

“A New Hope”

Today from Exodus chapters 1 and 2:1-10, we have the story of the Israelites time in Egypt. The story is a positive one of creation. Four verbs describe the powerful position of the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. They were fruitful and multiplied, which relate to God’s creation. They were prolific, teaming with abundant life. They were strong, which gave them might and staying power.

What should have been a wonderful story is set against the backdrop of racism and oppression. A king of Egypt comes to power who is not committed to the policies of his predecessors. He does not appreciate the history of Jacob’s family. Because the Israelites are a different people, the king’s racism affects his decisions. The fact that the Israelites are fruitful and powerful make it a threat to the empire. Instead of working with the Israelites, the king fears they will escape and leave the land. He fears the departure of cheap labor that the imperial government is no longer able to control.

The king’s reaction is to engage in a fresh policy of forced labor towards the Israelites. They are oppressed by the ruthless behavior of the empire. They build great buildings. Archeological evidence shows the existence in the nineteenth dynasty in Egypt of building projects for storage centers in Pithorn and Ramesses. Ramesses is the name most used as a royal name of Egypt. The storehouses

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constitute not only grain policies but are also metaphors for state policy, an elitist control of economic surplus and the means of production. These storehouses are evidence of the policy of coercion and accumulation.

The state policy of this Pharaoh created a fierce adversarial relationship between Israel and Egypt. The Israelites became a subjugated people. The lesson for us is that policies of greed and racism can lead to oppression and dehumanization of fellow human beings. We as Christians are to fight for justice and mercy so that all human beings, regardless of ethnic status, color, or creed, are given the fullness of life.

In response to the state policy that makes the work harder for them, the Israelites multiply and spread more. Once again, instead of working with the Israelites, the Egyptians just made life harder for them. The privileged Egyptians were not willing to put themselves on the same level as those they had enslaved. They were not willing to give up their privilege.

Then, fueled by the irrationality of his racism and greed, the Pharaoh then engages in a policy of genocide. He speaks to two Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah and tells them to kill the Hebrew baby boys while they are being born. These two women, though, engage in civil disobedience and let the Hebrew boys live. When the Pharaoh asks why they are letting the Hebrew boys

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live, the two women are cunning and crafty. They tell Pharaoh that Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are much stronger and give birth before the midwives can get to them.

Shiphrah and Puah are an example to us today that there are times we must stand up against the government or the system in order to do the right thing. These women showed great courage but also took great risk. Any king willing to kill babies would be willing to kill them as well. But they feared God more than they feared the Pharaoh. We may have to take great risk in standing up for justice but we must always remember that our ultimate allegiance is to God, not to the government or its human leaders.

We must also appreciate the craftiness of these women. Did they lie about Hebrew women being stronger? Probably. But as we have learned, God appreciates the cunning. Think of Jacob. And think of Bonhoeffer. If a greater good is to be achieved, then a lie is okay. Ask for God's forgiveness. In this story, it does not even appear these midwives needed to ask for God's forgiveness. The text tells us that God treated them well.

The racism and greed of the Pharaoh then drives him to an even more irrational act. He orders a systematic murder of precisely the babies who might be the most productive workers in the state system.

Then we have a strong baby boy, born of a marriage at a time when a callous king of Egypt has issued an unfair edict that all Hebrew baby boys are to be cast into the Nile River and drowned. His very strength is his liability. His mother can no longer shelter him. She has not even given him a Hebrew name. But at some point in time someone will hear him cry; someone may reveal him to the authorities. So, his mother has no choice but to send him out. A basket of papyrus with the cracks sealed tight. It was like a little ark. The mother has his sister watch what happens. He floats down the river meant for his death.

The little boat comes upon the Pharaoh's daughter while she was bathing. Did the mother know the princess would be there? Maybe. But how could she trust that the princess would act to protect the child? The mother could only trust God. When the princess sees the child, she immediately knew he was a Hebrew. She knows the baby needs protection from her father. She knows he is from the slave community.

The fate of the beloved baby boy was in the hands of a person of privilege. Usually persons of privilege are dangerous. They do not want to give up their privilege, especially to help those of the lower caste. As a woman of privilege, Bithiah had a choice when she heard the baby's cries. She could have easily responded out of loyalty to the system that gave her every advantage. She could

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have called Egyptian 911 to come eliminate this infant threat. But something pushed her beyond her privilege. It was more than pity, like the relentless call of justice, the sense that something about this was not right and the certainty that she was equipped to change it. She applied her privilege as a tool in enabling her to serve. With the help of her maids, she lifted the boy out of the water, giving him a new life and a new name, Moses. It is used in reference to God's mighty acts of rescue. Moses is rescued from the waters and this act anticipates a larger rescue to be wrought through the power of Moses.

Moses is actually reunited with his family through the actions of Bithiah. Miriam, Moses' sister, tells Bithiah she can get a nursemaid and smartly brings Moses' mother. Bithiah then pays her for being the nursemaid, allows her to take the child home with her, and tells her to bring the child back when he is grown up. We are not told how long this is, but once he is brought back Bithiah adopts him as her own son. Moses then has the opportunity of growing up in the royal court, with access to the Pharaoh.

These three women could have acted with class consciousness and nothing would have happened. But all of them refuse to live out their assigned hostility to one another. As a result, Moses lives and is given the ability to later have the

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ability to petition the Pharaoh when God determines it is time to set his people free.

This story speaks to us today as we, white people of European descent, are the dominate caste in the United States. It provides a model for how we can achieve justice for those in need. Many advances have been made by those of other races, creeds, or color, but we are still the ones with the most advantages. This does not mean that life is easy for us; in reality we still have to work hard for what we have. We still have problems. We do not have to apologize for being white. We do not have to feel guilty because we are white. But we need to recognize that we do not suffer disadvantages solely because of the color of our skin.

The question is, will we as members of the advantaged caste help to pull the disadvantaged persons out of the water onto the shore of opportunity? Many like to say that it up to the disadvantaged class to take care of its own problems, to bring itself up by its bootstraps. But the reality is that this is often hard to do without help from those with more advantages. Even with the advances of the twentieth century, the net worth of African-American households on average is still only one-tenth of that of the average white household in the United States. African-Americans make up only twelve percent of the population in the United States, so they need help from others to achieve justice and equal opportunity. Their vote

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alone will not bring them what they need. Just as Bithiah knew something was just not right, will we also have that epiphany and step up to do something?

As we close today, let us reflect on what we are willing to do for those who live on the margins. What will we do to strive towards that sacred statement of Thomas Jefferson “All men are created equal?” Hebrew children like Moses still make their perilous journeys today, armed with little more than their mama’s fierce love. As pointed out in a very effective image from Rev. Liddy Barlow, executive minister of Christian associates of Southwest Pennsylvania, “Bithiahs still sunbathe by the riverside, capable of casual cruelty but also---at our best--- able to subvert the very systems that maintain us. God calls us into holy conspiracy and invites us into one tangled family for the sake of the most vulnerable. For God’s own sake.”