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Exodus 1:8-2:10

“Strong Women under Pressure”

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Exodus 1

1:8 Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.

1:9 He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we.

1:10 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."

1:11 Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh.

1:12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.

1:13 The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites,

1:14 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.

1:15 The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah,

1:16 "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."

1:17 But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.

1:18 So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?"

1:19 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."

1:20 So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong.

1:21 And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.

1:22 Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews ^{E1} you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.

2:1 Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman.

2:2 The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months.

2:3 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.

2:4 His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

2:5 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.

2:6 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.

2:7 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?"

2:8 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother.

2:9 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.

2:10 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 birthing beds of the Hebrew women were matters of state. The Hebrew womb had fallen under the heel of Pharaoh” Zora Neal Hurston wrote that.

As a black woman of the South, she could easily, and fully, imagine the oppressive power of dominators seeking to control the wombs of poor women.

And though our children are safe, and our freedom to carry children, birth them and raise them in peace and plenty is assured (for most of us), there are countless places where anxious mothers worry about the child in their womb, or the child they have birthed.

I have heard the stories about baby girls abandoned in China. We have all read the stories and seen the footage of the babies and children who are the most innocent victims in genocidal wars, famines, the huge AIDS crisis around the globe, and other adult horrors.

But the story of God is the story of hope, and of life, pushing back against the forces of cruelty and oppression and death.

In this story, you hear repeatedly the words that have been used in the beginning of Genesis as God is creating: God’s command to **be**: to be fruitful and to multiply is echoed again, and again (vs. 7, 12). Even as they are beaten down in slave labor, the people live out the blessing of God given at Creation: to **live**, to be fruitful and to multiply.

Blessing and promise, a past and a future. These belong to this lower class, generically named “hapiru”: Hebrew people (who are no longer given the name Israel, or “the people of Joseph”: the Egyptians have forgotten, or taken away, their story and their pride in their history).

The Egyptians may have forgotten Joseph, but the people have not. They remember their forefathers and foremothers, their story of life lived to the full; and they do not forget it!

So the two midwives “fear God” more than they fear the Egyptian king. They honor, they revere, they respect and obey their God, Creator of Heaven and Earth and the One who promises to bless them with life and its fullness of multiplication and abundance (vs.12). Yes, they fear God, more than they do the god-king of Egypt. This king promises only oppression, ruthlessness and pain and suffering. No, they do not revere him!!

And as women have done all over the world, in countless ages of oppression, they use their wiles to protect themselves and to protect those they care about.

They cannot simply defy the king.

So, when they refuse to do as Pharaoh orders, and kill the boy babies at birth; they do not blame the mothers of these children, and they do not blame themselves; they merely reply that the power of life and vitality (the very power of God in fact) is so great, it is beyond their power to control. In their own way, indirectly and cleverly, they challenge the power of this pharaoh, which is death, with the power of Yahweh, which is life! And they do so to his face!

You have got to give these women credit for being gutsy!

And though the Bible is often a source of difficulty for modern women, with its ancient codes of ownership, its patriarchy and even, its misogyny, let there be no mistake: in this tale of the people, which forms the basis of the faith for Jews in every time and place, this tale which is celebrated at Passover every year throughout the world: in this tale, the cleverness and bravery of women (and girls) stands out for all ages!

- The two midwives, in a tale that dates back thousands of years, are named and honored forever. Shiprah, and Puah.
- The mother of Moses, defiant in protecting and supporting life.
- The sister of Moses, clever protectress of her baby brother.
- And surprisingly, the daughter of Pharaoh, defying her father/king, in protecting the little Hebrew baby Moses, who is under a royal ban.

Can we celebrate this?

Can we not rejoice in the cleverness, the courage, and the audacity of such women!?

Can we not rejoice to honor, love and worship such a God of life!?

Yes, oh yes!

And can we also recognize our own limitations, our own need and dependence upon the gracious, loving, life giving power of God?

- Our cleverness is limited; but the creativity of God is beyond our imaginations.
- Our power can be torn away on the winds of political change, just as the Hebrews lost their place in Egypt after the death of mighty Joseph. But the will of the Creator; for justice and equity, peace and fullness of life has never changed, in Hebrew Scripture or Christian ones.

These Hebrew women, clever and strong, under pressure from an oppressive regime, still do what is right in the face of great danger. And they keep faith, when faith seems unwarranted, when God seems silent.

Can you? Can I?

Our own days call for strong women, and strong men. There are pressures on us too.

It isn't slavery and forced labor under Pharaoh, but there are enormous pressures in our culture, and our world.

Like those Hebrew women, I believe the greatest pressure, seen in a dozen ways, is to capitulate to the powers that call for death. War and violence permeate our culture; from video games to Afghanistan and Iraq. Violence and death are all around us, and to stand up to such forces of death and violence is not easy. You will get called "un-American" won't you!?

The death of children, the death of hope, the death of our future, the death of faith in God and faith in each other.

Don't do it! Stand up to it!

Be strong under pressure!

Protect children, fight for life!

Be clever, be gutsy, stand like these women!

Bear life, bring life, fight for life, protect life!

Through the stories of Jesus we know that our God is a God of the living. That God desires life, and life in its fullness, for all of creation.

Let us be strong!

I know it is difficult to stand, that is why I stand with you.
And yes, I am thankful, for the God who is with us, desiring life, sharing
life, protecting life in our world.