

The book of Exodus begins with a naming of all twelve of Jacob's sons and a reminder that God had spared their lives by making a way for Joseph to rise in power in Egypt as Pharaoh's right-hand man to preserve all of their lives during years of severe famine. All of the twelve brothers' children stayed in Egypt and generation after generation, their numbers grew and they became exceedingly strong.

Exodus 1:8 is a sentence that changes the entire landscape for God's people. It says, "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." It is treacherous business when a new king does not know or care about the past. How many decades had passed since Joseph worked tirelessly for seven years all over Egypt storing all the leftover grain? Was this Pharaoh even alive when Egypt and all its neighbors were crippled by seven years of famine? Maybe Pharaoh had heard rumors or stories around the palace of this Hebrew man named Joseph who saved them all by his leadership and management when they were in the depths of a national crisis. Surely, Pharaoh thought, they are making too much over the contribution of this Joseph. No one would do that much good for a land that was not his own. I imagine this new Pharaoh thought the stories of Joseph were more legend than truth, more tall tale than anything. Whatever the truth, he didn't owe this dream-interpreting Hebrew prisoner turned grain manager anything. He had been gone a long time and what Pharaoh could see with his own eyes is that the Hebrew people were growing in strength and in number every day. They were a potential threat to his reign.

Joseph began his life in Egypt as a slave and that is just how this new Pharaoh would treat all those he had brought over from the land of Hebron. Pharaoh drove them all into forced labor, building city after city, back-breaking work from sunup until sundown. No matter the punishing work they were driven to do, the Hebrew people still grew in strength and in number. Pharaoh was having no luck breaking those already in the land, so he decided he needed to switch tactics. He called the midwives of the Hebrew women to him and commanded them to only allow the girls to live. No more Hebrew boys would be raised up in Egypt. But the midwives Shiphrah and Puah feared the judgement of God more than the judgement of Pharaoh and they allowed every child to live. When Pharaoh confronted them, they said the Hebrew women were so strong, they would give birth before they arrived. Giving up on his midwife strategy, Pharaoh ordered every Egyptian to throw any and every Hebrew boy into the Nile River.

Our Scripture is what happens next. This is Exodus 2: 1-20. 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 she took him as her son. She named him Moses, “because,” she said, “I drew him out of the water.”

This story is full of women who no one is watching and because of their low status, they are able to thwart Pharaoh’s orders and save a child’s life. Being a daughter to Pharaoh made you a princess, gave you a place in the palace to live in luxury but not a place at the table where decisions were made. Daughters were to provide a beautiful backdrop and then a bargaining tool when it came to marrying them to a potential ally with future grandchildren to further the bond.

One of these daughters leaves the palace to bathe in the serenity and peacefulness of the Nile. I imagine she did this often to escape the chaos of palace life. This day, a basket is floating nearby on the water. The princess calls to one of her servants to retrieve it. Inside the basket is a child whose mother had risked everything for her last hope that her beloved son might live. Not only does his mother risk everything but also does his sister who stays hidden in the tall reeds watching over him from a distance.

When Pharaoh's daughter opens the basket, her heart is moved by the child she finds inside. Maybe it was the expression of compassion on the princess's face, but something gives his sister courage to step out from behind the reeds. She asks if the princess would like her to go get a Hebrew woman to nurse the child. The question and the answer to follow draws them both into a conspiracy against Pharaoh that will continue until the child is grown. All of these women know they are openly and willfully defying Pharaoh's command to save this boy's life. From that moment on, he lives under the protection of Pharaoh's daughter and for the first three years of his life, under the care of his mother and sister. When it is time, the child is brought to the princess at Pharaoh's palace to live as her son. She names him Moses, because she drew him out of the water to life.

In Exodus and in 1 Chronicles, we are told the names of all three women. Moses' mother is Jochebed, daughter of Levi. His sister's name is Miriam. His adopted mother's name is Bethiah, who we are told in 1 Chronicles 4:17 eventually marries an Israelite, escapes the plagues and lives as one of God's people for the rest of her days. We don't know how she keeps Moses alive in the palace. We don't know who knows her secret of Moses' true identity. We simply know she places her very life on the line to save his, as do Jochebed and Miriam. None of them know at the beginning God's plan for Moses' life. They save him because they love him. Because of these three women, Moses is able to grow into the one through whom God will lead his people into freedom.

Reading this passage in the same week our nation made history in the nomination of Kamala Harris as the first woman of color to the Vice President on a major party's presidential ticket, I was struck by how far we have come and how much farther we have to go. In our Scripture, none of the women had political power. Of course, Pharaoh's daughter had privilege and wealth but that is different than power. My guess is that Moses was allowed to live as Bethiah's son because Pharaoh's attention was on other things besides the many children in his household. The few that knew stayed silent. There is no doubt if Pharaoh had discovered Bethiah had blatantly disobeyed his orders and challenged his authority both her and Moses' lives would have been over.

Then there is Jochebed and Miriam. They have no privilege and no power. They only have the deepest love for this child born into their lives. As Jochebed sends her child out in a basket on the Nile, it must have felt like she was putting her own heart in that basket. She knew she could no longer keep him safe in their home. As she acted letting Moses go towards safety and life, Bethiah acted to receive him as her own. The courageous and saving love of all three women is the beginning of the exodus, of God setting his people free.

This story is a reminder that love is more powerful than the power of any political ruler of any time. Acts of love and kindness and grace create far more good than we often give them credit. From the outside, nothing was in the favor of these

three women to save a child's life. On paper, it was a lost cause. Love is able to make a way when the path forward is hard to see.

None of us know what the coming months will hold. In normal times, we have known how to plan and adjust for the best possible outcome. Right now, everyone is doing the best they can without a reliable road map to guide us. Our fears warn us that we are not yet at the worst that it is still to come. That is not our favorite feeling as we like to have more control over our future than we do in our present time.

That is why this Scripture has been such a good reminder of the power of God's love in this time. With no political power of their own, yet working together and out of love, these three women save Moses' life. There is no darkness that God's love cannot shine a light into. Each one of us has the power to make a real difference in someone's life.

First, I want to encourage you to pray. Prayer is our time to come before God with everything that is on our hearts, to place our trust in God in all things and seek God's grace and wisdom for us all. It is a time to be drawn into the power of God's love to heal, to restore, and to redeem. This week, I am encouraging you to come to church and add a ribbon to our prayer cross that is outside the doors leading into the Narthex. On the prayer cross, you can write on the stick of the ribbon a name of someone you are praying for. My hope as a congregation is that we come together and cover all of the faculty, administration, students and families in prayer as this new school year begins.

Second, I encourage you be ready to respond in love as we continue to learn of new ways we can help our neighbors in the months ahead of us. Throughout this Summer, I have seen God at work through you as you have provided tents and sleeping bags and blankets and needed food to 7Hills and CEO and lunch to hospital employees on the front line of fighting COVID-19. As we continue to work with Elkins school district, we have already made 40 special masks for the band. You have sent cards and messages of encouragement when you couldn't be with someone in person.

If we continue to have an open heart to reach out in God's love, God will light our way showing us how to be the church God needs us to be. No matter who we are or where we are, God is ready to use us for the work of his kingdom. Think about Jochebed and Miriam and Bethiah, unlikely candidates all of three of them, to be the ones to save the One through whom God would set his people free. These three are the beginning of Moses' story, a triumph of love over the cruel paranoia and oppression of Pharaoh against the people of God. May we all open our hearts to be used by God as vessels of his powerful grace and love.