



From the Pulpit: February 12, 2023

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time—Stephen Minister Commissioning

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Exodus 2:1–10

The Unnamed, IV: Pharaoh's Daughter

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. When 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. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

The 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. When 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. Then 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?" Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh'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. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

"If you ask a Jew, she will tell you that the Hebrews are trapped there in slavery, and if you ask an Egyptian, she will tell you that the Jews are welcome there as guest workers."

During Epiphany and Lent at Kenilworth Union Christine and I are preaching a sermon series call *The Unnamed*, about all the characters in the Bible who are important to the story but never get a name. For instance, this wonderful story about Pharaoh's Daughter.

So at the time of this story the Jews have been living in Egypt for multiple generations. If you ask a Jew, she will tell you that the Hebrews are trapped there in slavery, and if you ask an Egyptian, she will tell you that the Jews are welcome there as guest workers. Like in contemporary America, it's the aliens and immigrants who do all the work the natives don't want to do, like making and laying bricks for Pharaoh's plush palaces and pyramids.

Nevertheless, the Jews are thriving in Egypt. In fact, they're having so many children that like Steve Bannon and Tucker Carlson today, the Pharaoh is worried they're going to take over, so the Pharaoh makes like Vladimir Putin and has his minions murder every male baby born to a Hebrew woman.

One Hebrew woman has a baby boy who is so perfect and so cute and so beautiful that she cannot even think about turning him over to these brutal Russian soldiers, so she builds a little ark, puts the baby in it, and sends it floating down the Nile among the reeds and bullrushes, which is not a very promising beginning for anybody's life but at least it's better than getting your brains bashed in by Pharaoh-cum-Putin. This Hebrew mother tells the baby's older sister to follow him as he drifts downriver in the Nile to see what will happen to him.

But of course this is one of God's patented, providential parables so of course baby Moses in his private little kayak bumps into the painted toenails of none other than the very daughter of the Pharaoh himself. She's gone down to the Nile to bathe. She fishes the baby out of the river, lifts the lid on the ark, takes one look at this adorable little baby, is completely undone by his cuteness, falls instantly, madly in love, and decides to take him home with her to the palace.

And here's the cleverest part of this already delightful tale. The baby's older sister, who's been watching all this from the bullrushes, pops out of the reeds and says, "Excuse me, Your Highness, but if you take that baby home, what's he going to eat? You're not a mother; you can't feed him; let me find you a wet nurse." The Princess says, "Great idea! I'll **pay** her for it." Guess who the wet nurse will turn out to be. Damn straight! The baby's own mother! Pharaoh's palace ends up **paying** Moses's mother what she wants to do for free anyway—nurse her baby. What's the going rate for a wet nurse? I have no idea, but it's a living.

This is one of those classic tales you find in every age in every land among every people in every language where the **oppressed** humiliate the **oppressor**. In these prototypical tales, the enslaved are smarter and craftier than the powerful, like in *Hogan's Heroes* where the POW's keep outwitting the Nazis who are supposed to be in charge. Or the Roadrunner who is supposed to be

prey is way shrewder than the Coyote who is supposed to be the predator. Or did you ever see that great film *Django Unchained* where Jamie Foxx and Kerry Washington make fools of Leonardo DiCaprio and Samuel Jackson? With these kinds of stories, the disenfranchised poke a finger in the eye of their oppressors with their infernal whips and chains.

Anyway, Moses's mother ends up nursing him for the next two years and then gives him back to Pharaoh's daughter; Moses grows up a Prince of Egypt and—Voil!—the Hebrews have a champion and secret agent planted in Pharaoh's very own house like a clandestine camera spying on everything from the picture frame until that *annus mirabilis* when Moses will free the Hebrews from their chains and lead them out of Egypt in the Exodus.

All this because this unnamed Princess rescues a baby from drowning in the Nile. Moses is the liberator, the freedom fighter, the George Wash-

ington, of the ancient Hebrews. There is no way to exaggerate his importance to their subsequent history. Without Moses, the Hebrews have no future, almost literally, or, to be more accurate, without Moses the Hebrew future is enslaved, in chains, in despair.

So the text values and guards the survival of baby Moses as fiercely as *The Terminator* films guard the existence of John Connor. Without their Freedom fighter John Connor, the humans have no future. Skynet will destroy them. John Connor is absolutely crucial, integral, to their future thriving, so the humans will even send a cyborg back in time from the future to make sure this fragile, vulnerable, defenseless infant survives. *Terminator* is nothing but a retelling of the story of Moses among the bullrushes.

What's the point? Well, I'm glad you asked. Think about this unnamed woman for a moment. She is a Princess. Can you picture a woman like this splashing around in the Nile with her regal robes hiked up to her knees to grab a dinghy with precious cargo?

"This is one of those classic tales you find in every age in every land among every people in every language where the oppressed humiliate the oppressor."

