

Title: What's In A Name?
Scripture: Exodus 2:1-10
Date & Location: August 2, 2020 Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church
Preacher: Grace Boyer

Over the next few weeks, we will be following the stories of Moses in the book of Exodus. This pivotal figure, these foundational stories in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faith.

In some ways, the story of Moses begins before the Exodus 2 passage that Donna read for us today. It starts in Exodus 1:8 with the ominous words, "Now a new King (or Pharaoh) arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." "Who did not know Joseph." Joseph, who was the son of Jacob and Rachel, the grandson of Isaac and Rebekah, the great-grandson of Abraham and Sarah. Joseph, whose jealous brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt, but through God's providential care, rose up the chain of responsibility and power to be Pharaoh's second in command. Joseph, who was able to organize and sustain the Egyptians during a devastating famine, and so a grateful Pharaoh gave Joseph's large extended family choice land to thrive and flourish in Egypt. And thrive they did. But then time went by, generations went by, until there arose a new Pharaoh who did not know Joseph.

With that phrase, we see the fall of Joseph's family from being honored to being seen as foreigners, outsiders, a threat to the empire. This new Pharaoh began to oppress Joseph's descendants, then put them into forced labor, then enslave them to his building projects. This new Pharaoh escalated the inhumane treatment incrementally with each new ordinance. Like a frog being boiled in water, everyone, oppressed and oppressor got used to the new normal. This new Pharaoh called Joseph's family Hebrews, likely from the word "hapiru". (Hebrew/hapiru, can you hear it?) Hapiru meant marginalized people, people without land or social standing, low class, no account. This new Pharaoh then summoned two Hebrew Midwives, two of my favorite figures in the Bible, named Shiphrah and Puah. Pharaoh summoned these two women and said, when you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, if the baby born is a boy, kill him, but if a girl, she shall live.

Take a moment and let the horror of that wash over you. Don't just receive it as part of what might be an overly familiar story to you. In the moment of childbirth, as the mother has heard her child's first cry, the midwives were ordered to kill the boys. The horror of that order. And then hear the second part, "but the girl, she shall live". Girls aren't a threat, they are just to be used. And yet what we see unfold in the story is an almost a humorous biblical response as a string of marginal hapiru women undermine the power of the mighty Egyptian Pharaoh and find a way to preserve life.

First Shiphrah and Puah "did not do as [Pharaoh] commanded them, but let the boys live." Biblical Scholar Dr. Walter Brueggemann describes these midwives as "discreet, defiant, cunning, mothering agents." I'd add, courageous. When Pharaoh notices, the two midwives tell him that the Hebrew women were too vigorous, unlike the dainty Egyptians, and gave birth before the midwives got there. They played on Pharaoh's racial stereotypes in order to protect the Hebrew babies, and Pharaoh believed them, because it fit his demeaning world view. Then Pharaoh ratchets it up a notch and tells the Egyptian people to take matters into their own hands and throw boy babies into the river Nile. It was open season on anyone born Hebrew, a hapiru, a person on the margins without land or power.

This is the Egypt that Moses was born into. As you heard Donna read, Moses' mother saw that her son was "fine". That word "fine", is the same Hebrew word used in the story of Creation in the Bible when God saw that creation was "good". Moses' mother saw that her creation, her baby boy was good/fine, and hid him for three months. Not an easy feat with a baby! When it was no longer possible to hide him, she waterproofs a papyrus basket (literally the word is ark), places her beloved son into it, and then puts it in a stand of reeds on the bank of the river Nile. The irony is that

technically, she was following the letter of Pharaoh's law, to put the boy babies into the river Nile, but she put the basket into the protective enclave of reeds.

What is often portrayed in movies is that the basket is whisked away by the river, turned over to the elements, and that may have been what happened. But it is also possible that Moses' mother was intelligent enough to know that that sheltered bank of the Nile was where Pharaoh's daughter bathed. She may have even have heard rumors of her kindness. This princess takes one look at baby Moses and has pity on this Hebrew child, this marginalized and endangered child. Moses's sister jumps in to ask "do you need a Hebrew nursemaid", and I can imagine the winks and understanding that take place between the daughter of Pharaoh and Moses' sister and mother, as the princess turns the baby back over to his biological mother to nurse and raise, while extending her royal protection over them by paying them and putting them in her employment. These women, from opposite ends of the social spectrum, the marginalized class and the ruling class, conspire together to let Moses live. They become unlikely allies, and undermine the edict of the all-powerful Pharaoh, these so called harmless, powerless girls.

Moses spends his young childhood in his birth mother's home, experiencing first-hand the life of his people in slavery, and then is adopted into the princess' home being educated and culturized into the Egyptian upper class. He is bi-cultural, with eyes open to both, and lives in the intersection of those two-worlds.

As you hear this ancient story, do you see parallels to our world today? Who are the "hapiru" today? Who are the marginalized in our world, nation, cities, neighborhood? Who are the Pharaohs? What are the unjust laws? Where does fear and violence reside? Who are the midwives, princesses, mothers, sisters, fathers, children, unlikely allies? Perhaps the dynamics of humanity have not changed that much from our ancient story.

Theologically this story from Exodus give me hope because it tells me that:

- God values and saves people that the powerful consider marginalized and expendable.
- God values a gender that the powerful considered powerless.
- God defies labels of who might be the enemy, and gives a princess a chance to show compassion.
- God see oppression and chooses to find ways to bring life again and again in the face of all odds.

I have hope in a God who conspires with two marginalized midwives and a spunky mother and sister to outwit an all-powerful Pharaoh. I have hope in a God who used those in the very power structure itself (a princess) to subvert the unjust system that she is imbedded in. I have hope in a God who through Jesus continues to speak truth to power, humanize and elevate the marginalized, and treat us all as named and claimed children of God.

When Pharaoh's daughter adopts the baby as her son, she names him. Moses was a common Egyptian word that meant "child" or "is born". But the princess plays on the Hebrew transliteration of Moses, which is a homonym for the Hebrew word "to draw out". She drew Moses out of the water, the waters of slavery, the waters that were meant for his death. And transformed them into the birth waters of new life and adoption. She names and claims and loves him. What's in a name? Identity, belonging, purpose. Reminds me of baptism.

Today we come to communion, as the named, claimed, and loved children of God. Our hymn is "Come to the table of grace". For this is truly a table of God's grace, God's love, and God's hope. Let us sing together.