

East Liberty Presbyterian Church
The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
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Exodus 2:1-10
“Out of the Water”

I recently took some vacation time with my family, which meant that I had time to catch up on my reading. By coincidence, the books I read all focused on unusual, or unconventional, themes. For example, to prepare for a preaching class I’m teaching at the seminary this fall, I read a book about women preachers in the 18th and 19th century, and the misogyny and prejudice they had to overcome. Then I read a novel in which a gorilla teaches a man about what it means to be truly civilized. Currently I’m reading a book about Abraham Lincoln, which focuses on the three men Lincoln defeated when he won the Republican nomination in 1860 and how Lincoln brought this “team of rivals” together as part of his cabinet in the White House. Looking at things from a different perspective – women preachers in male-dominated society, a gorilla reflecting on life, the men challenged by then serving beside Lincoln – can be very instructive.

This same pattern exists when we look at the first chapters of Exodus, the story about the birth of Moses. In this narrative, women have all the leading roles. Women fill the stage, while men are either entirely absent or acting somewhere in the background. In Exodus chapter 1, we have a Pharaoh, who is concerned about the growing presence of the Hebrew people in his land, pursuing an aggressive anti-immigrant policy, and demanding that all newborn, male Hebrews be put to death. This unjust law is circumvented by women, Hebrew midwives like Shiprah and Puah, who do their best to protect the innocent baby boys. In the story’s second act, Exodus chapter 2, the stage is filled with women: Moses’ mother, Moses’ sister Miriam, Pharaoh’s daughter, and her female attendants. While all the men in this drama are associated with violence and death – Pharaoh with his throne and soldiers demanding the Hebrew boys be drowned in the Nile – the women actively work to circumvent the men by seeking to protect life – Moses’ mother putting her child in the papyrus basket, Pharaoh’s daughter rescuing the boy from a watery death, Moses’ sister finding a creative way to reunite mother and son by suggesting her mother serve as a wet-nurse for the child.

Shifting the focus from the men in the Egyptian palace to the women gathered at the edge of the river Nile gives this drama a whole different perspective. As one bible commentator has pointed out, it is a drama full of irony.¹ The very location of Pharaoh’s forced destruction, the Nile River, becomes the place of Moses’ salvation. A distraught mother followed the letter of Pharaoh’s law by throwing her baby into the river, but by adding a basket into the equation found a way to circumvent the spirit of the law. She then ended up getting paid by the oppressors to do what she longed to do all along, namely, protect her son’s life and nurse him as an infant. Pharaoh’s daughter ended up saving the one child who, in time, would lead to her entire dynasty’s downfall. And the very powers that sought to keep the Hebrew people oppressed end up raising and educating the one who would lead the Hebrews to freedom. As I said, in this story, as seen from the women’s perspective, ironies abound.

But there is much more to this story than simply the irony and surprises built into the drama of Moses' birth. And given the stormy, unsettled times in which we live, there is much that this story can teach us about faith today. Consider the headlines in the world news today: Trouble in the global financial markets, especially here, and in France, Greece, and Europe. Starvation in Somalia. Suicide bombs and fighting in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, and Syria. Riots in London. Political infighting in Washington. We can try to keep abreast of these issues, keeping our focus on the modern Pharaohs in their palaces with their armies and oppressive laws. Or we can shift our attention elsewhere: not to avoid looking at the hard stuff, not to shut our eyes and hide from reality, but to look for new perspectives and surprising places where a deeper truth is manifest, where God is at work literally to change the world. For remember what the apostle Paul said: *God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong* (I Cor 1:27).

So while the modern-day Pharaohs plot their wars in Syria, Libya and the Middle East, while the big boys squabble and fight in Washington D.C. and the money-boys tear their hair out over the teeter-totter gyrations of the stock market, we're going to focus today instead on the quiet act of baptism, a simple drama that will happen shortly. Baptism involves people young and old. Often parents bring children forward, but also young adults come forward on their own accord to receive the washing of water and blessing by laying on of hands. It is quite simple and something different from the machinations of war and politics. In this simple drama is a mystery of sorts – God showing incredible strength, wisdom and love through an act that appears to be so weak, foolish, and tangential to the larger spectacle of life.

