

An Auspicious Beginning
Genesis 50:22-26 and Exodus 1:8-2:10
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This morning we begin a new sermon series on Moses and the book of Exodus. For a lot of people in this room, the name Moses immediately brings to mind an image of a young Charlton Heston playing the leading role in Cecil B. DeMille's production of "The Ten Commandments." For others, you are more likely to think of Walt Disney's animated story of Moses' life in "The Prince of Egypt". What we're going to discover over the next several weeks is that no film could do the man or the story justice. Moses is *the* central character in the Old Testament and the exodus is *the* central event, and I believe you will be amazed at how relevant this story is to our faith and also to our contemporary lives.

To begin, we need to set the stage, and if you were here a couple of years ago for our short sermon series on Joseph, you'll notice that this story picks up where the story of Joseph left off. When Genesis ends, Jacob's 12 sons and their families are living in Egypt as welcome immigrants. One of Jacob's sons, Joseph, was Pharaoh's right-hand man, a position of great power and responsibility which he achieved after devising and executing a plan that saved the country during a seven-year famine.

But at least 400 years go by between the end of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus, and in that time, Jacob's descendants have grown numerous. They prosper and grow strong in both numbers and financial dealings. Over those four centuries, various pharaohs have come and gone and by the time Exodus opens, a new king is sitting on Egypt's throne, one "who did not know Joseph." Since Joseph had died centuries earlier, that's no surprise, but what the statement really means is that this particular monarch felt no obligation to honor an ancient promise of hospitality made by one of his predecessors to the Hebrews. He felt no loyalty to remember the critical role Joseph had played in saving his empire from starvation so long ago. Far from an attitude of gratitude and hospitality, this pharaoh saw Jacob's descendants as a potential threat.

There's not the slightest indication that the Hebrews have done anything threatening; it's simply that they have been prolific and "filled the land." The Egyptian king sees their large number as dangerous and suggests that, in the event of war, the Hebrews might side with the enemy. So, thinking it strategically

advantageous to exert his power over them, Pharaoh introduces chaos into their lives. He enslaves them, putting them to work on massive government building projects.

The Hebrews did the work, but they also continued to multiply. So, Pharaoh steps us his game. He calls in two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, and instructs them that when they deliver girls to Hebrew women, the infants can live, but when they deliver boys, they are to kill those babies. The midwives, fearing God more than they fear the king, ignore his directive.

When Pharaoh sees that his orders have not been carried out, he calls the midwives in again, and these two brave women tell him that the Hebrews give birth so quickly that the babies are delivered before the midwives can get there. The oppressive labor hasn't worked; going through the midwives hasn't worked. Pharaoh now doubles-down on his murderous plan. This time he commands the entire Egyptian population to seek out male Hebrew children and drown them in the Nile. His underhanded methods give way to a very public decree.

Before going any further I want us to pause and think about the implications of this story we're hearing. First, be sure to notice that the population growth among the Hebrews is the direct fulfillment of the covenant God made with Abraham. God had promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars, that they would become a great nation. In verse 7 of Exodus 1 we see five verbs used to describe that God's promise has come to pass: the Israelites were fruitful, prolific, they multiplied, grew exceedingly strong and filled the land. Exodus wants to make sure we take note of the fact that **God is a God who keeps his promises**, not only to Abraham and Moses, but also to us.

Second, the five verbs go beyond the promise to Abraham to connect us to the story of creation. Israel's fruitfulness bears witness to God's **ongoing work of creation and blessing**. God's intentions for a good and overflowing creation are being realized in this family, in this people. But, they are but a microcosmic fulfillment of God's macrocosmic design. Yet, notice that so far, God's name has not even been mentioned. God's creative activity is all behind-the-scenes, as it has been during the 400+ year interlude between Joseph and Moses. We are meant to see that this long period has not been a time when God has been absent, but when God's work of blessing has been substantial. The God who creates, redeems and keeps his promises has been at work in life-giving ways all along the Hebrews' journey, even in their darkest times. Exodus invites us to experience that what was

true for them is also true for us. Even when we can't see it, God's work of creation and blessing, in our lives and in our world, is ongoing.

