

Exodus 1-2 – Holy Disobedience

The way the narrative lectionary had the readings laid out, we would have read this plus Moses and the Burning Bush...with the option to leave out the story of the Hebrew midwives to shorten it.

We're not doing it that way. We'll give Moses his chance next week.

This story is just too good to give short shrift. Why? Well, first of all, women are the heroes. And not only are they the heroes, but the only named characters in the whole story besides Moses, are Shiphrah and Puah. The midwives. Although midwives are very important among their own people, in the power structure of the Egyptian empire, they're near the bottom. Moses' sister and mother are equally powerless.

Some people reject the Bible and Christianity because of the patriarchal nature of its history. Others will insist on bringing that patriarchy into the present...they say the relationship between the sexes should be just like it was in ancient times.

Neither of those views seems to pay much attention to the stories of women in the Bible. The Bible is rich with stories of women who do at least as much to bring God's promised blessing to the world as the patriarchs. Sometimes more. In fact the very survival of Israel...and therefore God's blessing to the whole world...only survived Pharaoh because of the women in this story.

Before we dive deeper, let's do a very brief gap-filler. Last week we were with Jacob wrestling with God on the banks of the Jabbok river. A lot happened in between that story and where we are this week. We get different parts of the story each year and this year we don't really get anything of Joseph and how Israel came to be in Egypt.

But you'll probably remember that Joseph, Jacob's favorite son, was sold into slavery by his brothers and wound up in Egypt. God was able to turn the evil Joseph's brothers intended upside down and use it for good. Joseph was able to rescue, not only Egypt, but his own family during a famine.

They stayed in Egypt. Now, the family has grown and 400 years later, here they are.

They have been fruitful and multiplied. The vast number of Abraham's descendants fulfills part of God's promise. The promise of land remains in the future.

And now, the promise of blessing to the world is under threat. This is more than just a threat against one group of people – this is a threat against God's plan to use Israel to bless the whole world.

Pharaoh takes a page out of every tyrant's playbook. He declares a group of people the enemy. He casts fear and suspicion on the Hebrews.

Tyranny and oppression's most powerful tool has always been fear. Yes, the Israelites have become numerous. But as near as we can tell, there is no evidence that Israel would have joined Egypt's enemies against them. In fact, it doesn't even appear that there was any war looming at the time.

So what was Pharaoh's motive? If history has something to tell us, it could be that Pharaoh had some work to be done...a lot of work. And he didn't want to pay for it. It's possible that Pharaoh simply needed slaves and decided the Hebrews were perfect candidates.

Throughout history, powerful people have desired cheap, or even unpaid labor to make them richer. Once the decision has been made to enslave people, then the work of justifying it begins.

Usually that justification involves sparking and stoking the fire of fear in the other people. Pharaoh gets all of the Egyptians to fear the numbers and hypothetical power of the Hebrews. They become the enemy, for really no actual reason.

When making the Israelites slaves doesn't reduce their numbers, outright genocide is the next step. This was not the last time in history that playbook of oppression and genocide was used. You may well recognize it in much more recent history.

At this point, Pharaoh is so invested in destroying Israel, he is apparently oblivious to the fact he's destroying his labor pool.

But ultimately death is always the result of Pharaoh's playbook – and the playbook of all those in power who oppose God's purpose.

But here's the thing. There is another playbook operating. It's the playbook of those whose hearts are set on something different. And with that playbook, the tyrants ultimately lose.

Let's look at that playbook. The Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Pua are playing by that one. The midwives feared God.

Let's talk for a minute about that phrase...fear of God. It comes up a lot in the Old Testament. At least in this story, I don't think that meant that the Hebrew midwives feared God would punish them .

I think it means the women knew who the real king was – and it wasn't Pharaoh. They knew that God was the one who ruled. And they also knew that God's rule was about life – the world God ruled was about being fruitful and multiplying and nurturing creation. Not killing it.

The midwives disobeyed the ruler of Egypt...they disobeyed their earthly ruler. But when one disobeys a ruler whose purpose is at odds with the creative and life-giving purpose of God, it's a holy disobedience.

The midwives succeeded in keeping the people of Israel...and the promise of God...alive.

But Pharaoh wasn't ready to concede defeat. His next plan was to throw the Hebrew boy babies into the Nile and drown them.

Now three more women get in on the holy disobedience. Moses' mother practices holy disobedience by putting her baby in a basket in the Nile, hoping he will float to safety. Then, even Pharaoh's daughter practices holy disobedience. She feels compassion for the child.

There's a key for us there, too. What Pharaoh did to the Hebrews began with making them something not quite human...he convinced the Egyptians the Hebrews were less than human. Certainly inferior to they themselves. People nobody could feel compassion for.

When the Egyptians cooperate with Pharaoh by throwing babies in a river to drown, they became something less than human as well. This play from the tyrant's playbook dehumanizes everyone involved...it's in total opposition to God's creation of humanity in God's own image. Pharaoh's daughter refuses to go along. She feels compassion for the baby. She sees his humanity. And so she practices holy disobedience.

When the ruling powers stoke fear...when that fear becomes hatred and oppression...holy disobedience is the appropriate response. When people far removed from power are limited by that power, holy disobedience is sometimes the only response.

And at the heart of that holy disobedience is compassion and the trust that God is the only true ruler. And that God's rule is about life and blessing.

Ultimately, it will take major divine action to free the Hebrews. We'll hear about Moses and the burning bush next week. That will lead to the great Exodus saga...the journey to freedom.

But God depends on people to make liberation happen. And it often begins with small acts of holy disobedience. God was at work in all of this. But the work began with five women – Shiphrah and Puah, Moses' mother, his sister, and Pharaoh's daughter – none of whom had any power in the Egyptian hierarchy.

Throughout scripture, we hear stories about powerful forces that work against God's purpose of life and blessing. Pharaoh was by no means the last tyrant to oppose God. And that opposition is not limited to the stories in the Bible. Throughout history, powerful rulers have stoked fear to make an entire people a threat in the eyes of the tyrant's people.

That's why what happens in the church is so important. We can choose to go along with the tyrant. Too many churches did that in Nazi Germany.

But we are called to something different. In situations where some of God's beloved people are presented as something to be hated or feared, we are called to practice holy disobedience. We are called to follow the lead of the Hebrew midwives. We are called to trust that ultimately God rules, and God's rule is about life and blessing, not death.