

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, September 3, 2023
10am

Text: Exodus 1:8-2:10

Theme: Anything but Ordinary: Moses' Birth [Persevere]

[prayer]

Last week a group of us concluded our *Not in God's Name* book study. All summer we walked together with Rabbi Jonathan Sacks as he exhorted us to understand the roots of religious violence, reevaluate our faith stories, and wrestle with the role of religion in the public square. Rabbi Sacks ends his book by arguing that religions should never exert power by setting public policy. Instead, religions should influence society by forming individuals in the ways of justice and mercy. In the United States, this is the role our founding mothers and fathers intended for religious institutions – not to set the laws of our land but instead guide individuals in doing their part to help form a more just and perfect union.

The faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – indeed, the faith of Jesus Christ – does not transform societies by exerting power from the top down. Our faith instead transforms from the bottom up by teaching individuals to resist the siren call of selfish individualism and tribal politics and seek instead the common good of their neighbors. Our mission as United Methodists is to transform the world by making disciples of Jesus Christ. We fulfill this mission one single, solitary person at a time by turning hearts and minds to the Way of Jesus. The kingdom of God is birthed in the hearts of individuals who – in the words of our baptismal covenant – have accepted the freedom and power God has given them to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms it presents itself.¹

[pause]

In our Scripture lesson today, we encounter a set of individuals who, in different ways, accepted the freedom God gave them to resist the evil, injustice, and oppression of the Egyptian empire. The story of Moses' birth is a rescue story.

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship/the-baptismal-covenant-i>

Ordinary people go to extraordinary lengths to rescue baby Moses from the violent power of the Egyptian government. The government chose to wield this power against the poor and marginalized within its borders. The biblical word ‘Hebrew’ once referred to a social class instead of an ethnicity. *Habiru* is a term used in ancient texts from the Fertile Crescent to describe displaced peasants, nomads, foreigners, and low-class people who did not own land. The Israelites were among these *habiru*.

At the height of his power and privilege as governor of Egypt, Joseph invited his family to leave Canaan and settle in Goshen, part of the fertile Nile delta. They flourished there. But after Joseph died, his honored memory was gradually lost among the Egyptians. Eventually the Israelites stopped being the kin of Joseph, Egypt’s hero, and instead became *habiru* – landless foreigners, feared and hated, without rights.

We know what happens when a government chooses to ‘other’ a people by stripping them of their rights. We have seen this over and over in history, and it has happened and continues to happen in our own country, from the genocide of Native Americans to the internment of Japanese Americans to the treatment of transgender individuals today. The ‘other’ quickly becomes a scapegoat and object of government-sanctioned violence and oppression. Pharaoh’s genocidal program against the Hebrews was the tragic but unsurprising end point of a government built upon class and ethnic divisions – the rich versus the poor, the ‘true’ Egyptian versus the ‘foreign’ *habiru*.

Against this violent political backdrop stood the women whose brave actions saved Moses’ life. In the face of Egypt’s vast power, they appeared powerless. But in truth, they were not; they held and exerted power in their individual spheres of influence. And while Pharaoh chose to exercise his power in the direction of death, these women exercised their power in the direction of life.

First, we have the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. I preached last summer on their remarkable civil disobedience, so if you want to take a deeper dive into their story, you can look up that sermon on our website. The power these two women exercised is the power of their integrity. The Scripture says that they respected God more than they feared Pharaoh (v. 17).

Do we do the same? Are we guarding our integrity as Christians? Which has control over our hearts: Our respect for God or the things that we fear? This is what Christian integrity looks like: Letting the love of God inside us overcome *everything* that we fear. Only then can we love our neighbors as ourselves.

How will *you* choose to exercise the power of *your* integrity?

[pause]

The midwives' resistance of Pharaoh birthed resistance in another woman: Moses' mother. She delivered her son in secret and hid him for three months. But eventually the baby was too big to hide, and she knew that if she was to save his life, she had to let him go. She chose to exercise the only power she had: The power of sacrificial love. She sacrificed a future with her child to secure a better, more hopeful future for him.

As I thought about how painful this must have been for Moses' mother, I also thought about mothers around the world who are forced to make a similar sacrifice – mothers separated from their children by violence and poverty. I thought especially of the mothers in Central America who have sent their children on dangerous journeys to our southern border in a desperate bid for their futures. Like Moses' mother, they had no guarantee that their child would survive. It was an impossible decision to make, but with the courage that only love can give, they made it.

The basket that Moses' mother weaves for her son is called in Hebrew a *tevah* – an ark. It is meant to evoke Noah's ark, cast upon the flood waters, subject to God's deliverance. Psalm 124 declares:

*If it had not been the LORD who was on our side -- let Israel now say --
if it had not been the LORD who was on our side, when our enemies
attacked us,
then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled
against us;
then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over
us;
then over us would have gone the raging waters.*

Blessed be the LORD, who has not given us as prey to their teeth.

Our faith declares that we can make great sacrifices in love because we are assured that the Lord is on our side. We are confident that no matter what happens, God has the final victory. And this confidence frees us to love in bold and sacrificial ways that fights not only for our own wellbeing, but also for the wellbeing of our neighbors.

How will *you* choose to exercise *your* power of sacrificial love?

[pause]

By God's providence, the Nile waters deliver the infant Moses to an unlikely heroine: Pharaoh's daughter. The Scripture says that when the princess saw the baby was crying, she felt sorry for him (v. 6). But the Hebrew word is much stronger than pity or even compassion – it implies that Pharaoh's daughter was moved to spare Moses' life. Her compassion compelled her to become an ally of this Hebrew (*habiru*) child – a child her culture had taught her to fear and hate. She exercised the power of her privilege by giving Moses safe harbor, defying her father's murderous command. She chose to ally herself with those who had no power and stand with the oppressed.

It is this display of solidarity that convinced Miriam, Moses' sister who followed her baby brother along the Nile, to approach the Egyptian princess with a proposition. Together, Miriam, Pharaoh's daughter, and Moses' mother created the conditions that allowed Moses to grow up and eventually liberate Israel from Egypt.

None of us here hold the same power and privilege as Pharaoh's daughter. But even when we think we have very little privilege, there is usually someone who has even less than us. How will you use what privilege you *do* have to advocate for the needs of those who have less than you? This is not an optional part of being a Christian; this is the very work that Jesus called us to when he said, "What you have done for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done for me" (Matt 25:40).

[pause]

I preached last week how God's will works to bend our stories in the direction of life. God's promise to Abraham had come true – his descendants became like stars in the sky or grains of sand, so numerous they threatened even Egypt's political dominance. Still God chose to act through individuals. Behind each of the individual women in this story stood the lifegiving, liberating power of God. And each of these women chose to exert the power they possessed in the direction of life and liberation. God's providential plan for Moses, and ultimately for his chosen people Israel, was worked out through the faithful courage of these women.

God can and will work through us, too. The world's problems are big and complicated, but through the power of his resurrection, Jesus has overcome the world! And in our baptism, we die to the ways of this world and are resurrected to the Way of Jesus. Paul writes in his letter to the Colossians:

“So, if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on the things that are above, not on the things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” (Col 3:1-3)

Because our lives are hidden in Jesus Christ for eternity, we can find the courage to be allies of life in the midst of whatever evil, injustice, and oppression we encounter in this world. How will we choose this day to exert the lifegiving, liberating power that God has given each of us?

Amen.