Third, irony plays a significant role in the book of Exodus. In just the few verses we've read, think about this: God's abundant, creative work is occurring in, of all places, pagan Egypt, and it will be through a death-dealing pharaoh that God's great act of life and liberation will come to pass. Two Hebrew midwives are pitted against that pharaoh and indeed, against the entire Egyptian community, and the women prove to be too much for them all. The Egyptians' fear of the Israelites leads to their failure, while the women's fear of God leads to their success. Ironically, the efforts of both Egyptians and Hebrews have the same result: the people of Israel multiply all the more. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that the women in the narrative are named while the mighty Pharaoh never is.

Pharaoh's rampage against all the male, Hebrew babies sets the stage for the birth of one very particular Hebrew son. With the threat of Israel's extinction ringing in our ears, the question of this baby's survival heightens the drama. Certainly Moses' family takes precautions for his safety, but the risks are enormous. The mother hides him for as long as possible, but when that is no longer feasible, she creates a waterproof container to hold him while strategically positioning him where Pharaoh's daughter is known to bathe. The baby's sister is stationed as a lookout. The child is discovered, just as his family hoped, and the princess exhibits a compassion that is absent in her father as well as a commitment to non-compliance with his brutal policies.

Ironies continue to abound. Pharaoh's chosen instrument of destruction, the Nile, becomes the means for saving Moses. A member of Pharaoh's family undermines his policies, saving the very person who will lead Israel out of Egypt and destroy the king's dynasty. The baby's mother gets paid to do what she most wants to do and from Pharaoh's own pocket, no less. The Egyptian princess gives the boy a name that betrays much more than she knows. She drew Moses out of the water just as Moses will eventually do for all the people of Israel.

The importance of women in this drama is striking. In addition to Shiphrah and Ruah, Moses mother, his sister and Pharaoh's daughter all make crucial contributions to the preservation of life and the fulfillment of God's creative, redemptive purposes. It is not overstating it to say that their wisdom, courage, vision and faithful non-compliance make a difference not only to Israel, but also to God. These women were not leaders; they didn't hold positions of influence that

could impact Egypt's immigration policies. Yet they were not powerless. Each of them used all the resources she had at her disposal.

Of the women we're met thus far, Pharaoh's daughter is the most unexpected. She was, after all, the daughter of a despot who was oppressing and killing Hebrews. A non-Israelite, she worshiped the Egyptian gods and goddesses. Yet, God used her, as Moses' adoptive parent, in one of the most important roles played by any mother in human history. In fact, her activity is directly parallel to that of God with Israel. She "comes down," "sees" the child, "hears" him cry, takes pity on him, draws him out of the water and provides for his daily needs, all actions that also describe God's response to Israel. In the final analysis, both Hebrew midwives and Egyptian royalty are agents of life and blessing in the created order. God makes use of the gifts of both, and the community of faith is equally accepting of their efforts. By telling both sides of the story, Israel acknowledges the contributions of Hebrew and pagan alike with gratitude and praise and reminds us not to be too narrow in where we think God may show up, who God may use, or how.

Already, several of the major themes of Exodus have emerged, themes that we will encounter again and again. The **relationship between divine agency and human action** is woven like a golden thread throughout the narrative. God chooses to work through human beings to accomplish God's divine purposes. God didn't send angels from heaven to spare Moses' life. God didn't miraculously step in to destroy Pharaoh or change his wayward heart. Instead, God worked through the talents, the plans, and the compassion of human beings. We are partners with God in God's divine purposes and sometimes that means that even God does not get his first choice in how events play out. God chooses to be self-limiting in order to work with the frailties of his human partners in mission.

God's self-revelation is also a major focus throughout this story. "That you may know that I am your God" is a refrain we'll hear again and again. Pay attention as the narrative progresses to the fact that God's self-revelation is meant not just for Israel but also for Pharaoh and the Egyptians. God's concern for self-disclosure is not confined to one people; it includes the whole world.

It is that **cosmic nature** that is a key to understanding this narrative. While the liberation of Israel is the focus of God's activity in Exodus, it is not God's ultimate purpose. The deliverance of Israel is ultimately for the sake of all creation. The issue for God is finally not that God's name be made known in Israel but that it be declared *in all the earth*. What's at stake is God's mission for the world. All

who oppose God's life-giving, creative, redemptive purposes will be judged and judged severely. But for the Hebrews, the Egyptians, and for us, every time we opt for compassion, for giving voice to the victim, for remaining faithful and courageous in the face of adversity, we can be sure that our efforts are not in vain. God is working with us and through us. Thanks be to God!