

And a new king arose over Egypt, who knew not Joseph. And he said to his people: ‘Look, the people of the sons of Israel are too many and too vast for us. Come, let us be shrewd with them, lest they multiply, and it come to pass than when any war occur, they actually join our enemies and fight against us, and get out of the land.’ And they set over them forced-labor foremen to abuse them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh store-cities, Pithom and Ramses. But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread and the more they came to loathe the Israelites. And the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with crushing labor. And they made their lives bitter with hard service, with mortar and brick and every work in the field in all the crushing work they performed.

And the King of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one who was named Shiphrah and the other was named Puah. And he said, “When you deliver the Hebrew women and look on the birth-stool, if it is a boy, you shall put him to death, and if it is a girl, she may live.”

And the midwives feared God and did not do as the King of Egypt had spoken to them, and they let the children live.

And a man of the house of Levi took a wife, a daughter of Levi. And the woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months. And when she could no longer hide him, she took an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with resin and pitch; and she placed the child in it, and laid it in the reeds by the banks of the Nile.

And his sister stood at a distance, to know what would be done to him. And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the river; and her maidens walked along by the riverside; and she saw the ark among the reeds, and sent her slave girl to fetch it. And she opened it, and saw the child; and behold it was a lad weeping. And *she pitied him* and said: ‘This is one of the Hebrews’ children.’

And his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter: ‘Shall I go and call a nursing woman of the Hebrews, that she may nurse the child for you?’ And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her: ‘Go.’ And the girl went and called the child’s mother. And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her: ‘Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages.’ And the woman took the child, and nursed it. And the child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and he became a son to her. And she called his name Moses, and said: ‘For from the water I drew him out.’

What a truly great story this is! Pharaoh is threatened and makes chaos; a frightened mother makes an ark to save her child (yes it is called an ark- reminding us of what Noah used to save his family, and in the same way, this infant is born to save his people.)

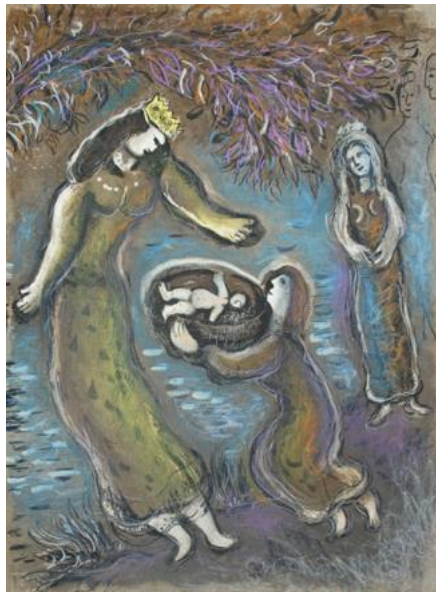
Then a Princess finds a baby and an older sister brokers a deal. A baby is saved and a tyrant is foiled. It is a perfect story, with *great* roles for girls, I might add (which doesn’t occur all that often in the Bible.)

Our story is set about 350 years after Joseph died (Jacobs’ youngest, most beloved son) and was buried there, mummified in Egypt (signaling that the Hebrews had lost their identity and were thoroughly ‘Egyptianized’.)

Now times have changed. The Hebrew people have fallen from grace and are now counted as slaves among their Egyptian overlords. Life for the Hebrews is hard.

So as we begin, notice two things. First, the main characters are young people and, as the Rev. Anna Carter Florence points out, *their parents aren't around*. This is important because this story is partly about what happens when young people are in charge. Second, without this story, without these two girls in the reeds, there will be no Moses. There will be no Exodus. There will be no liberation for the people of Israel, and there won't be unless the parents get off the stage and the young people set things in motion.

[Maybe having two daughters helps me process all of this, somehow...] So, we have two dramatic roles for girls: a beautiful princess (Bythia) and a responsible older sister (Miriam). You could choose either role; they're both good parts, even for you guys who are listening out there; just use your imagination. You can be Pharaoh's daughter dipping your toes in the cool



green water or you can be Moses' older sister, alone in the reeds, keeping watch over the miniature ark by day and night. You can be the powerful princess or the smart and resourceful sister. Like I said, you can't lose; they're both strong characters. And while scripture doesn't tell us how old they were, whether they were teenagers or twenty-somethings or even younger, what it *does* tell us is that each of them had an inner yearning just waiting to be unleashed. Each of them was ready to set aside what she *should* do, and work together on what they *might* do, which is what happens when you're down in the reeds. [Two more women

are mentioned, by the way, the 'handmaids' or 'slave girls', Shiphrah (beauty), and Puah (fragrant blossom) who have pretty important roles themselves.]

