

Sermon for the 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16A)  
Preached at St. James Episcopal Church, Columbus, OH  
The Rev. Bruce Smith  
August 27, 2017

### **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 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 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, 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 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.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

Exodus 1:1-7 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

**1** These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: **2** Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, **3** Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, **4** Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. **5** The total number of people born to Jacob was seventy. Joseph was already in Egypt. **6** Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation. **7** But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

Those were the beginning lines of the Book of Exodus... summing up the Joseph Saga which closed out the Book of Genesis. The sons of Israel, who was formerly known as Jacob were, in effect, the founding ancestors of the 12 tribes of Israel. But, because of a severe famine in their homeland of Canaan, they ended up in Egypt where there were also famine conditions. But, there was food in Egypt, thanks to the wisdom and forethought and dreams of the Prime Minister of Egypt, who just happened to be their long, abandoned brother, Joseph.

The first lines of Exodus tell us that the descendants of Jacob thrived in Egypt... they multiplied and became exceedingly strong. The land of Egypt was filled with Jacob's offspring.

But... and there is often a but in scripture... we come to today's passage from the first chapter of Exodus beginning at verse 8, one verse after we learn that the children of Israel are thriving in beautiful Egypt.

"Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." And he didn't care. For this pharaoh, who reigned maybe some 400 years after Joseph, the Israelites were at best a thorn in his side and at worst a threat to his throne, or so he thought. So, he enslaved them. And, as their numbers increased, Pharaoh clamped down even harder, ordering the Hebrew midwives to murder the baby boys.

Well, that wasn't really very smart, was it? For 2 reasons. 1) The Hebrew midwives weren't about to murder the babies of their own people. And, 2) if they had, Pharaoh's future labor pool would have been decimated. So, now Pharaoh decides that his own people, probably soldiers, will murder the male Hebrews babies, by throwing them in the Nile where they will drown. And that is what they do. But, they miss one. And, we know who that is.

One Hebrew mother saves her little son, by placing him in a water proof basket and hiding him in the reeds along the banks of the very river where he would have been drowned. just a little bit of irony there!

Then the baby is found by Pharaoh's daughter who just happens to be bathing in the area, and she, even knowing the child is a Hebrew baby, has compassion on him, and rescues him. The baby's older sister, who has been watching, approaches Pharaoh's daughter and recommends a nurse for the baby... very clever... she goes and get the baby's mother. So, the baby goes back to

his mother, the text seems to say, until he is “grown up” and is then given to Pharaoh’s daughter who raises him as her son. She named him Moses, “because,” she said, “I drew him out of the water.”

Here endeth the reading, but not the story.

There is a lot going on in this story. A lot! And, like so many biblical narratives, it needs some unpacking.

First, there is Egypt. Egypt and Israel have been linked together since the time of Joseph. Egypt has been both a symbol of salvation and a symbol of oppression for Israel. Even in modern history, these two neighboring peoples have both fought with each other and lived side by side in peace. And, in Matthew’s gospel, Egypt plays a role as the Holy Family takes refuge in Egypt to escape Herod’s murdering rampage of the Holy Innocents. Think about that for a moment. Herod’s actions parallel those of Pharaoh in this story. But safety for the Holy Family is found in Egypt, not in Judea. And, in Genesis, Jacob’s family found safety from famine in Egypt.

Second, while there are quite a few characters in today’s story, only three of them are named: Moses (thank God!) and the two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. That’s it. Not even Pharaoh or Moses’ family members are named. Why? Maybe because the writer didn’t feel they were as important to the story as Moses, who would save his people and the two midwives, who helped bring Moses into the world and refused to do Pharaoh’s bidding by murdering male children. Midwives are all about helping to bring life not death!

Third, women have a major role in this story, don’t they! And, their role is bringing life into the world and protecting it... Moses’ mother, his sister, the midwives, and Pharaoh’s daughter... all have compassionate, life giving roles as opposed to the ruthlessness of Pharaoh. All of them play a role of helping to protect God’s covenant with Abraham to make his descendants numerous among the stars... even in the midst of slavery in Egypt.

Fourth, while Moses’ parents are not named, the story makes a point of telling us that they are both Levites. It is the Levites that eventually form the priestly class in Judaism beginning with Moses’ brother Aaron, who doesn’t live into his priesthood all that well. But, that is a later story.

I think that many of us view these Bible stories as important to our faith, but as being a bit simplistic and primitive. They are not, and today’s story is a good example of the complexity of one brief story that is the beginning of a much larger story.

It is that larger story that is at the heart of The Big Read in the Diocese of Southern Ohio. From today through April, we are invited to immerse ourselves in the Book of Exodus. It is the 2<sup>nd</sup> book of what we Christians have commonly called The Old Testament. Exodus is the 2<sup>nd</sup> of 5 books called “Torah,” or the “Law” in Hebrew. The Greek word for these 5 books is “Pentateuch,” and they have been referred to as the Five Books of Moses because it was once widely assumed that Moses wrote all 5 books (even though his death is described in the last book, “Deuteronomy.”)

Why Exodus? Because we all remember fondly Charlton Heston as Moses, and it makes a great bathrobe drama for the big screen? Uh, no.

The Exodus is to Judaism as the Cross and Resurrection are to Christians. But, the Exodus is also our story, too. Very much so! Exodus is a story about deliverance from oppression. It is about a people moving from oppression to freedom, from death to life. And, as in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, at the heart of the story is someone who was once a vulnerable little baby who was somehow seen as a threat to the secular rulers, yet who was saved by God through the love and compassion of others to save his people from the powers of sin and death.

In the Passover and the Exodus, we will see the LORD God, Yahweh, powerfully at work bringing the children of Israel out of slavery back to the land God had promised to their ancestors so many generations earlier with Moses leading them on the ground. We will see God and Moses leading them, pushing them, walking alongside them, scolding them and celebrating with them.

And, we will also see that the elation of escape from Egypt wears off and ends up in 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, literally and metaphorically. From, “Yea we are out of Egypt!” to “Why did we ever leave Egypt?”

We are living in age of rapid change for Christianity. The “glories of Christendom” are a thing of the past. And, we are experiencing throughout the churches in North America, a decline in the both the influence on society by the church and a decline in the number of folks who find participation in the life and worship of a community of faith to be even marginally important to their lives.

So, maybe, like the Israelites, wandering in the wilderness for those 40 years, we find *ourselves* wandering a bit, and trying to figure out who we are and how God is calling us to live as the people of God.

Who will we follow? Who will lead us? Who will guide us? Who will walk alongside us in this 21<sup>st</sup> century wilderness?

The answer to these questions, I believe, is found in the Biblical witness that we hear and read every week... in both the Hebrew Scriptures and in the Christian Testament... but not just there, not just in the writings of folks who lived long ago, but in our community of faith today... here... now... as we come together as the people of God, as the Body of Christ, with God’s help:

- To be still and know that God is God, and we are not.
- To be still and to listen... listen to God in Christ working in us and through us.

We are on a journey... it began long, long ago when Abraham was called out of Ur. It is a journey that will continue for our descendants long after each of us here today has died. It is a journey in faith and perseverance, a journey with its ups and downs, its joys and frustrations, a journey in which both doubts *and* faith can deepen. But, no matter where the people of God ends up, no matter what the church of Christ looks like down the road, it is a journey with God in Christ walking with us, leading us pushing us, comforting us. It is a journey about God With Us... Emmanuel. And, may each of us be open to the presence of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit as we continue our journey. Shalom and Amen.

