

**Sermon for 8-27-17**  
**Exodus 1:8 - 2:10**  
**The Rev. Maggie Leidheiser-Stoddard**  
**St. John's Episcopal Church in Worthington**

Imagine, for a moment, that it's not a lady priest who's standing before you, but instead a very powerful man. A king, actually. A new king who has just come into power, and who's very anxious and fearful about his people's future. This king says to his people, "Look, there are way too many of these foreigners living here, and they're getting too powerful. We need to do something, and we've got to be smart about this - because if we don't, they will try to destroy us. We must crush them, for our own protection and survival."

That's the beginning of the book of Exodus. The new Pharaoh is worried about all the Israelites living in Egypt. He doesn't see them as people; he sees them as threats to the Egyptians' security and way of life. To Pharaoh, the Israelites are not people but problems. So he begins to demonize them, to portray them as sinister enemies of Egypt. He enlists his people in oppressing the Israelites, in an effort to minimize their numbers and their influence. The Israelites are aliens, strangers in this land, and they cannot be allowed to flourish. God's chosen people have become undesirables, living in a land where they are both scorned and feared, where their very existence is viewed as a threat.

Spoiler alert: it's going to be okay. God will raise up a great hero, and he will lead the Israelites to escape from bondage into freedom (the book is called Exodus, after all). But this freedom, this liberation, will not come without plenty of suffering and sacrifice and courage.

The Exodus story speaks directly to our souls, nourishing us with holy food, illuminating our darkest hours with its vision of God-light. It teaches us the meaning of hope, and community, and dignity. And from its very beginning, the Exodus story teaches us about courage.

The Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah - if we didn't already know their names, let's commit them to memory now. Shiphrah and Puah refuse to follow Pharaoh's command to kill male baby Israelites at birth; and when Pharaoh interrogates them about these living baby boys, they lie to him and continue their holy disobedience. These women are courageous. Their repeated acts of resistance to Pharaoh's orders put their own lives at risk, and yet they persist.

What gives Shiphrah and Puah their amazing courage? The knowledge of God. The Scripture tells us that the midwives disobeyed Pharaoh *because they feared God*. Pharaoh was the ruler, he had ultimate power in the land of Egypt, but Shiphrah and Puah knew an authority truer and higher than Pharaoh's. The Hebrew midwives knew Yahweh as Lord Most High, Maker of Heaven and Earth, Source of all Being. They heard Pharaoh's call to destroy life, but they also heard a higher call to protect it, and they heeded God's call. Shiphrah and Puah did that which was good and right and just, in the face of powerful fear and cruelty. They found courage in their knowledge of God.

The Hebrew midwives aren't the only models of courage in today's Exodus reading: we've got the mother of Moses, who risks her own life by hiding her condemned baby boy as long as she can, and then entrusts him to God's protection when she can protect him no longer. There's Miriam, baby boy's big sister, who watches over him and intervenes on his behalf. And then there's Pharaoh's daughter, who is most certainly not an Israelite, but who allows her heart to be moved by the human need in front of her. She has been trained to see the Hebrews as

villains and threats, but when she looks upon this baby boy, she sees not an enemy to be defeated but a *person* whose life is precious, who is worthy of dignity.

Pharaoh's daughter has been schooled in fear of the other, and as a princess of Egypt, her duty is to destroy this child. But she chooses compassion over fear, and mercy over death. Pharaoh's daughter is the only one of our Exodus heroines who does not know God, and yet her actions are guided by Godly values - justice and mercy, compassion and dignity. Even without knowledge of God, Pharaoh's daughter acts righteously.

All of these Exodus women have courage. They choose to protect innocent life, to uphold human dignity, to defend the persecuted. These Exodus women, and the generations of saints and martyrs that followed them, show us how to be courageous. As long as there is violence, as long as there is hatred and division and greed and injustice, we will need courage. We need courage to do our part to bring about the reign of God, the beloved community.

Last week, a friend from seminary shared with me a transcript of a radio interview with an African-American theologian named Ruby Sales. The interview was from September of last year, and in it Sales talked about the pain that she heard from people in all parts of the political spectrum, her unwavering commitment to nonviolence, and the essential importance of human dignity. My favorite line was when she said that the task of theology today should be "to raise people up from disposability to essentiality."

In this interview, Ruby Sales also talked about faith and courage. Her father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were all Southern Baptist preachers, and she said that for her and her peers, faith in God was "the ground [we] stood on that positioned us to stand against the wind." She spoke of the incredible courage and strength it takes to resist hating one's own oppressors - "I can't control the world, but I can control myself. And you are not going to coerce me into hating."

*You are not going to coerce me into hating.*

That's powerful, it's revolutionary, it's miraculous and holy and dignified. To resist demonization and hatred, to recognize and name the humanity in those who deny your own humanity... that is courage.

In the final minutes of this hour-long interview, the interviewer shared a dramatic story of courage from the Civil Rights movement, from August of 1965. It's a story I'd heard before. Jonathan Daniels, a white Episcopal seminarian from New Hampshire, was in Lowndes County, Alabama, protesting segregation with a group of clergy and local activists. When Daniels and three of his fellow protestors tried to enter a convenience store to buy sodas, they were stopped by an off-duty county deputy named Tom Coleman. Coleman cursed at them, raising his shotgun and pointing it towards one of Daniels' companions, a 17-year-old black high school cheerleader. As Coleman pulled his trigger, Daniels pushed the teenage girl out of the way, and took the bullet that was meant for her. He died instantly. He was 26 years old. His murderer was acquitted by a jury of 12 white men, and lived to be 86 years old.

I had heard this story before. I knew the name of Jonathan Daniels, Episcopal martyr of the Civil Rights movement, who gave his life to protect the life of an unarmed teenage girl. But I didn't know the name of that teenage girl.

Her name was Ruby Sales.

Courage.

It takes courage to stare down the barrel of a shotgun, armed only with your faith in God and your belief in the dignity of all people. It takes courage to hear and then disobey the unjust commands of a ruler who couches death and oppression in the language of self-defense. It takes courage to look beyond the separating barriers of identity and see a fellow human, equal in worth and dignity. And it takes courage to live through violence and oppression and degradation and emerge with your commitment to liberation and the innate worth of all people intact.

May we all stand firm in the knowledge of God, may we seek liberation and dignity, and may we have the courage to stand against the winds of hatred and fear. *Amen.*

-----

All quotations from “Ruby Sales: Where Does It Hurt?”  
An episode of *On Being with Krista Tippett*  
September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016  
<https://onbeing.org/programs/ruby-sales-where-does-it-hurt/>