

**Message Delivered at Christ Church**  
**Saturday & Sunday, August 21<sup>st</sup> & 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2011**  
**TEXT: Exodus 1:8-2:10**  
**Delivered by Paul A. Johnson**

\*\*\*\*\*

So there once was a king of a great land, who had forgotten everything that had come before him. He was neither the first nor the last to believe that the only moment worth living in was his own, and the only person that mattered was himself. He was strong and powerful, but very much afraid; and power and fear are deadly combinations.

Sometimes, the stories of scripture seem old and distant and ancient. This one's not that way. Its echo rings through the ages. A strong and fearful man uses his authority to bring death rather than life; injustice rather righteousness; slavery rather than freedom.

It's a story told too many times in human history. Too many others like pharaoh would follow; too many tyrants who for their own sake would forget the humanity of others, and thereby lose their own humanity. After Hitler, and Stalin, and Mao, and Rwanda, and the Bosnian war; after apartheid; after centuries of violence between religions and peoples because they are different and afraid of one another; and, lest we forget, after our own national legacy of trading for people from Africa as if they were something other than people, and making them slaves here, and then Jim Crow; or the Trails of Tears traveled by those who were in this land before most of us were...the actions of an ancient Pharaoh who tried first to get the upper hand through forced labor and then through what we today too politely call "ethnic cleansing" doesn't sound so ancient anymore.

There are stories that form a people. And what we heard first this morning is the framework of the story that forms the Jewish people, and gave birth to hope...with an earthly king, way too afraid, who decides that the solution to the problem is slavery and death.

Now we know how the story ends; that a time will come when God intervenes directly and powerfully. Soon enough there will be burning bushes, and plagues, and parted waters; God will speak and act decisively; the Law will be given, and God will give the Hebrew people a home. And there will be heroes...Moses first, and then Joshua.

But before all that, come the heroes we hear about today, and who get the story started; whether they know that's what they're doing or not.

So a pharaoh decides to squash the Hebrews. And of all the ways he could have chosen to do this, if you can believe it...the entirety of his grand plan for their destruction he places in the hands of two Hebrew midwives. Their job is to help the Hebrew women give birth, so he instructs them to kill the children as they are being born if they are male, but to let the girls live.

Now, I need to tell you...Shiprah and Puah are two of my absolute favorite characters in the entire Bible. They may only get seven verses, and we may not have heard about them before today, but they are two of the strongest, cleverest, and courageous people in scripture; and were a movie version of the scene to be made I think they'd be played by Rosie O'Donnell and Whoopi Goldberg; 'cause they got some sauce to 'em.

You see, anybody could acquiesce to pharaoh, and kill the children; and some may be courageous enough to say "no," and thereby lose their heads. But it takes either brilliance or divine inspiration to find a third way; to both foil the plan, and walk away with one's life. A little like this...

“You know, Puah, that pharaoh’s a tough guy...”

“He’s tough... pharaoh...”

“But I don’t think God wants us doing what he’s telling us to do...”

“Nope; God doesn’t want us killing people...”

“So what we gonna do, Pu...”

“Just got a text, Shiprah. Tamar’s having her baby down at 931 Tutankhamen Street. Let’s go...but first...you know, I could really use a cup of coffee. Let’s stop at Starbucks on the way. And also, I got to go to Macy’s to return that blouse my sister gave me for my birthday. I’ve been meaning to do that for months, and today I really want to get that done. And I think I’m running low on...vanilla extract; yeah, vanilla extract...so we’ll go by the grocery store; and I sure hope there’s enough gas in the car...”

“Me too! And I’m sure after all that, Puah, I’m going to be hungry, so we’ll have to stop and have lunch, too...”

“I think that’s a great plan, Ship...but probably after all that, the baby’s going to already be born!”

“Well, we’ll just have to tell pharaoh we’re doing the best we can...”

I mean, it’s almost comical if you think about it; two midwives, standing in front of pharaoh. “Why have you not carried out my orders?!”

“Well, we’ve followed your orders... But the Hebrew women...well, the Egyptian women are so delicate; but the Hebrew women! They’re just so rugged, they give birth before we can get there!”

So plan A didn’t work; on to plan B. This time, everyone is mobilized, and all the Hebrew baby boys are to be thrown into the river. The Nile is the life blood of Egypt, and there the sacrifice will be made.

So there was a woman named Jochebed. She was married to a man named Amram, who doesn’t figure much in the story. Her first child was a son named Aaron, born before pharaoh’s edict. Her second child was a daughter named Miriam. Or maybe Miriam came first; we aren’t exactly sure.

But a third child...another boy...came after pharaoh’s edict; a child born into a world that was not safe for him; born under a king who would not tolerate his presence simply because he was alive; born into an earthly kingdom that plays by this world’s rules where the strong crush the weak.

So what it is for Jochebed to place her baby in the basket, and put him upon the river, is something beyond my ability to describe; and I’m not going to try. I’m not a mother, so I can’t really get it. But one mother with whom I shared this story simply said she couldn’t imagine having to make that choice.

But life gives us choices we don’t want to make; and so we make ‘em, the best we can; so Jochebed does...maybe possibly because she trusts God to take care of her baby. But scripture doesn’t get very pious here. Maybe she does it simply because she thought it was her son’s best chance; and that’s a good enough reason.

