

“MAKING OF A PEOPLE: HOPE IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING”

Exodus 1:8-11a, 14b; Exodus 2:1-10

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We have moved forward several generations from the story we read last week to quite a different scene. I'd definitely put this one in the category of "Favorite Sunday School Stories." It won't come as a surprise that pictures of this scene are way easier to find than pictures of Joseph's complicated and emotional reconciliation with his estranged brothers, which we heard about last week. After all, the story has a certain sweetness, not to mention a princess, a cute baby, and a happy ending. There are lots and lots of pictures of the baby Moses in a basket, floating gently among the reeds, and the Egyptian princess discovering him. She is beautiful and elegant, of course, sometimes pictured with ladies in waiting accompanying her; often the artist also includes the watchful older sister as well. The scene is invariably picturesque, romantic, and idealized – in art as in our minds.

But we shouldn't let any of that cause us to forget the backdrop of the story:

Why is that baby in a basket in the river anyway? When you think about it, it seems really a little strange, doesn't it?

Even when you know that the Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt, has decreed the killing of baby boys born to the Hebrew slaves (apparently lest they grow up to rebel against their oppressors) don't you wonder what on earth made his family think of putting him into a basket at the edge of a river? How did they think that would save him? We have no way of knowing. Perhaps all we can say is that desperate people sometimes take crazy risks and do things that don't make sense to other people, to try and give their children a chance of survival. But at any rate, the reason for this story lies in the larger context of oppression, slavery, suffering, and danger into which this baby was born.

Things have changed a lot for the descendants of Jacob (or Israel, as he was also known), since their ancestor brought his family to Egypt to escape a famine. The irony here is that Joseph, who'd started out as a slave, then rose to a position of power, was able to save his family and settle them in Egypt because he had served the interests of Pharaoh well. But that alliance with power which saved his people also set the stage for what happened later: a new Pharaoh with different interests and no loyalty to Joseph's family saw in this community of foreigners – "others" – only labor to be exploited. So Egypt that was a place of refuge soon becomes a prison of slavery for Jacob's descendants.

Even in circumstances so hard, people are still trying to live with love and dignity, hold their families together, remember who they are, and keep faith with their God. But life is very, very hard, and dangerous, and getting worse. It seems almost impossible that

they can go on. Their future, their very existence is threatened and there seems no reason for hope.

Then comes the story of the baby.
A story of a baby is almost always a story of hope.

The Bible has a number of these stories, about babies being born in extraordinary circumstances or surviving against great odds. You can pretty well count on a Bible story involving a baby to be a story about God keeping promises, assuring a future for the people of God, and instilling a fresh new hope. The tension in the story is not merely about the survival of this one little baby (or even of the other baby boys); it is a question of whether the people of God will survive. And the answer - God's answer - is a baby in a basket in a river, and an improbable chain of events and people that insures the future of God's promises.

This story is full of irony and humor. The larger arc of the "making of a people story" seems to repeat itself: Joseph was a beloved favorite child who became a slave who rose to power in Pharaoh's court and then reconnected with his family to save them. It looks like that narrative is about to repeat itself to Moses. And who would think that the Pharaoh who wanted to kill the baby boys of the Hebrew slaves would end up sheltering and educating, in his own household, the one baby who would grow up to be the very rebel leader he was worried about? This story suggests that God delights in surprising twists, small beginnings, unlikely heroes, and sudden reversals of fortune.

However, it's a serious story, too. This story tells us that God has seen the people's suffering, and heard their prayers, and is going to raise up a new hope. But hope is fragile, as fragile as a baby. It can be hard to recognize its potential or imagine its future. It needs nourishing and protecting. There are always going to be those who want to kill it.

At the same time, there are the people who protect that hope... against all odds, at great personal risk, out of love, because they feel called to do so, because they have a dream, for the sake of the children, maybe even for reasons they don't themselves fully understand. This story always seems to be called "Baby Moses in the Bulrushes" but all the action in the story is by others, the ones who protect him: his parents, the midwives (we'll talk more about them in Adult Ed in a couple of weeks), his sister, Pharaoh's daughter, and her household.

It makes me think of Fred Rogers, talking about what his mother told him when he wondered what to do when bad things were happening. "Look for the helpers," she said. And so he did, and saw that they were there, and he became a person of hope. He passed on his mother's wisdom, and he became one of the helpers, too ... a protector of hope.

Look for the helpers. Who are the helpers in our world? Who are the people who protect the hope when everything looks grim? Who are the people who protect the

children? Who are the protectors of the vulnerable? Of the mentally ill, of threatened communities, of endangered species, of disappearing habitats, of the elderly who have no one, of everybody who depends on a thin safety net? Who helps us resist cynicism and hopelessness and apathy? Who protects the dream of freedom and wholeness and justice for everyone?

It's not hard to find ourselves in a story where times are hard and fear is real and hope is hidden. But can we find ourselves among the protectors of hope? Are we going to be among the helpers, even if we can't quite see how it's all going to work out, or when, or how our hope can ever come to anything?

Where are we going to find the courage and the faith for that? The story we are exploring, this big saga the Bible gives us of the making a people, does not ever suggest that it's easy. But it does show us that – even in a dark time - hope is kept alive, nourished, protected, and unfolded in a *community* of people who are sustained by the *knowledge that they belong to a faithful and present God*.

Amen.