

The Women Behind Moses – Exodus 1:8-2:10 – August 27, 2017

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This morning as we flipped on the news or check Facebook or Twitter, we were confronted by horrific pictures of the devastating floods in Houston and the surrounding area as a result of Hurricane Harvey. It will take days to assess the full extent of the damage caused, perhaps even weeks, and much longer to begin to clean up. It's hard not to think of the many lives that are being impacted by this natural disaster and we do what we can to help – by praying or by donating money to disaster relief efforts. Of course, people who live on the coastal parts of the USA are aware of the risks of living in these regions, but even so, one can never be fully prepared for tragedy, if and when it strikes. There are events in life that happen very quickly and many of them are beyond our control.

Our lesson from Exodus this morning is a good example of a situation beyond the control of the average person on the street. There was a change in power, a new king over the land of Egypt, and life as the people knew it became quite different. And not in a good way.

At the end of the book of Genesis, there is a happy reunion between Joseph, second only to the Pharaoh, and his brothers, who had years ago sold him into slavery. Forgiveness and reconciliation abounded as the sons of Israel settled down in the land of Egypt with their families and flocks. Eventually that generation passed away, but the Israelites were prolific and soon these immigrants were quite numerous in the land. The immigrants lived in harmony with their Egyptian hosts.

The Book of Exodus begins with this change in the leadership over Egypt. A new king takes the throne. A king who is not a very good student of history and so has no knowledge of the close relationship between the Pharaoh and Joseph so long ago. In fact, the new king looked with fear upon the descendants of the sons of Jacob. He saw that they were great in number and prosperous, and he felt threatened by their presence. We are given no reason to believe they were anything but peaceful, yet the Egyptian king stirred up his people against them. He spread fear and made conjectures about the loyalty of the Israelites. He told the Egyptians to beware, lest the Israelites join with the enemies of Egypt and turn on them.

We are familiar with the concept of scapegoating. Where one person or a group of people are blamed for some resultant action or state of being. We've all heard these statements. The economy would be better if those people would quit sending all the jobs to all the other countries. Or if those other people would stop taking our jobs. Or if these people over here would just quit being so stubborn and do things the RIGHT way, which of course is our way.

At various points in our own lives we've been both the target of scapegoating and also the finger-pointer. It can occur anywhere – on the school playground to the corporate boardroom. When a leader or person in power begins to point the finger, then tragic consequences can occur. The hatred and animosity will soon spread.

The king's solution to this problem was to force the Israelites into the labor of building cities for the Pharaoh. This they did, yet despite their oppression, they continued to multiply and spread throughout the land. The attitude of the king began to spread among the people, until all the Egyptians came to despise the Israelites. They dealt with them harshly and gave them more work to do – both in the cities as builders and in the fields. Yet still they grew in number.

The king realized that physical oppression wasn't doing the job, so he sought an alternative solution. He brought in two midwives and gave them a despicable task. He commanded them to kill any baby boy that was born to the Hebrews. The two women in the text are named, Shiphrah and Puah. Women do not very often receive mention in biblical stories, especially by name. Nor are women often identified as heroes of the story.

The midwives had no intention of following through with the king's order. Surprisingly, they had no fear of any repercussions for their disobedience. Rather they were more fearful of what God would do if they did what the king said. They continued on in their role as midwives, respecting all life, both Egyptian and Hebrew.

When the king realized that Hebrew male babies were still being born and surviving, he again summoned Shiphrah and Puah. He demanded to know why the boys lived. The women lied to the king, claiming that the Hebrew women were quick to give birth, and by the time the midwives had arrived to assist, it was too late. Their lie accomplished a couple of things. Obviously, it saved them from punishment at the hands of the Pharaoh. But it also ensured that they would continue on in their job, perhaps saving other babies from the hands of weaker midwives who might succumb to the order of the king. The text tells us that God was pleased with these two women, and God blessed them by giving them families of their own.

Pharaoh was stubborn and refused to give up. If the midwives couldn't catch and destroy the babies during childbirth, then this male infanticide would become a nationwide policy. He gave the decree to all Egyptians that they were expected to toss any male Hebrew babies into the Nile River.

Suddenly the text changes focus and we are introduced to a Levite couple who had just birthed a son. Over the next several verses, the actions of several females ensure that God's future deliverer of the Hebrew people will survive his infancy. First, his mother was able to hide him from sight for three months, but finally realized she could hide him no longer. Willing to give him up in order to save him, she crafted a tiny, watertight basket, placed the infant inside, and then put the basket into the river among the reeds along the bank. His older sister kept close watch of the basket to see what would happen next.

Later, the daughter of the Pharaoh came down to the river to bathe. When she spotted the basket, she told one of her maids to retrieve it. When she looked inside, she quickly understood the situation. She recognized in this little bundle the hope-filled desperation of a mother trying to save her baby against the tyranny of a paranoid king. This young woman chose to act against the command of her father in compassion and pity for the tiny boy.

Bravely, the infant's sister came over and asked the Pharaoh's daughter if she required a wet nurse for the child. And ironically, the baby's mother was hired and paid to feed and care for the infant she had birthed. Once he was weaned, the mother gave the boy to the king's daughter, and she named him Moses.

As we look at our story this morning, we can't help but be confronted by several questions. Perhaps the most blatant question comes out of our examination of the Pharaoh. His paranoia and hatred of the vitality of the Israelite people cause him to scapegoat an entire race of people. While this is certainly an extreme example, it does cause us to put that question toward ourselves. When have we ourselves participated in blaming or condemning a person or group of people? Have we allowed the biased opinion of others to negatively influence our own judgments?

This story forces us to examine how we treat others. Do we see and judge people as members of some type of group – a group based upon beliefs, race, social status, sexuality, nationality, etc. – or do we see them as individual human beings created in the image of God? Jesus spent a lot of his time associating with the people that others went out of their way to avoid and persecute.

Another question that comes out this story is, is it ever okay to go against authority and the laws of the land? And furthermore, are there ever situations when particular values supersede the need for complete honesty? Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives in this story, were dissenters. They went against the order of the king. They willingly broke an unjust law,

because their respect for God forced them to stand against it. When confronted, they hid the truth from the Pharaoh, knowing that honesty might endanger more lives.

This story brings up questions of advocacy and ethics. Often our faith in Jesus Christ pushes us to stand up for what is right and good, even when that might put us in harm's way. An example that came to mind while reading this story was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a German theologian. He was adamantly opposed to and spoke out against Adolph Hitler, and was even part of a plan to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer was arrested and later executed for his beliefs. Are we willing to stand alongside those who are discriminated against? Will we protest against injustice? Will we change our practices that directly or indirectly lead to the oppression of others? These are tough questions for us to consider, but consider them we must. Like Shiprah and Puah, our faith demands we act in the face of injustice.

A final point to mention has to do with all the women in the story who worked to ensure Moses' survival. Each of these women stood against an evil and unjust system, risking harm to themselves in the process. First the midwives, who were willing to stand against tyranny, then the mother who gave him up so that he might live, the sister who carefully watched then spoke up to ensure his survival, and finally the daughter of Pharaoh who took pity and offered compassion, taking for her own, a child of the despised people. In his most vulnerable time, Moses was surrounded by strong, brave women, who put his needs before their own.