

Bulrushes and Bedrock

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Exodus 1:8-2:10; Matthew 16:13-20

It is good to be back with you today. Time away is always restful and good but also coming back is something I look forward to.

As a child, I loved the story of Moses in the bulrushes. The image of a little baby hiding among the cattails and being found by a beautiful princess is the stuff of fairy tales. I remember weaving a little basket and putting a paper cut out of the baby Moses in it and setting it in a wading pool at Vacation Bible School.

But looking at this story with adult eyes, as well as books about slavery and racial injustice, I cannot help but see this sweet little story with the eyes of an adult.

For a brief recap, call to mind the story of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. We know that story -- it made it to Broadway! Joseph, Jacob's favored son, was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. But that was a rag to riches story. Joseph had worked his way to a top position in Egypt when the famine hit. Joseph's good planning allowed Egypt to have more than enough food while his father and brothers' lives suffered. After some intrigue and a few shenanigans, invites his large extend family to join him in Egypt so that they could survive the famine. The book of Genesis ends with Jacob's death and Joseph forgiving his brothers for their treachery in their younger years. It is a happy ending as the sons of Jacob settle into their new home in Egypt.

Now an exodus begins as years have passed and a new king who does not know Joseph is in charge. The Hebrews (the children, grandchildren and great grandchildren of Jacob) are no longer welcomed for they are now considered a threat. Listen to the reading of god's word in Exodus:

⁸Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in

the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.”¹¹Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor....¹³The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites,¹⁴and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

¹⁵The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, ¹⁶“When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.”

¹⁷But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ¹⁸So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” ¹⁹The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.”²⁰

²²Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.”

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman.²The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. ³When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. ⁴His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

⁵The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. ⁶When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him, “This must be one of the Hebrews’ children,” she said. ⁷Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?”

⁸Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother. ⁹Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it. ¹⁰When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and she

took him as her son. She named him Moses, “because,” she said, “I drew him out of the water.”

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

What a happy story. Except for all those other Hebrew boys who were killed, everything worked out.

With subjects like race and immigrants and white supremacy heavily in the news, I realize how often a version of this story has gotten replayed on all continents of the world, particularly within the span of our lifetimes. The Holocaust in the 1940s, the Pol Pot’s genocide in Cambodia in the 1970s the Tutsi and Zulus, Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s, South African apartheid, and the separating immigrant families. It boils down to the same -- one group of people holding another down, trying to intimidate, and if that does not work to eliminate. You would think we would learn. You would think that we would evolve, but feeling threatened and fearing others is as real today as it was in Pharaoh’s time.

One can get completely discouraged that the human race continues to commit atrocities, and rationalize that they are protecting our own. This king of Egypt was being political; he cared about his own people and liked the economic sense of keeping the Israelites around to build up their cities and coffers. Not only did he fear their growing number and power, but also enjoyed the benefits of extremely cheap labor. Fear and greed are a tight combination that can justify killing innocents.

In every dark story, there are rays of light. That light comes from unlikely sources. The heroes in this story come from the most oppressed of all, Hebrew women. The bearers of light are two midwives, a mother and a sister; they work in their own way to save lives. They bear hope in the face of evil. The midwives Shiprah and Puah, defy the most powerful man in the known world. They are ordered to kill the boy babies but they do not because they feared God, more than they feared the King of Egypt. In times of great darkness, we never know where the light of hope burns, but throughout the story of humanity, as cruel and hateful people may be, there are a few who say no to the evil.

As we confront our own history and see where we have been complicit in oppressing or suppressing another, may we be strengthened and heartened, that even in our own way we can bring light to the darkness and stand against human power and intimidation.

We are given more means to let that shine. Which brings us to our second scripture today. Jesus is with his disciples. They have been with him long enough to know that what they are witnessing is important and even life changing. Reading Matthew 16:13-20:

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

When Gregg & I get to go to our vacation spot in Maine, one of the things we love to do is go to the coast and visit Two Light State Park in Cape Elizabeth, Maine. We love climbing over the basalt rocks and watching the waves crash in on them. One of the years, we had two of the grandchildren with us. I kept reminding them to watch the rocks with sea plants on them, as they would be wet and slippery. If only I had heeded my own advice. I stepped on one of the rocks, my feet went out from under me and down I went. Although I fell on the most cushioned part of my body, I experienced firsthand how solid a rock can be. It is no small thing when Jesus changes Simon’s name to Peter, which means rock and says “It is on solid foundation that I will build my church.”

Both the Matthew and exodus scriptures mark an important beginning. In Matthew, Jesus proclaimed the flawed Simon as the rock, the foundation of the church in which even the vilest, the gates of Hades itself will not prevail.

In Exodus, we see the birth of Moses who begins his life in hiding in the midst of a dark and terrible time but grows up to coalesce a group of slaves into a nation.

There are many threats to God's Word today. Fear is something we know about. Pharaoh knew how to use the fear of the growing number of Israelites to try to turn lifegivers into murderers. Fear makes us suspicious of our neighbors because they may be different from us. Fear makes us more vigilant when we are near another whose skin color is different from ours. Fear causes good people to turn away and be silent when they witness injustice and cruelty.

In the depths of fear comes that glimmer of hope. As one child is saved, one flawed human is called upon to be the solid foundation of a movement. Jesus chooses Simon Peter to be the visible sign of Christ on earth until that time when Christ returns. The solid invincible rock teamed up with the passionate, yet mercurial human named Simon (now known as Peter). That is our heritage, from whom we came. We have the bulrushes of Moses in hiding and the bedrock of Peter to remind us what we are about in a world filled with fear and anger. We have a choice. We can wrap ourselves up in our own cocoon and let someone else make the decision and speak for us; or in our own actions, we can show that we too fear God and follow God above all others.

It is tempting to not only take a stand, not want to cause waves, not challenge the status quo. We want to keep the peace at all cost. I am sure that neither midwife wanted go against the powers that be, but their simpler defiant acts allowed Moses to survive and grow up to lead his people out of Egypt. In their own way, they gave birth to the nation of Israel.

You can be sure that Peter, a simple fisherman, had no ambition or design to have great churches named after him. But God has a way of using us beyond our own imagined potential.

We are a church of bulrushes, bringing hope to a world that seems quite dismal; bearing hope for what is to come in the midst of horror and evil. Bulrushes do not seem like a solid defense against what is wrong with this world. Yet out of the thinly veiled covering comes a beginning to a new order for the Hebrew people.

We are a church founded on bedrock. Populated by less than perfect human beings but humans who at one time or another have declared with all their hearts that Christ is the Messiah and son of the living God. We have the promise that the gates of hell itself cannot penetrate what god has brought.

We are called to have a part of this community to be a church that offers even the slightest hope to the downtrodden and discouraged. We are called to be a church that stands solid in a wavering world.

God's purpose for Oak Grove Presbyterian Church is still evolving. When church buildings are closed, this is precisely the time that light shines out in the community bringing God's word and hope outside so that all may know. God's mission for this church continues to unfold. Whatever the future may hold, we do know that we are a church in which god is a part. To Peter, the Rock, we say thank you for giving us something on which we can hold. To Moses, the midwives (his mother and sister), who dared to hide him in the bulrushes, we say thank you for giving us a hope in the face of darkness. Amen.