

Midwives of Rebirthing
Romans 12.1-8, Exodus 1.8-21
Sunday, August 27, 2017
Pentecost + 12a
Celebration of Rev. Tim Lauve-Moon
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott

Let's begin with Joseph, the younger brother sold into Egyptian slavery by his older brothers because they envied the favoritism and affection their father Jacob showed him. Genesis 37.4 tells us, "when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him." They sold him, created false evidence to indicate he'd been eaten by wild animals, and they assumed they'd never see him again. But through a long series of events, Joseph was protected and blessed by God in his time in Egypt. In fact, he was trusted and respected and rose to the second most powerful position in leadership, second only to the Pharaoh.

Joseph had dreams and visions and the ability to interpret the dreams of others since he was a young man. This mystical ability told him about the future, and he knew a famine was coming. In his role at the top of Egyptian government, he began to store tremendous amounts of grain in preparation for seven years of famine. When the time of great need arrived, "all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine had become so severe throughout the world." (Genesis 41.57) This, of course, included his brothers and, eventually, his father, and Joseph came to understand the Divine plot of his life telling his brothers, "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors...You shall settle [here], and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children...I will provide for you." (Genesis 45.7,10)

God preserves the people of Israel through Joseph's care. When he dies, they are all slaves because they famine cost them land and freedom at the hands of the Pharaoh's provision. In his final words to his brothers, Joseph promises, "God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land he swore to Abraham, Isaac, and to Jacob." (Genesis 50.24) Our text today for today picks up just after that story and begins with "ominous foreshadowing,...with just two Hebrew words, translated: 'Now a new king arose ...' With just three words this time, the author lets the audience know that the story is about to take a turn."¹

¹ Karla Suomala: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3380

Professor Karla Suomala offers helpful commentary on these nuanced words and phrases. "How will this new king treat Jacob's descendants -- immigrants who have contributed to and made their home in Egyptian society? Just in case we don't catch the foreshadowing, the author adds that this is a king 'who did not know Joseph.' The verb 'know' in this case can't be read literally because generations have passed. What it's getting at in Exodus 1:8 is that the new king didn't remember Joseph's role in keeping the Egyptians alive during a time of famine or simply chose to ignore this piece of history. In any case, it seems to be more willful than a simple act of forgetting."

We don't have to wait long to find out what this means for the Israelite immigrant population. The Pharaoh says:

Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, 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 (Exodus 1:9-10).

The writer is also dealing shrewdly with Pharaoh in the way Wendell Berry speaks of war in his novel *Jayber Crow*. Whether speaking of World War II or Korea or some other conflict, Berry simply writes about The War (capital T, capital W). "The War started up again," suggesting it is all just a continuation of the same impulse of human violence and empire's inability to speak peaceably to one another. Well, the writer of Exodus doesn't tell us much about who this new ruler in Egypt is, just that he's another Pharaoh. Old Pharaoh, new Pharaoh, they're all empire and get lumped together as a recurring presence across time.

While the old Pharaoh profited off of famine, the new Pharaoh is terrified by the people in his midst and begins to stir up fear about the immigrants in Egypt. They came to Egypt as refugees and made a life there, raised their children there, farmed the land there. But Pharaoh is afraid, threatened, intimidated by this population of outsiders in his country. If they aren't going to leave and go back to their real homes, he reasons, then the only logical response is limit their population and destroy them from birth. And so he turns to the midwives, asking them to do the unthinkable and destroy every baby boy born to Hebrew mothers. We learn of two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who will not participate in Pharaoh's plot. Women with no power are named in the face of all-powerful Pharaoh who is just another fearful ruler protecting what really isn't his at all. And we learned that the midwives feared God, not Pharaoh. And so they did not follow Pharaoh's orders.

"[Because the] midwives respected and revered God more than Pharaoh...they refused to comply with Pharaoh's deathly order."² This is holy resistance. When Pharaoh asks why they aren't honoring his executive orders to murder Hebrew babies, they lie to his face, though he has no understanding of what is going on right before his eyes.

"There's actually a complex word-play going on here," notes Pastor Tim Suttle, "to Pharaoh, with limited Hebrew, this phrase would've sounded like they were saying, 'Hebrew women are like animals. They give birth quickly, and they don't need assistance.' But Hebrew readers of the Torah would recognize [the dual meanings] from a Hebrew root meaning *life*. So, reading between the lines, the midwives were actually telling Pharaoh, 'Hebrew women are too full of life to be contained by your plan, or treated in such a dehumanizing fashion.'" The midwives honored and followed the ways of God above the ways of just another Pharaoh. This is the first act of civil disobedience in our scripture.

