

The Part That Is Ours

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,

Settle our hearts.

Still our minds.

And stir our imaginations,

That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor.

They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.

The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor.

They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live."

But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.

So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?"

The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them."

So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.

Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

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.”

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The Part That Is Ours

I’ve been listening to the book, *There is No Place for Us: Working and Homeless in America* by Brian Goldstone based on Pastor Jenny’s recommendation. The book is similar in style to Matthew Desmond’s *Evicted*, but follows working families in Atlanta who struggle to find and hold onto housing. While the book is compelling, I can only listen in small chunks because the relentlessness of what these families face is hard to absorb.

The stories begin with one bump in the road—the loss of reliable childcare, a landlord who decides to sell a condo rather than renew a lease, a cancer diagnosis—and suddenly people find themselves unable to secure safe housing. One domino falls, often due to no fault of their own, and everything begins to topple.

And once it does, Goldstone chronicles the obstacles that keep those without housing from acquiring it. He describes the long lines required to get public assistance, the ways in which being evicted for one late rent payment makes it impossible to find a new place, the hours one has to spend looking for a new place they can afford while still holding down a job and parenting, sometimes while living out of your car with children. It is heartbreaking and demoralizing—and I’m just listening.

There are so many things in our world that feel that way—overwhelming and impossible to solve. What do we do in the face of so much red tape, so many bureaucratic obstacles, so many hurdles? How do we solve poverty or homelessness in America? How do we cure cancer? Address the mental health crisis? Or improve public education? Spend enough time immersed in the news or caught up in a particular issue and it’s all too easy to feel like nothing can be done. The problems are too big, the systems too entrenched, the obstacles too many.

The opening chapters of Exodus introduce us to people caught in a similarly relentless system. When the story of Exodus begins, Jacob's descendants have become so numerous that Pharaoh is worried they could topple his kingdom if they ever decided to side with an enemy. And so Pharaoh puts them to work, hoping that by oppressing them, he will quell their growth. When this fails, he goes to two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, and instructs them to kill all Hebrew boys when they are born. (Little does Pharaoh know that it is women and girls who will be the undoing of his kingdom.)

At the same time, Pharaoh increases the workload required of the Hebrew people, making an already oppressive existence increasingly unbearable. Yet, despite back-breaking labor and attempts at infant genocide, the Hebrew people continue to multiply. And when called to account for their failure to stem the tide of Jewish boys, the Hebrew midwives lie, using Pharaoh's own stereotypes and prejudices against him, telling him that the Hebrew women are too vigorous and they give birth before help can arrive.

It can be easy to skim past this section of Exodus. It is, after all, just the prologue. But stop for a minute and consider the enormity of what these two midwives do. The text simply says that they do not do as the king commanded, and that when asked about it, they use his own prejudices against him.

Two brief sentences, two huge risks.

Shiphrah and Puah cannot overthrow Pharaoh. They cannot free the Hebrew people. They cannot change the laws or dismantle the system that has enslaved them. They are two midwives standing before the most powerful man in Egypt. But they can refuse to do what he tells them to do. And their courage works. Hebrew boys survive. Shiphrah and Puah cannot do everything. But neither can Pharaoh make it true that they can do nothing.

What Pharaoh can do, however, is make things worse. And he does, commanding all his people to throw every Hebrew boy into the Nile. The midwives have done a faithful thing, taken an enormous risk, and the result is an escalation of violence.

Which is how we meet the next woman in our story, a Hebrew mother determined to save her newborn baby boy. After hiding the baby for three months, this desperate mother waterproofs a basket, tucks the three-month-old baby inside, and sets it among the reeds at the edge of the Nile while his sister watches from a distance—probably not what Pharaoh had in mind when he ordered all the baby boys thrown into the Nile.

And yet, putting your three-month-old baby in a basket and leaving him among the reeds of a river is not, by any reasonable standard, good parenting. But this mother doesn't get to choose between putting her baby in a basket and keeping him safe at home. Keeping him safe at home is no longer one of the options available to her.