Did you know that there were something like 12 female Pharaohs in ancient Egypt, including Nefertiti about the time of Moses and Cleopatra just a little before Jesus? I don't think this woman ever became a Pharaoh herself, but that's how important she is.

She is a Princess. She is more powerful than Princess Grace of Monaco. She is more powerful than Princess Catherine of Wales. She is more powerful than Princess Megan of Sussex, and when the palace finds out what she's done, it's going to hate her as much as Buckingham Palace hates Princess Megan, because her almost omnipotent father wants all Hebrew boy babies dead.

And yet this Princess manages to find the humanity in the kayak. She manages to see that this Hebrew baby is a precious child of God even though everyone who looks just like her tries to tell her that he is less than human.

If we cannot see the humanity in each other, we are all doomed. We are all doomed. Those Memphis police officers who beat Tyre Nichols to death; how did it all go so wrong? It didn't start when they stepped out of their cruisers and hurled literally hundreds of F-bombs at him like they were shotgun pellets. It started the minute they joined the Scorpion Unit and began learning a blind, deaf, idiotic, obsolete culture of law enforcement which is either unable or unwilling to see the humanity in the citizens they are paid to protect.

I think the most beautiful and moving book in my entire library might be *The Righteous* by Sir Martin Gilbert, 2003. The subtitle is *The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust*, and it tells the story of literally hundreds of Europeans who risked their lives to rescue Jews from the Nazis.

In 1942, 74 Jewish children were smuggled into a small Italian village in northern Italy. Forty-three of them had already lost their parents to places like Auschwitz. Don Arrigo Beccari was a Roman Catholic priest at the seminary in that village. He convinced the mayor to let these children hide and live in a large empty house. In 1942, remember, the penalty for hiding Jews was death.

The children live there secretly and safely for about a year before the Nazis or their Italian minions find out about them. Before the Gestapo could get to them though, Father Beccari knocked on every door in his tiny village begging the townfolk to hide them, one at a time; 73 of the 74 Jewish children find a hiding place; they stay there for five weeks; 73 of 74 Jewish children make it to Switzerland and survive the war.

Fifty years later, when he was 92 years old, someone asked Father Beccari why he'd risked his life to save children who were not his own. He said, "It was simple. They were children in danger. What would you have done?"¹

It's a question for all of us, isn't it? What would you have done? Like that Princess at the Nile, Father Beccari was able to see the hidden, almost invisible, humanity of the scorned, vulnerable, alien babies in that basket among the bullrushes at

the river's edge; 73 more Jewish children saved from certain death; 73 more Moses's.

Look closely at the Other and the Different. Do you see their humanity? Do you see that they too are children of God?

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¹Martin Gilbert, *The Righteous: The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust* (New York: Henry Holt, 2003), pp. 356–357, 363–364, 441–442.

Oh, by the way, Pharaoh's daughter never gets a name in the Biblical story, but later, the rabbis start calling her Bithia, which is an Anglicized form of the Hebrew name *Bat Yab*.

You might not know much Hebrew, but you know at least two Hebrew words. If you have been to a *bat mitzvah*, you know that *bat* means 'daughter.' You also know that *Yab* is short for Yahweh, God's very name. So Bithia is the daughter of God. God says to Bithia, "You made Moses your son, even though he was not your son. Therefore, you will be my daughter."

—Prayers of the People— Diane Hart

Dear God who lifts us up, who carries us, and who delivers us, we are grateful for the beauty of this sunny day, the hint of warmer weather, and the grandeur of this earth's natural beauty, but also for the simple touch of a loved one, a call from a friend, the support of caring ministries of our church and for those who walk with us in difficult times. All of these gifts add to our wonderment of the world that you have created and reminds us of your abundant and never ending love.

And while we are mindful of these generous gifts, let us also reach out as we can, for those who are suffering the devastation from the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. We pray for the thousands of families who have lost loved ones, and those that are left wounded or homeless, and for those who work diligently to help with the rescue efforts.

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And here at home, help us to feel your presence as we deal with our anxieties of everyday life, the constant barrage of political discord, our own health issues that frighten us, or our concerns for loved ones who are in need. Help us to breathe slowly, to turn to you in prayer, to feel held up as we strive for balance with those we love, and those with whom we struggle. Help us to reach out for a caring hand in our own times of need and let us be that caring hand for those who find this day difficult. Guide us as we support one another, using the gifts we have received to serve others as faithful stewards of your love and grace.

We give thanks for this church community dear God, and all those who support and nourish it with their gifts of time and talent. And we give thanks for the ministers who guide us and inspire us each week through worship, education, and care. As we grow in our relationship with you loving God, help us to hear your words each day, and transform them into deeds that work toward the growth of your kingdom here on earth.

Keep our hearts and thoughts in Jesus Christ, your son, who taught us to pray together: Our Father...Amen.
Our Father...Amen.