We need look at some of the story again. It's familiar, but you know how scripture is: you hear it differently every time. So let's recall it the way the girls in the story lived it, as if the parents weren't around, which is an interesting interpretive lens, come to think of it: *'read Scripture as if your elders aren't watching.'* You might be surprised that lot of people of every age might do well to do that. Listening to your conscience is pretty good advice.

So remember the larger context we're in; it's Egypt, a world superpower in those days, and the Hebrews are oppressed as slaves. But the Hebrew population is growing. There are enough Hebrews to make Pharaoh feel threatened, worried that soon these people will be as numerous as his own. You'll go into the city and hear Hebrew as much as you hear Egyptian. So Pharaoh thinks up an unspeakably evil plan to thwart them. He targets the boys. Every Hebrew boy baby that is born is to be exterminated on sight: pitch 'em into the Nile. Pharaoh knows: target the boys of those you want dominate and you'll soon exterminate them.

Moses, of course, was a boy, and so his mother did what she could: she hid him for a while. But babies grow, and when she could not hide him anymore, Moses' mother, (Jochebed) this daughter of Levi, does a sacramental, saving act. She takes a bunch of reeds, coats and molds them with river mud, and makes a snug little ark for her three-month-old son. It's a courageous and symbolic act, designed to save a life as well as to bear witness. And it is heartbreakingly



limited. A small ark can't save a child for long. He has one day, maybe two before he will die of exposure; one day, maybe two, to live. And anyone who finds him will get the mother's message, loud and clear:

'This is what we've come to in Egypt. Take a look: an ark with an infant.'

It's all I could do for my child. All I could give him was two more days.'

With that, Jochebed leaves the scene. Maybe she was like Hagar who couldn't bear to watch baby Ishmael die in the desert (Gen. 21:15-16); we don't know. But we do know that it's the older sister, Miriam, who takes over from here. That's what big sisters do: they watch when the parents have to go. They report back. It may not be what they choose to do, but it's their job as part of the family. It was this sister's job to stand at a distance and see what happens to her brother; first to wait in the reeds, and then to come home.

Next, Pharaoh's daughter appears. She has a benign agenda. She goes to the river to take a bath; to get away from it all: the court, the publicity, the pressure, the pedestal. Being beautiful can be a tough job; but that's what princesses are: it's their job as royalty. It was *this princess'*



job. Take your slave girls, go to the river, and anoint your lovely skin because you need to look good this afternoon. Bathe in the reeds and then come home.

So here they are: two girls in the reeds. Two girls who know what they're supposed to do. *Hide and watch. Bathe and dress.* Do as you're told and come home. And they might have done it and never even met one another; but as you know, the reeds are a watery, slippery, in-between sort of place. It's muddy, murky and hard to find your footing, and who knows where the deep water starts. Anything can happen down in the reeds to upset your balance, and on this day, something did.

You know what it was. The princess found the baby. The *Egyptian* princess found the *Hebrew* baby. And you know what she was supposed to do with it... she knew too. And the

sister did, too. And *now* what?

What do you do with a baby in an ark down in the reeds, at the river's edge, and the parents, even *your* parents, are nowhere to be found?

The princess knew what her father would have done or at least how his law was written. If this was a Hebrew male child, and it was, she was supposed to tip the ark over and let the baby tumble into the water. At the very least, she was supposed to close the lid, give the ark a little push and send it on down the river for someone else to deal with. That's what the law required, like it or not. And she was supposed to uphold it.

Big sister Miriam knew what her mother would have wanted. If someone found the baby, no matter who it was, she was supposed to keep an eye on things, as awful as things might get. She was supposed to stay in her hiding place so she wasn't seen and wasn't caught and then

report to her mother all that happened. That's what was required, like it or not. She was supposed to just wait and watch.

Two girls in the reeds with a basket and a little body in between them. And things began to look a little different from where they stood, knee deep in water, down in the reeds. It was their own eyes that saw what was going on, and their minds that made up the decision as to



what to do. The princess saw what she saw and said what she said. "This," she said, "must be one of the Hebrew's children."

