

Sunday, August 27, 2017

Rev. Robert W. Brown

*Defying Evil*

How 4 women subverted an empire and saved a nation

Exodus 1:8-2:10

INTRODUCTION:

Once upon a time, a new ruler, wishing to solidify his political base, identified a common enemy; a scapegoat to vilify and lay blame on. For he knew that naming a common enemy is the quickest way to unify a population and increase political strength. No, I'm not talking about today's political turmoil; I'm talking about today's scripture reading from the Book of Exodus.

I know that most people have little use for scripture, especially the Hebrew Bible. It's hard to read, filled with strange names and places we can't relate to. I get it, I really do. But when we do read these stories, we find incredibly instructive and hopeful narratives of God's steadfast faithfulness to humanity. God really wants to keep this project going. Today's reading is a great example of an ancient story that holds significant meaning and relevance to our contemporary world. And what I notice, more often than not, is that the heroes of these stories are *NOT* the religious elite, or politically powerful. God seems to use the lowly and excluded people in powerful ways, while the proud and dominant characters are mocked and portrayed as foolish. Today's scripture is a great example.

Before Moses delivers the 10 commandments, before he steps on holy ground and speaks with a burning bush, before he raises his staff over the Red Sea to lead a nation out of bondage, before any of that great stuff happens, he is nearly vanquished as an infant.

At the time of Moses' birth, a new king came to power in Egypt and had sanctioned an all out genocide of the Israelites, even though the Hebrew people had been there for 400 years! Maybe you remember how they migrated to Egypt to escape a terrible famine. They came to Egypt by invitation from an exiled Jew named Joseph who had become a powerful advisor to the King of Egypt. (Maybe you saw the wildly popular musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.) Anyway, for about 400 years the Israelites had lived peacefully in Egypt. For *four centuries* Egyptians and Israelites lived side by side in peace. And then this new leader rises to power and is somehow threatened by the increasing number of these immigrants and foreigners. So, as is common in the rise of every tyrant, he demonizes them, he makes the Jews the enemy and systematizes their enslavement and oppression.

Let's listen to the story from Exodus chapter one...

Exodus 1:8-14

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.



Notice how fear and ignorance motivated this xenophobic cruelty. Even still, enslaving and tormenting the foreigner was not enough for this deluded king. Pharaoh upped the anti and sought to diminish his enemy even further using even more drastic and covert measures.

Exodus 1:15-22

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 birth stool, 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."



Pharaoh's covert genocidal plan was foiled by the moral integrity and sassy insolence of subversive midwives. Maybe he was so easily duped because his murderous obsession blinded him. So the King decided to go public with the cause making it a

public sport for all loyal and good Egyptians to throw the enemy's infant boys into the Nile. The story continues into chapter two...

