

“How to Make a Way Where There is No Way”

Exodus 1:8-2:10

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We have spent the past eight weeks in the family of faith in Genesis, considering what it was like to be family, what it was like to have faith, in the four patriarchal generations from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to Joseph, along with others in the stories: Sarah, Abraham’s servant, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah, Laban, Esau, Reuben, Judah and Benjamin, and God’s representatives – the angel that stays Abraham’s hand, the angels descending and ascending the ladder, the nighttime wrestling partner, and then of course God, whose voice is heard and whose presence is felt throughout these stories.

Keeping our theme of surprises and disruptions, but moving to the Book of Exodus, I asked the participants at Bible Study to share something from our eight weeks in Genesis that helped build their faith and understanding of who God is and what God does. Maybe before you hear theirs, you might want to think about how you would answer that same question.

- Steve – struck by how God had an amazing ability to create a result out of an amazingly messed up bunch of people.
- Jack – this tolerant, forgiving God, uses this human clay of ours for amazing ends
- Lois – patience, nothing happens in a hurry and you have to weather through a lot of stuff before you get to the good part.
- Judy – The many different ways that God was present to people, as a vocal God who is there and who you can talk to.
- Charlie – God meets us in our grief, and in our difficulties and he accepts our shortcomings and our failings and yet loves us nonetheless.
- Mary – God loves us warts and all, if he can love and work with these people in Genesis, he can work with any of us, and he is available to all of us.

At the end of Genesis, things have come together, a broken family reconciled, a safe harbor in a crisis, an Israelite serving high up in the Egyptian government.

How quickly the narrative changes with a few haunting words, the very first that Ruth read for us today, “now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” In the years, likely centuries, between the conclusion of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus, Joseph’s story – an Israelites rescuing Egypt - or at least how that history mattered, came to an end. So the unnamed Pharaoh speaks next, taking a page from the tyrannical despots playbook – first he lies in saying the Israelites are more numerous and powerful than they are, then he instills fear with a hypothetical – in a war, they will join our enemies, fight against us, and escape. These words

follow – taskmasters, oppress, forced labor, oppressed again, ruthless, bitter, hard service, ruthless in tasks. And not just from Pharaoh, but the Egyptians themselves, who have walked into the painting of Pharaoh’s portrayal of the Israelites. Six verses set-up how difficult life has become for the Israelites, enslaved among a people who are ruthless in their oppression, their lives made bitter.

Into that context come the next eighteen verses, where six women are caught in the horrible circumstances of Pharaoh’s next move, a defeat of the still-potential and hypothetical Israelite threat by a boy genocide. First by an order to the midwives to kill baby boys after they are born, then commanding all Egyptians complicity by throwing the baby boys into the river themselves.

There are not six women characters in any story that we read in the book of Genesis, I don’t even think there were ever three. But here we have six women living under Pharaoh and his many campaigns against the Israelites, from enslavement to prejudice to genocide, for whom the consequences of disobeying any of his orders would be as high as their death. Yet each of these women will risk to uphold life in the midst of so much death dealing, will figure out what they can do, in their own position in society and role in the story, to make a way where there seemed to be no way at all.

I celebrated a birthday last week and one of my presents was a T-shirt. I will show it to you in a minute, but first want you a chance to get the reference without it, “Live each day like it is 19 and 31.” Many of you may know that was the Nationals significantly losing record on May 23rd before they recorded the greatest comeback in all of MLB history to win the World Series. (A similar comeback might be needed again this year, bottom of their division as I record this.) A baseball comeback is inarguably a trite example for the kind of making a way where there is no way of the forces of the scripture, but I like the decree to live each day like it is 19 and 31. (3.4% chance of making it to the World Series.) There is an implied hope, and courage and perseverance required, there is the ability to see a way when everyone else says there won’t be one.