And perhaps that ought to make us a little slower to judge the desperate choices so many parents today are still forced to make. The parent who brings children along to a workplace because there is nowhere else for them to go. The mother who leaves an older child home alone sooner than she ever imagined because missing another shift means losing the job that pays the rent. It's easy from the outside to question the wisdom of parenting choices, but how often do we stop to ask what has happened that these are the only choices a parent has left?

The text doesn't tell us if this mother's plan is a plan of desperation (the only option she can think of), or a calculated gamble (perhaps she knew where and when Pharaoh's daughter would be bathing). What we do know is that she cannot control what happens next. And so she leaves her baby in the river while her daughter watches from a distance.

Eventually, Pharaoh's daughter comes down to the river to bathe. She sees the basket among the reeds and sends one of her attendants to retrieve it. When she opens it, she sees a crying baby, and she knows exactly what she is looking at: "This must be one of the Hebrews' children."

She knows what her father has decreed. She knows what is meant to happen to this child. But faced with the child, she chooses compassion. And the sister, who has been watching from a distance, sees an opening. She steps forward and asks Pharaoh's daughter if she should find a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby. Pharaoh's daughter agrees, and Miriam goes to get the one person we know can nurse him: his own mother. And so, in one of the great ironies of scripture, the mother who had no choice but to put her baby in the Nile is now paid by Pharaoh's own household to take him home and nurse him.

Two midwives, a mother and daughter, and a princess. They don't know one another. There is no coordinated plan. And none of them know where any of this is going.

Part of what makes this story so satisfying is that we know how it ends. We know that the baby is Moses. We know there will be a burning bush and plagues and a confrontation with Pharaoh. We know there will be a path through the sea and a people who walk out of slavery toward freedom.

But Shiphrah and Puah don't know any of that. They only know that Pharaoh has ordered them to kill the babies they're meant to help deliver. Moses' mother only knows she cannot hide her son anymore. His sister only knows there is a basket in the reeds and someone is walking toward it. Pharaoh's daughter only knows that there is a crying baby in her arms and her father says he is supposed to die.

God is almost invisible in these chapters. God blesses the midwives, but there's no burning bush yet, no pillar of fire, no miraculous intervention at the Nile. These women make desperate, courageous choices with no evidence that God is about to do anything. And yet, looking back, we can see that the story of liberation has already begun.

I don't know how to solve homelessness in America. I don't even know how to improve public education in Racine, and I'm on the school board. I don't know how to fix the broken systems that leave families with choices no parent should have to make. And one of the things Goldstone's book keeps confronting me with is how inadequate so many of the things I can imagine doing feel in the face of the enormity of the problem.

But "I cannot do everything" and "there is nothing I can do" are not the same thing. And faithfulness isn't always knowing how to solve the problem. It isn't even always knowing if what we've done has made a difference. Faithfulness is recognizing what is within our reach—the thing we can refuse, the person we can protect, the possibility we can watch for, the power we can use—and doing that.

The temptation, of course, is to do the easy thing within our reach and then decide we've done enough. But nothing the women in our story did was easy. The question isn't, what is the smallest thing I can do and still count myself faithful. The question is, what is actually within my power to do. Because I suspect that those of us who are not the ones putting our children into baskets—who have housing, education, money, influence, votes, relationships, access—have far more power than we sometimes want to admit.

And systems need to change. Saving a few babies from the Nile isn't going to get the Hebrew people freedom. Pharaohs have to be confronted. And eventually faithfulness will require Moses to stand before Pharaoh and do exactly that. But before Moses can stand before Pharaoh, other people have to keep him alive long enough to get there.

We may not know what comes next. We may not know whether the thing we do will work. We may never know what our actions make possible for someone else. But we can know what is in front of us: The person before us. The injustice we can refuse to participate in. The opening we can watch for. The power that is ours to use. The basket in the reeds that is, for this moment, within our reach.

Thanks be to God.