"God used that small act of non-compliance to begin a process culminating in the defeat of Pharaoh and the freedom of God's people. At the time, however, Shiphrah and Puah did not know this. They were merely acting according to conscience, refusing to violate their sense of right and wrong. In so doing, they gave us a powerful picture of who God is. God is the God who has the back of the lowly and the powerless. God is the God who uses slaves and servants to save his people."³ Ultimately, the women who stand in defiance of Pharaoh (including Pharaoh's own daughter!) save the infant Moses who works with God to save them all.

If Pharaoh was willing to kill babies out of fear and self-preservation, then we can easily infer he was responsible for numerous other acts of oppression and cruelty. The midwives don't organize a campaign to take him down, however, they resist what is not of God by honoring God in the work of their hands. Tim Suttle adds, "the secret strength of civil disobedience is that it's not a frontal assault. It's a flanking maneuver meant not to destroy the enemy, but to convince them to lay down their arms and join the cause of justice and peace." Even their bold refusal to kill for the king is an act of grace and compassion believing he himself has the capacity for transformation. Boldness upon boldness, and it begins with being so closely aligned with the ways of God that the power plays of Pharaoh are not seductive.

² Tim Suttle: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/paperbacktheology/2014/11/on-civil-disobedience-saint-rosa-parks-and-the-women-who-saved-israel.html>

³ Tim Suttle

We are called to this work, too. We are called to the subversive power of scripture. We are called to honor God more than any Pharaoh or whatever we call the powers of our world. We need to be so closely aligned with the ways of God that we naturally and quickly name injustice and find ways to creatively resist it. To do so, says Tim Suttle, is “an act of worship of the one true God.”

We know many models of large-scale civil disobedience. We think of Ghandi’s work in liberating India, Mandela’s work undoing the apartheid of South Africa, Rosa Parks shining light on injustice the American South during the Civil Rights Movement. We are grateful for these heroes, the risks they took, the wholeness they sought to bring to the world. But most of us also think our lives are too ordinary or too small to lead a resistance movement in the face of our modern-day Pharaohs. The work of Shiprah and Puah happened right where they already were and was simply an act of giving themselves fully to being who they were shaped to be, honoring the image of God within themselves, and honoring the image of God in everyone they met—including Pharaoh and every baby born into their hands.

For today, I’d like to hold up my friend and colleague (and, hopefully, soon-to-be adopted brother as soon as sibling adoption is a thing) Tim Lauve-Moon as a resister who follows the ways of God so closely that he is not seduced by the ways of power and injustice laid out before him by this world. The way he loves people is an act of resistance in the face of a cultural narrative that tells us to protect our own interests first. The open-hearted laughter and joy he brings to every single space he inhabits pushes against narratives of fear that tell us to move through our lives with suspicion and anxiety.

He is giving himself to the slow work of undoing racism by reading and learning, listening and owning the reality of moving in this world as a cis-gender, straight, white man, and he invites us all to enter into that life’s work, too. Yes, he has sometimes marched and rallied in public and official ways when we are visibly standing in solidarity with Muslim neighbors who are being target for their expressions of faith, with women who stand together for equality and equity, for black lives that do matter and are being threatened by a vocal minority and the systems that empower them. But the ordinariness of his life is a picture of the ways we follow closely to the steps of Christ by loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. Tim’s life is the slow work of conversations and listening, supporting and cheering people on, advocating and assisting when his influence can make more life and more space for someone else. If church is to be a school of love, as Henri Nouwen suggests, then the Rev. Tim Lauve-Moon is one of our greatest teachers.

Friends, God calls us to the work of midwifing. We are midwifing love. We are midwifing compassion. We are midwifing justice. We are midwifing equity and wholeness and the true, comprehensive flourishing of all things and all people. Tim, we thank you for the five years you have given to the St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, to New Orleans, to each of our lives. We thank you for embodying a love that transforms lives and has the power to resist even the most powerful forces of empire in our world. We thank you for believing that each and every one of us can love that big and that well, in Jesus' name. We pray it may be so. Amen.