

Message for July 9, , 2023 Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church
“Living Boldly” Rev. Trish Eckert

The Book of Exodus pulls us into a story with a huge plot and many characters. We witness God drawing people who are in trouble out of the mess of history and delivering them from harm. The pastor and theologian Eugene Peterson tells us that, “Story is an invitation to participate, first through our imagination, and then, if we will, by faith – with our total lives/ in response to God.” It’s exciting to dive into the Book of Exodus as we continue to seek out stories of women in the Bible, because male energy is so obviously the focus of the text, but a deeper look reveals that women are truly the heroes of the story. Their courage, acts of civil disobedience and abounding love assure the survival and redemption of an entire people.

We’ve dipped in and out of brief excerpts of scripture, and now we’re going to attempt to connect the dots. Listen for the names of the women working behind the scenes.

The Bible Wisdom teachings this morning began with the words, “Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” A new king arose who didn’t know, who didn’t remember. And we know from the opening sentence that trouble is coming. The new king didn’t know Joseph had saved Egypt from starvation and was that Pharaoh’s right-hand man. The new king didn’t remember the Hebrews were descended from Joseph and his family and had one time been welcomed in the land with open arms as their savior’s family. This new king didn’t know.

The king thinks he’s dealing shrewdly with Joseph’s descendants who have grown so numerous that he fears they’ll rebel and join Egypt’s enemies. His first course of action is to conscript the Hebrews into a slave labor force to build two new cities. But that doesn’t work. The more the Hebrews work the more they multiply. So, Pharaoh gives them more work to do. Of course, they multiply even more.

Then Pharaoh comes up with a new plan. He calls in two midwives who are named: Shiphrah and Puah, and commands them to kill every boy they deliver. The midwives, who are considered wise women in their culture because they oversee the rites of birth and new life, do the unthinkable to the king who thinks he holds life and death in his hand: they disobey. They not only disobey, but when Pharaoh demands to know why they aren’t

murdering the boys, they look him in the eye and lie. How can they kill the boys when the babies are delivered before they even get there?

Thwarted in his attempts to reign in the growth of the Hebrew people, Pharaoh decides it's time to call his people into his enterprise and so he commands the Egyptians to throw every Hebrew son into the Nile River.

The text then turns to (Joke-eh-bed) Jochebed, a woman who is three months pregnant when Pharaoh's edict is given. When her son Moses is born, Jochebed hides him for three months and then realizes she won't be able to keep him hidden, so she creates a container described as an "ark," puts Moses in it and sets him afloat down the Yam Suf, or the Reed Sea - the very same river the Israelites will walk through on their way out of Egypt years later. Moses' sister, Miriam, (not named in this part of the story) follows the ark as Moses' protector.

At this point, we meet the next woman who defies the King of Egypt and ensures Moses' safety. Princess Bityah, daughter of Pharaoh, is standing by the river, washing up, when she notices the basket and asks to see what's inside. A baby boy, circumcised and covered in a Hebrew blanket, lays before her. Well aware of her father's words, Bityah nonetheless is filled with compassion and embraces this little stranger as her own.

Now Miriam witnesses Pharaoh's daughter pull the child out of the river, and Miriam approaches the princess, suggesting that her mother serve as nursemaid to the baby boy - without revealing that either of them are related to him. Through Miriam's quick thinking, Jochebed was able to be involved in her son's life while he grew up with the privileges of being the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter. Neither Miriam, nor her mother realized the significance that their actions would have on their nation by saving Moses' life.

Each woman faces the Egyptian leader and his heartless edict to kill Israelite baby boys. Through the text, we learn of their impact on the Exodus story, particularly on the men who withdraw in the face of power. These women lead, refusing to succumb to defeat and demoralization.

As I sat with these women's stories over the past week, it was Miriam who really caught my imagination. She was SO young when we first hear of her - she fiercely protected her little brother. Though she is young and enslaved, she courageously approaches Pharaoh's daughter and offers to

help with the child found floating down the river, and then arranges to ensure the family connection with her brother.

When we hear of Miriam again, it isn't until after the exodus and the miraculous escape through the Red Sea. In this passage, Miriam is also referred to as a prophet - the first person in the Torah to be given that title – not the first woman, the first person. The title of prophet recognizes her role in speaking to and shepherding the Israelite people through the wilderness. What must it have been like for her to be there through the plagues and the march through the Red Sea? What must it have been like to be an eyewitness to the mighty hand of God reaching in to rescue her people?

Miriam and the other women must have prayed for freedom for themselves and their families. Like many refugees, they must have lain awake at night imagining life in a new land, where they could settle and begin anew in freedom. A life where their children were safe and provided for — where they didn't live in fear or uncertainty anymore.

And so, it must have seemed like a dream when God heard their cries and began moving in their midst through Moses. Perhaps while Moses negotiated with Pharaoh, Miriam was preparing the people for the journey they would be making toward freedom. Perhaps as Moses was herding the Israelites out of town, Miriam was voicing encouragement and providing logistical support. Interestingly, she apparently danced and sang a sermon when they crossed the sea — and maybe all sermons would survive for thousands of years if they were as brief, expressive, and lyrical.

Miriam's song punctuates the celebration after their dramatic exodus — her creative and embodied spirituality leads the women in thanksgiving and rejoicing.

Each of the women named in these stories display incredible courage, strength, fortitude and virtue. Their overwhelming love, compassion and commitment to life ensures the future of an entire people.

As we navigate our lives in these times filled with stress, anxiety and fear, we must embrace the courage and hope these women expressed and let our love and compassion guide the future.