

PROPER 16, PENTECOST 13, YEAR A, AUGUST 27, 2023

The Old Testament lesson this morning is probably one of the most familiar stories in the Bible and has been immortalized in several movies like the Ten Commandments. Of course, I am talking about the story of Moses. Anyone who attended Sunday School remembers being taught about the baby Moses being hidden in a basket in the bull rushes who was rescued by the Pharaoh's daughter and then nursed by his own mother.

However, this story in today's Old Testament reading is really not about Moses and it never was. This story is about five women who had very little significance in their cultures; were powerless, but whose actions had a major impact on the outcome of their people. I think as this story was passed from generation to generation it brought a smile to the people who heard it because it is a story about oppression and how people, who have little power or influence, can overcome and survive their oppression in small, creative ways. I believe any person who has been oppressed can resonate with these five women because it shows that you might not be in power or have power but you can have amazing hope. It recognizes a new way of finding that hope which highlights the other theme running through this story which is fear and compassion.

We begin with the most overlooked part of the baby Moses story with two midwives named Shiphrah and Puah who had amazing audacity. We're told that Pharaoh feared how great Israel was becoming, and in reaction to that fear he first ordered their workload increased, and when that didn't work he ordered their male children slaughtered.

If you think this is an exceptional vile plan that shows how uncivilized people were 3500 years ago think about how many genocides and ethnic cleansings have occurred in the 20th and 21st century: Armenia, Nazi Germany, Cambodia, Bosnia and Herzogevena, Rwanda, Somalia and Darfur just to name a few. All these atrocities occur because of fear – fear of the other, fear of those different, fear of losing control and power. This is the pinnacle of how fear distorts and consumes. But, as you well know, fear affects all of us. You name the fear and we react. One word about inflation or credit ratings sends investors fleeing, and sends economies reeling.

It's not just that, look at the ways that fear dominates our personal daily lives. How much of our energy goes into protecting and insuring? How often does fear dictate what we do or where we go? We're not immune to fear.

Now a little fear can be healthy. But, when fear drives our lives, and becomes the epicenter of all our reactions and decision making, it stops being healthy. It becomes consuming. It consumes us. And, often, it consumes others.

Pharaoh was no different. His fear of the Israelites consumed him. So he called in two midwives who assisted the Hebrew women during childbirth and told them to kill all the new born Hebrew males as they were being born. The two women, Shiphrah and Puah, we're told, feared God more than they did the Pharaoh so they ignored his wishes and continued to help the Hebrews. Now the word fear here means awe or being overwhelmed by a reality greater than oneself. It does not mean being afraid, alarmed or terrorized. They were afraid of Pharaoh but "to fear God," is living life with an awareness that life has meaning -- that the choices you make have ultimate

significance. So these two women decided to stand on the side of the oppressed and the powerless just like they were.

When Pharaoh realized the Hebrew community was still growing he called Shiphrah and Puah in for a little talking too. He asked them what was going on since they were so many more Hebrew male babies. Well, I think this is one of the best lines in scripture. Shiphrah and Puah figured that the Pharaoh didn't know anything about childbirth and were quick witted enough that they told him that the Hebrew women were so strong that by the time the midwives arrived they had already delivered their babies. "Oops, Pharaoh we don't know how this happened." What we have here is that Shiphrah and Puah's compassion was stronger than their fear of Pharaoh.

Shiphrah and Puah were off the hook but now the Pharaoh commanded that every newborn Hebrew boy be drowned in the Nile River. Now enters the other women in this story.

A Hebrew woman by the name of Jochebed gave birth to a boy and she was well aware of the Pharaoh's edict. So Jochebed hid him for some time but, as you well, know, it is difficult to hide a baby that likes to exercise their lungs.

So Jochebed decided to tuck her baby into a basket and put him among the protective bulrushes in the river perhaps hoping the soothing movement of the water would put him to sleep. She then told his sister Miriam to stand watch over the boy from the river's edge. Think of the irony of this situation. She puts him in the very river that Pharaoh wanted to drown the baby boys in. The symbolism is also quite vibrant. The Nile was a source of life for that region. Pharaoh wanted to make it a place of death and yet the baby that will deliver Israel is drawn out of those waters giving new birth and life to the Hebrews.

Well you can imagine Miriam's dilemma when she heard voices approaching the river and saw that the voice belonged to none other than the Pharaoh's daughter. Pharaoh's daughter saw the basket and had one of her maids retrieve it. When she opened it up she immediately sized up the situation and recognized that this must be one of the Hebrew male babies. She could have feared this child of another race. She could have feared her father's reaction had he found out. But, she wasn't dominated by fear, but rather compassion. She chose compassion over being fearful.

Miriam too took a risk when she stepped forward and asked Pharaoh's daughter if she would like a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby. She overcame her fear of the Pharaoh's daughter and what might happen to her being so bold in talking to her. She then retrieved her mother who entered into a pact with Pharaoh's daughter to save her son. Picture that meeting between two women of different races, religions, cultures and languages who decided to resist the law of the land and save the life of a slave child. Talk about chutzpah! But their chutzpah was laced with unbelievable compassion.

So Jochebed raised her son for three years and then turned him over to Pharaoh's daughter to be raised as her son. She named him Moses which means drawn out of the water.

You might ask, how did they get away with this? Why didn't the maids who attended Pharaoh's daughter that day betray them at the beginning or even when Moses came to live at the palace? Margaret Mead, the anthropologist once said, "Never underestimate the power of a small group to change the world". That is what these women did because without them the Exodus story would never have happened.

Moses would not have been if it wasn't for Shiphrah, Puah, Jochebed, Miriam, Pharaoh's daughter and countless other unnamed women. These women and a girl were change agents in order to ultimately liberate the Hebrews and dramatically change the course of their history.

What is so powerful about this story is that it offers a new model of heroism based on intelligence, wit and compassion rather than violence. The women overcame their fear and resisted the powerful pharaoh but did not seek to destroy him or seize his power for themselves.

What we learn from this story is that God does indeed work in unique ways. Our God of love helps us to overcome our fears and to act in responsible and compassionate ways. Whether we are the ones who are oppressed or see others that are being oppressed, excluded or disenfranchised it is our baptismal responsibility to recognize and name it and then join God in confronting it. That means racism in our schools, offices, neighborhoods, media; or violence against women and children - or excluding whole categories of people; people of color, immigrants, gays, women, homeless people, mentally ill people.

One of the best measures of society is to look at how we treat the least among us. Where do we see exclusion or powerlessness in our community? Whose stories are not being told? What can we do about it?

Change can come through small opportunities. It doesn't always take money or influential people to make it happen. Change can come through the actions of just one person or two; workers like the midwives, a whistleblower, any person who refuses to cooperate with the oppressor. Change comes through acts of human love, inventiveness and courage to use compassion over fear to do what is in our power to do.

So what is in our power to do? How is God calling us to stand with those who are oppressed? It is in responding to that question that we will find ourselves overcoming fear with compassion so we can do justice, love kindness and mercy and walk humbly with God which is precisely what God requires of us. Amen.