And then, there are the young heroes. Miriam...who was Scout Finch before there was a Scout Finch...and pharaoh’s daughter. The latter, of course, is not one of God’s people; and she’s given no name here. She’s one of the enemy; one of those “delicate” Egyptian women. If she draws the baby out of the bulrushes because God has spoken to her, again scripture doesn’t tell us. Maybe she’s simply acting on the compassionate spirit God places in all of us, if we’ll open ourselves to it; that’s a good enough reason. But she’s got nerve, and pull the baby out she

does. And whether pharaoh ever found out what his daughter did or not, we don't know. If he did, I can only imagine the conversation..."Well, dad, you said we had to put the Hebrew boys into the water. You didn't say we couldn't take them out..." And one more time, a courageous hero...whether she knew she was doing this or not...stifles the powers of evil, and furthers God's story of salvation.

And the baby was named Moses.

Every Easter Eve, when we worship, we listen to the story of the Exodus. We listen to the story of God parting the waters, and bringing the Hebrews to safety. Here at Christ Church, we actually act it out. The children walk in making noise with a bunch of noisemakers, and the rest of the congregation waves blue pieces of cloth to make the Red Sea. And we make a big deal about the story because from the beginning into now Christians, too, have known the story of Israel's deliverance to be fundamental to our own deliverance. Israel goes through the waters, and in our baptism so do we. Moses is drawn out of the water, and so are we.

But the story begins with some people who have very little, yet in the midst of that little take the opportunity to do what is right in the realm of their own lives. Their actions are not small. In fact, they are huge; super-human, even, in their strength. But their realm of influence is small; or at least private...the place of childbirth, their own homes...and within that small realm they demonstrate the courage to make the choice for what is right...at great risk to their own well-being; reminding us that we're not called to take the safe route, anyway.

And while we know the end of the story...while we know who Moses is, and what God will do through him...the story that begins, incidentally, immediately after this one ends...they do not. They don't know what God is going to do with him. Remember...one of them isn't even an Israelite. The deep beauty here is that they don't know that the world will be changed because of what they're doing. They're not doing this because this is MOSES! They just do it; and that's enough for everything else to follow...

Because we just don't know, do we; we just don't know what the consequence might be of the compassionate and courageous or gentle act we do this week; we just don't know what impact we may have through how we are in our own realms, and what might grow through the choices we make to act for God...but I guarantee you, they'll make a difference.

There's a book called The Butterfly Effect, written by a guy named Andy Andrews. In it he tells of Moses and Susan Carver, who adopted an orphan who they named George Washington Carver; and of Etta Budd, George's art teacher, who told him he needed to study something other than just art. Etta's husband Joseph was a professor of horticulture at Iowa State; and after all, in Iowa they grow a lot of stuff, so why not study plants? Carver grew up; became a professor at Iowa State University, and became friends with a Dairy Science professor named Henry Cantwell Wallace and his family. Carver would visit the Wallace's, and go on walks with them...including with Wallace's son, who was also named Henry. Henry Wallace grew up to become Secretary of Agriculture under FDR, and eventually his third-term vice-president. On a vacation in Mexico after the 1940 election, Wallace had the idea of developing a strain of corn that would survive in dry climate. He got some money from the Rockefeller Foundation, and started the first research station in Mexico. One of his first hires was a man named Norman Borlaug, whose life-long research in high-yield crops would earn him the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize. But more importantly, according to some, over the last fifty years Borlaug's accomplishments have saved the lives of a billion people who otherwise would have starved...none of these people did what they did because they knew a billion lives would be

saved; but because each of them did what they did, a billion lives were saved. Whether they understood what they were doing would change the world is something I don't know. But it did.

Which, like the story of Shiprah, Puah, Jochebed, Miriam, and the daughter of pharaoh who is given no name, I would suggest, makes the week ahead of us look a little bit different. We all got places to go and things to do and stuff on the calendar, and things will happen that inevitably aren't scheduled. Some of the things may not be easy.

But look up, and we see there's a bigger story; and we're in it, and as much a part of it as the persons whose story we heard today and who really didn't know what their actions would mean, but did them anyway. And what we got before us is more than just another plain old week, or plain old day. It's another week, and another day, when God gives us strength so we can and will change the world for God; and further the story not of this world's kingdoms, but of God's Kingdom; and not somewhere else, but exactly where we are, wherever that is.

Because we're all life-touchers and difference-makers—wherever we find ourselves—just as God helped these women bring life and make a difference where they found themselves. Which doesn't mean curing cancer or writing the novel that moves a nation; but may mean a smile, or a hand, or a word of encouragement to the husband or wife, or mother or father, or friend of the person who connects to the person, who connects to the person, who connects to the person who does.

Moses dealt directly with God, and helped save a people, and give hope to all the world. All because of two midwives, his mother, and a pharaoh's daughter who did what they believed was best and put in the effort so that God could create the results. At great risk, they were just doing the right thing that was before them; and all the time, it was part of something greater than they could ever understand.

And if there is a way to honor their story, and honor God, it may be to see that their story is our story; and this week, like them, we have been given the power to change a world that still need changing.

So let's.