Whatever brings you to a baptism font, whether your parents' decision when you were a baby or your own two feet when you are an adult, it is not something you control. Baptism is not something you do, but rather it is something done to you. You profess faith in God. You present yourself or your child and seek God's blessing. But ultimately, you are letting yourself be chosen, be blessed, anointed and washed by water and thereby fully enter into a larger, grand drama – one that the world often misses because its cameras are busy filming elsewhere. It is a sacramental act that says, "Welcome, you are not alone. Hello, you are known by me, says the Lord. Look around and now see the world in light of my story – a story of creation, redemption, courage, and hope."

Now think about baptism and the Moses story for a minute. What could be more fragile than this tale of a distraught mother, a slave in a violent culture, putting her child in a basket as a way to delay a most-likely death by drowning in the Nile waters? What could be more tenuous than this tale about a child being pulled out of the waters by a stranger? But just as you've been baptized, as you've been pulled out of the waters into the church and the drama of Christian faith, think again about this fragile tale from long ago. A Levite woman bore a son, and she saw that he was good, just as God at the dawn of time had created heaven and earth and saw that it was good. This child was born, though, into a land that did not honor God's will for all creation and all people. So the mother disobeyed the unjust law and, in an act of civil disobedience, hid her child for

three months from those who would kill him simply because he was a Hebrew boy. When his safety could no longer be protected, she built for him a *teiva*, a word that means “little ark.” Just as God protected Noah’s family as they huddled in an ark as a raging flood swept away a world of sin and injustice, so too would this boy-child be preserved in his little-ark set afloat on the Nile River. Yes, this was a heart-rending choice for this mother to make. Yes, there were still other boy-children dying in the land, and mothers and fathers weeping over the oppressive laws coming from the palaces and places on high. But amidst the panorama of life’s drama, over here in one corner of the stage a tiny papyrus basket floated downstream, coming to rest in the reeds near to where a royal princess was bathing.

In that moment, all the weapons and all the gold mattered not, as a spirit of compassion created a happy ending for this fragile story. Pharaoh’s daughter, an outsider in this Hebrew story of salvation, sees the child and pulls it from the water. By her own act of civil disobedience, she rescues the condemned boy-child and in time brings him into the very halls where his death sentence had been decreed. She set in motion a long-term non-compliance with her father’s brutal decision, which becomes a public witness to the bankruptcy of his unjust policy. Think of modern examples of how patient, long-suffering witnesses to justice have over time both defied and overturned laws of injustice – laws that condoned slavery, that prevented women from voting, that banned interracial marriage, that forbade same-gender households from adopting children or more recently be recognized as married couples. Yes, there remains much still to be done on issues of economic justice, sexual justice, immigration justice, and peacemaking justice, but in this fragile story is an example of a wisdom deeper and stronger than all this world claims to know. God is always at work in individual lives for the common good and God’s future realm of peace.

In this story is also vocabulary upon which the continuing drama of the New Testament is built. Years later, while Herod ruled in his palace and Romans controlled the land, a barren woman named Elizabeth was suddenly pregnant with John the Baptist and a relative, a young girl named Mary, was told she will give birth to the child of God. Mary too hid this news for several months, lest the violent laws and misogyny around her would end her life and the life of her child. In time a decree would again go forth from the palace to have all male children destroyed at birth. But in this later, fragile-powerful story, a boy child would be born to Mary, laid in a cradle, a *teiva*, a simple wooden ark meant to rescue all humankind. In time, this Jesus would stand before kings and rulers, telling of a love, a power, a strength that was more than anything Rome or Jerusalem or Washington had ever truly seen or understood. And through an act of seeming destruction – like a child set afloat on a river, or a man crucified on a cross – came an act of ultimate redemption. Pulled out from the water, Moses led the people through the waters years later to the Promised Land. Stepping out from the tomb, Jesus leads us beyond the power of death to a sacred place of community, hope and eternal life.

Remember your baptism, your entrance into God's grand drama of true life. For you've each been chosen to play a role, to appear on stage, to be pulled out of the water so you can act, witness, show compassion, defy injustice, and be what you've always been all along – if only you have eyes to see it – beloved children of God.

AMEN.

¹ Cf. Terence Fretheim, Exodus, *Interpretation*, Exodus 2:1-10, pp. 36-41.