions, cultures, social positions, languages as they enter into a mutual pact to resist the law of the land and save the life of this slave child. And when Miriam returns home carrying her baby brother, what must Jochebed have been feeling and fearing with her baby son's life at stake?

No doubt delaying as long as she can, she keeps her son until he is weaned, probably around three years. But she holds up her side of the bargain; and eventually, the boy moves from the Hebrew slave quarters to live in the royal palace and be raised as the adopted son of the pharaoh's daughter, who names him Moses, an Egyptian name which means 'drawn out of the water'.

And what of her attendants who saw this plan evolve? Why do none of them betray her right at the beginning, or when the boy comes to live in the palace, or even later in his life? As anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, "Never underestimate the power of a small group to change the world." For that is exactly what these seemingly powerless women manage to accomplish.

Phyllis Tribble, a biblical scholar who has studied this text extensively, points out that because of their combined activity, "the Exodus story owes its beginning not to Moses, but to Miriam and the other women." God chooses these seemingly powerless women and a young girl to be change agents, to defy and undermine the immense power of the pharaoh's orders, to ultimately liberate the Hebrews and thus dramatically change the course of human history - for the Exodus event is the pivotal event of the Jewish nation, and Moses is the central character, leading his people out of their Egyptian slavery, across the Red Sea and through the wilderness, to the freedom of the Promised Land.

Another interesting fact about this particular story, when set in the larger biblical context, is that it offers a novel, new model of heroism based on intelligence and wit rather than violence, warfare, and brute force. The women resist the powerful pharaoh, but do not seek to destroy him or seize his power for themselves. Each woman, acting autonomously, derives power out of no power.

And probably this story is among the first in history, also, in which a god stands with the oppressed and powerless, rather than the privileged and powerful. In this story, we learn that our God is always on the side of the oppressed, the excluded, the disenfranchised. As God's children, confronting the kingdoms of this world with the Kingdom of God is our job here on earth. And that takes many forms. It is our baptismal responsibility to recognize and name oppression when we see it, then join God in confronting it - whether it is oppressive governmental policies like the pharaoh's decree ... or racism and prejudice – whether personal or systemically entrenched and codified ... or abuse against women and children ... or excluding whole categories of people based on race, or sexuality, or belief, or any other barrier.

One of the best measures of a society is to look at how we treat the least among us. Where do you see exclusion or powerlessness in your workplace, school, or community? How about your church, or you're your family? Whose stories are not being told? Who is being overlooked, or discounted, or dismissed?

Change can come through small opportunities and the use of resources like money and privilege - such as being the pharaoh's daughter, or well-educated and well-employed.

Change can come through the actions of just one person: a worker like the midwives, a whistleblower, a person with a God-given opportunity to act, a loving parent, a brave child - all refusing to cooperate with the oppressor.

Change comes through acts of human love, compassion and mercy, inventiveness, and the courage to do whatever is in our power to do.

So, what is in your power to do? Where and how is God calling you to stand with the powerless, the excluded, the homeless, the hungry, the powerless, the unheard, those on the margins of our society?

What is in your power to do to improve someone's life? What is in your power to make your local community more inclusive and responsive to all? What is in your power to make the world a better place? What is in your power to build the Kingdom of God in this place, in the here and now?

What is in your power to do? Don't sell yourself short or underestimate your power to accomplish change. Remember what these supposedly powerless women did. Remember what Margaret Mead said about the power of a small group to change the world.

So I ask again: What is in your power to do? What is in our power to accomplish? Will you – will we - claim that power and act?

It is in responding to that question that we will find ourselves “doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God” [*Micah 6: 8*] - which is precisely what God requires of you - and me ... requires of us, his children.

Amen.