Shiprah and Puah are most likely Egyptian women serving as Hebrew midwives, who have been commanded by Pharaoh to kill babies after birth. Perhaps their experience among the Hebrew women gave them enough witness to the God of the Israelites to put their fear in God higher than their fear of Pharaoh, perhaps as women whose job it was to bring life into the world they just refused to use it for death. When called into Pharaoh’s throne room to account for their failure, they use Pharaoh’s prejudice against him, a sense in the Hebrew that calling them lively in their births is an insult – they are animal like, unlike the Egyptian women who are delicate. And they also do this with a wink – we know they are there when the boys are born because the previous verse says that they let them live. Live, lively, multiply, strong, words in a world of ruthless, oppressed, bitter.

I wonder if Shiprah or Puah were the midwives for Moses’ mother. With her Levite husband she gives birth, sees that the boy is a fine baby, and hides him. This language seems strange, but is important – the word for fine is the same word as Genesis 1, when God saw that the creation was good. Moses mother sees that her creation is good, and then does whatever she

can as an oppressed person living under brutal rule – hides, carefully creates a basket (Hebrew word for that is ark – again connecting to Genesis) to hold her baby in the water. Any discovery of her boy would lead to his being thrown into the very same river with no protection, and there seems to be no way other than to put him into it herself. The other women take over the story then, one is just a girl - Moses' older sister, who we assume to be Miriam, keeps watch. Pharaoh's daughter sees the basket and sends her maid, her own slave, wading into the water to retrieve it. She takes compassion on the crying child, the big sister appears and with incredibly quick thinking, offers to find a Hebrew woman to nurse the child (not mentioning anything about how that baby is her brother and she will go get her Mom) and Pharaoh's daughter agrees, and even agrees to pay her to do so. Pharaoh's daughter knows full well what her father is doing, and likely knows full well who this girl and her mother really are. That is a true use of privilege as resistance on the daughter's part. Moses will end up in Pharaoh's palace with the daughter, but not before years of being loved by his family and coming to know who he is as an Israelite. Moses is the original boy who lived, and will live to defeat forces of evil and cruelty even greater than Harry Potter.

Into a no-way system of brutality and oppression, these women made a way. Some made a way through access, because of their job, because of their privileged place in society. Some made a way by action, following by the riverside, wading into the water. Some made a way by opportunity, a girl to emerging from the reeds and using her voice and a person in a family of cruel power making a different decision for herself. Some made a way by compassion, when looking upon the face of a crying child and letting it forever change your life, or by carefully preparing whatever safety you can for what you love in a world that wants to kill it. All made a way by risking something – their jobs, their status, their comfortable place in society, and of course lives.

What made them able to see a way where there seemed to be no way? In this story there are two forces at work – God, who is putting together a liberating rescue beginning with one child, and how those forces of God interact with what these women bring to the table. An openness to possibility in an impossible context. A heart of compassion when the forces of death around them threaten to deaden that very place in them. A sense of justice that supersedes all other considerations – justice born of the fear of God and the seeing of the humanity of every human, no matter how their ruler and the society around them derided that group or that person. And finally a willingness to risk for that sense of justice, because some things are more important than ones job, status, privilege, comfort, and even, and we know this is true because we follow Jesus, ones own life. John shared a quotation in our Earth Care Book Discussion on Thursday night fits these women, even if a context with little hope, they were still able to have courage.

We learn in Genesis that if God can work with the people in that book, then God can work with any one of us. We learn in Exodus that this work continues, as God works with Egyptian midwives, and mothers and big sisters, daughters of Pharaoh and slave girls. And God can work through us. How are we going to live the kind of lives that God can use? We all see things that scream at us from inside our heads and within our hearts and the depths of our guts, that is not right. It's just not right. And God would not want that in the beautiful, good world God created.

This story gives us hope and if not hope courage, that we are equipped to be of use by God, as we are, wherever we are, in that exact place that calls to you – a specific kind of injustice, hurt, struggle for housing/food, for those children and families that might need you. There are two forces at work in you, the power of God who makes literal ways where there are no way – through small acts of people doing their part with their own access, opportunity and action, and through acts as big as parting a sea in the middle of a path and - then in the powerful ways God is molding you, to be a person with an openness to possibility, a heart of compassion, a sense of justice, and a willingness for risk. Live each day like it is 19-31, like God can use you, like you are in Pharaoh's courtroom, or down by a riverside, where small acts of risky faith are only the beginning of what God can do through you, and through us, for others, and for the world God so loves.