Sometimes, the truth is the most radical thing you can say. Just to name it: what you see, right in front of you. That baby left for hours in the hot sun, left to die. Just telling the truth about it is huge. Seeing it; knowing it is real; knowing what it means...

"This must be one of the Hebrew children, because no other mothers are reduced to this: making little arks to float in the

Nile... trying to save their babies from a torrent of hate." One truth calls out another, especially when you're in the reeds, in the thick of it all. One girl, stammering out the truth about what she sees, invites another girl to speak up, too.

One girl, pausing over unspeakable evil, encourages another to stand with her. "This must be one of the Hebrew's children," says the princess, realizing the obvious, but allowing herself some responsibility. And then the sister got an idea. "Do you want me to find a nurse among the Hebrew women?" she asked, coming out from her hiding place. "Do you want me to find someone to nurse that child for *you*?"

And just like that, they had a plan. A plan to save one life, no matter what their parents thought of it. And it was about the craziest plan you could think of, to take baby Moses back to his Hebrew mother for a few years and tell everyone it was just fine because it was on



Pharaoh's daughter's orders: really. But they did it, and they got away with it, and when Moses was three years old, the princess actually adopted him. She took him into the palace and raised him there, with her *father* down the hall; and Lord only knows what *he* thought about this whole arrangement - little Moses sitting in his booster seat at the royal table, or riding his Toys-R-Us chariot through the throne room. Scripture never says a word about *that*. But as I said, this isn't a story about the parents and doing what they told you, even if your Dad *is* the Pharaoh. This is a

story about the young people, doing whatever crazy thing they can dream up together to get the bodies out of the reeds.

So now I'm wondering about what this story means for us. After all, it's one of the first stories we learned in Sunday School; it's another 'flannel-graph' story, a building-block of the Judeo-Christian tradition, with timeless truths for us all. There are **not** a lot of **new** revelations to be drawn from this story, and that's what makes this all the more powerful. What was true for them then is also true for us, now, right?

So what are our lessons? First, we begin in the reeds and we draw salvation from the waters. This happens both figuratively and literally. Maybe this is something that wouldn't have been mentioned twenty years ago, or fifty, much less two thousand, but if our salvation -our lasting health and healing- comes from the waters (whether it be through Moses, Jesus, or our baptisms), there is some meaning in keeping these waters clean.

I don't think I'm inappropriately stretching the meaning of this salvation story to extend to our stewardship of the waters from which we draw life. Being aware of the life that we draw from water is essential, no longer to be taken for granted, ignored or dismissed. The environmental realities about the need for water as a source of life is very real, for all of us. We all depend on clean water and share responsibilities for keeping it as clean as we can....

Second, this is a story about the least among us; about refugees, foreigners or non-citizens. How can it not be? Later in life Moses himself has an identity crisis when he discovers his true identity is not Egyptian. This is a story about helping others, even if they are not 'Moses' in waiting'. It's about telling the truth as you see it, down in the midst of the reeds, not from the height of a drone, but right in the muck of the waters. Even later in life, after Moses learned of his own identity, he identified with the victim, the disadvantaged, the oppressed. At the risk of his own comfort and even his life, he never stood idly by as someone was being hurt. The young girls stepped up to do what they could too, and what they did mattered, not just for this one life, but for all time.

So, finally, this is a story about each of our abilities to make a difference. It's not just a 'fairy-tale' story about the miraculous salvation of a heroic figure and Moses' beating the odds, time and time again. It's not that way because Moses did not do it alone. Although we never again hear about the full cast of characters in this story, Bythia, Shiphrah & Puah (but we do hear of big sister Miriam!), none of this would have happened without them doing their part.

This is how God's love grows. It starts down in the reeds, with an unexpected interruption and a presence we have to acknowledge. God's liberation can start with two girls and one really crazy idea, or some other way, but it most always starts small (maybe even in making peanut butter sandwiches for Our Daily Bread, as we did this morning.) That may well be all you need to get started, because whenever the children of God claim the freedom to re-imagine and remix the world--well, then, something good begins to happen.

With willing hearts, ready hands, and eyes that can see what's going on, down among the reeds, we have the makings of the next chapter of a truly wonderful story. Thanks be to God that here at Second Church, we can have a part in writing it, together. Amen.