

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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As a pastor, I often hear that the God of the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Old Testament, is a spiteful and angry God. Some tell me that as Christians we don't believe in *that* God; instead, these people say, Christians believe in the God of love in the Christian Scriptures. I'm fascinated by this understanding. Theologically, as a church, it is untrue. Over the next few Sundays we will focus on a reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, and I hope this can help us see God's work in a new way.

Before today's narrative began Pharaoh, who was the Egyptian leader, had forgotten that Joseph, a Hebrew immigrant, had saved Egypt from a potential famine. Pharaoh was new to power, and he utilized a typical political strategy to unify his base. First, he identified a weak minority group and labeled them as an enemy and a threat. In today's reading it was the Hebrew people, or the Israelites, who were a religious minority and either immigrants or refugees due to famine and a changing climate. After Pharaoh labeled them a threat, then he argued that this rapidly-reproducing minority group might fight against them. So, what did Pharaoh do? First, he enslaved the Israelites to make them weak, but instead of having less children they had even more.

Then we get to the narrative we read today. We heard Pharaoh's second strategy when he commanded the midwives to kill Hebrew boys during birth. The ironic part of the story is that Pharaoh saw no threat from Hebrew females, although it was the female midwives who engaged in civil disobedience that changed the arc of human history. These midwives feared God and upheld their vocation to preserve life. As such, they broke the law and lied for the sake of justice.

Pharaoh became angry. So, he commanded everyone to commit infanticide by throwing all male Hebrew babies into the Nile River. But, three strong, courageous women changed the course of history. Jochebed, who was the mother of Moses, Miriam, who was the daughter of Jochebed, and Pharaoh's own daughter all resisted the tyranny and fearmongering of their ruler. One theologian called it "a powerful cross-cultural and intergenerational alliance of three women...who disobey[ed] Pharaoh and rescue[d] the baby Moses."¹ Without these women, Moses would not have survived. Without these women, the Hebrew people may never have left Egypt for the promise land. We may not have had the Passover, Jesus ministry might not have occurred, Jesus' death and resurrection might not have happened, and the world would look different without Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as we know them today. You see, the entire arc of human history would be fundamentally changed without the civil disobedience and resistance of these three women.

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=131

Yet, resistance and civil disobedience are easier said than done. Imagine Jochebed as she stood knee-deep on the muddy bank of the River Nile. She knew Pharaoh's order, and was aware that her three-year-old boy could no longer be hidden. Desperate to save her son, she fashioned a basket out of reeds and put her child in it. As one pastor illustrated, she was "ravaged by grief but firm with resolve, her hand outstretched, her heart pounding, as she [gave] the little basket bearing her son a final nudge out into the current. Love gave her the courage to do the one thing no parent wants to do... give up [their] child. She loved her child enough not to love him too much. She loved him enough to know that the way to save him was to not protect him."²

Do you feel it? Can you sense Jochebed's courage? We know what came next. We heard that the child was found by Pharaoh's daughter, and that Jochabed was called to serve as the boy's nurse. We know that Moses liberated the Israelites and led those surviving children into freedom. However, in that moment, in knee-deep mud, Jochabed had no idea. Jochabed could only trust what she loved most into an unknown current that she could not control.

What a powerful story. So, what strikes you about this narrative? Where is God's work in this story? There are two things that strike me about God's action in this story.

² Rev. Dr. James Gertmenian. Sermon entitled "Into the Current." Preached October 23, 2014 at Plymouth Congregational Church in Minneapolis, MN.

First, God has a way of working through some evil and oppressive situations. When leaders want to scapegoat minorities like immigrants, welfare recipients, LGBTQ individuals, the “undeserving poor,” Muslims, and people of color, we know that this has been a common tactic for power-hungry leaders like Hitler and Pharaoh. However, we also know that God works through small, common acts of resistance and civil disobedience. God works through people that those in power would not expect, like the Hebrew midwives and Pharaoh’s own daughter, to bring about change and liberation. Time and again, God provides opportunities for your action in your little corner of the world to ripple out on our shared waters of life. You are loved by God and empowered to God’s work.

Second, as Christians, we know that water is the life and source of all things. The waters of the womb nourished our growth. The waters of Lake Michigan keep us alive. Evolutionary biologists remind us that we likely came from the water. At the same time, we are in awe of the destructive force of water. We’ve watched the waters that bring life pour down and destroy during hurricane Harvey. Similarly, the main source of life and water in Egypt was the River Nile, and it was used as an instrument of death. Yet, God uses an instrument of death to bring life and liberation. This is the work our God does time and again. The cross used for Jesus’ execution became our symbol of hope and new life. Water used to drown young boys, became a source of liberation.

So too, in our baptisms the same water that drowns our self-centeredness becomes a force for justice and peace. Instead of obsessing about fear, uncertainty, and ego, we come dripping from the baptismal waters with an outlook of abundance, peace, and love. Here we are both sent like Moses into the currents of life and, at the same time, we, like Jochbed, send out our greatest hopes and joys with courage and trust in God. Here we march with the torch of peace. Here we agitate for justice. Here we gather at this table to proclaim God's abundance for all. In this place, we wade in God's abundant waters of love and hope. Amen.