Exodus 2:1-10

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 tar 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."

~~~~~

I want to begin this morning with a couple of questions.

- What insurmountable struggle are you facing today, or have you faced in the past?
- What is God calling you to do in the midst of the battle?
- What do you think God is raising up at TriCon Church to defy the evils in our world?

Please pray with me...

*God of our faith, surprise us with Your word today. Written so long ago, these stories still instruct us and guide our actions while filling us with a hope that defies cynicism and pushes against defeat. We open to you, with a faith that believes that even now you are raising up the most unlikely people as agents of transformation. Raise us up. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. - Amen*

In my wildest imagination, I didn't see it coming. About this time of year, 27 years ago I returned home with my family after picking my son up at summer camp. Pulling into the driveway, I noticed black smoke wafting out the front window. It didn't look like much so I carefully opened the door and saw the kitchen illuminated like a

Buddhist temple. There were hundreds of single flames ignited on the walls and ceiling. All they were waiting for was oxygen. I quickly closed the door but it was too late. Not more than 5 minutes passed before the firefighters arrived. By then the entire house was engulfed. In an instant we lost everything but the clothes on our back. Just like that, all that was solid and firm in life just 10 minutes earlier became unstable and unreliable. Everything that we had taken for granted instantly vanished in smoke and water. It was a seismic shift into some altered reality and I knew that nothing would ever be the same again. I would come to understand eventually that hardship and loss is like a sharp knife that pares away all that is false, leaving only that which is our truest self. We learn who we truly are in ways that we could never learn on our own.

The Israelites didn't see this new king coming. For generations they lived as good, faithful, productive citizens of the empire. Then suddenly this delusional Pharaoh feels a paranoiac need to solidify his power by scapegoating outsiders. "It's those Israelites! They are a problem. They threaten our safety and endanger our way of life!" Suddenly all the freedom and abundance that the Hebrew people knew was ripped away. The men were enslaved and treated worse and worse each day. Everything they thought they could rely on was now uncertain. The new king's paranoia grew and he ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill all the newborn boys as they came out of their mother's womb. Can you imagine? Neither could the midwives. This was way out of bounds.

Einstein once observed that adversity introduces us to ourselves. When everything we thought life was about gets ripped away, what remains is only that which can not be taken. Who am I when left with only the bare essence myself? How do I behave when stripped of the quaint illusion that things will always be good and safe? I wonder if Shiphrah and Puah knew they had the courage to defy a murderous king? Only when they came face to face with the powerful monster would they find out. Confronted with horror, they discovered within them a deep moral courage, an unshakable reverence for God's morality over the empire's sick demands. And it was this courageous act of civil disobedience, by two ordinary women, that changed history.

Catastrophe sharpens our focus and steels our resolve. The mother of young Moses must have been utterly terrified and desperate. At any moment her newborn boy could be discovered and thrown unceremoniously into the Nile – as an act of patriotism! She somehow kept the boy a secret for 3 months, but I'll bet she didn't sleep a minute. Finally, exhausted and facing certain disaster, she arrives at the moment of clarity that reveals only one alternative. In an ultimate act of love, she crafts a small basket boat to send the boy away, hoping that somehow God will guide him to safety. I have to wonder though if she knew the bathing schedule of Pharaoh's

sister and knowingly released the basket into the weeds. The boy's sister, just a young girl, stays behind to see what becomes of her brother and brokers the deal of a lifetime with Pharaoh's sister. The girl will grow up to become the great prophet Miriam who was at least as pivotal as Moses in liberating the Israelites from Egypt.

Biblical heroes are always unexpected, average or unlikely people. It seems God prefers to raise up ordinary and outcast people to do extraordinary things in times of chaos. Even under the brutal tyranny of a mad king an infant floating helplessly down a river survives. Because of 4 marginalized women Moses will live. He will grow up in a royal place and be uniquely positioned to follow God's directives and lead his people out of captivity.

I have found many times in my life that it is in those moments of deep despair, those times when the life I thought I knew suddenly shatters and the very core of my identity unravels is exactly when God draws near. And Always, without fail, it was other people who rose up to help me heal and grow. In my experience God is always raising up ordinary people to defy tyrants, show extraordinary compassion and display astonishing courage.

What insurmountable challenge are you facing? Is your marriage failing? Is an important relationship eroding into estrangement? Maybe your career is falling apart, or that dream you've chased for so long is evaporating. Is your hope fading on the distant horizon? Are you caught in a web of cynicism and mistrust? I've been there too many times and walked with others through the dark valley. What I have found, time and time again, is that through the chaos we redefine new order. We tap into a profound resiliency we never knew was there. And, over time, we do endure, adapt and find to our astonishment that God has been present in all of it. There is no adversity powerful enough to rip away the Divine Presence. I have come to understand that in my life story it was the severe losses and the agony of an uncertain and frightening future that revealed a God that raises up the lowly. A God that yearns to redeem and restore my life, even from the ashes of what seemed like total destruction.

Adversity and disruption don't block the way forward, it is the way forward! Even now God is raising up unexpected heroes that will subvert tyranny, stand against injustice, and play a critical and mostly invisible role in advancing the realm of God. And, like the Israelites in Egypt, we too find strength in community. As we continue to trust God's presence and follow in the Way of Jesus, we find the audacity to live in hope.

What is God raising you up to be? What part do you feel called to play? How can we at TriCon Church best evolve as a ship of light in a sea of darkness? The only way is

to humbly, prayerfully follow the One that called us here in the first place. The One in whom we live and move and have our being. The One who always redeems, restores and resurrects. Lead us on Eternal Sovereign! – Amen.