

# Do What You Can Do

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
August 23, 2020

- Exodus 1:8-2:10 Good News Translation <sup>8</sup> Then, a new king, who knew nothing about Joseph, came to power in Egypt. <sup>9</sup> He said to his people, "These Israelites are so numerous and strong that they are a threat to us. <sup>10</sup> In case of war they might join our enemies in order to fight against us, and might escape from the country. We must find some way to keep them from becoming even more numerous." <sup>11</sup> So the Egyptians put slave drivers over them to crush their spirits with hard labor. The Israelites built the cities of Pithom and Rameses to serve as supply centers for the king. <sup>12</sup> But the more the Egyptians oppressed the Israelites, the more they increased in number and the farther they spread through the land. The Egyptians came to fear the Israelites <sup>13-14</sup> and made their lives miserable by forcing them into cruel slavery. They made them work on their building projects and in their fields, and they had no pity on them.

<sup>15</sup> Then the king of Egypt spoke to Shiphrah and Puah, the two midwives who helped the Hebrew women. <sup>16</sup> "When you help the Hebrew women give birth," he said to them, "kill the baby if it is a boy; but if it is a girl, let it live." <sup>17</sup> But the midwives were God-fearing and so did not obey the king; instead, they let the boys live. <sup>18</sup> So the king sent for the midwives and asked them, "Why are you doing this? Why are you letting the boys live?"

<sup>19</sup> They answered, "The Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they give birth easily, and their babies are born before either of us gets there." <sup>20-21</sup> Because the midwives were God-fearing, God was good to them and gave them families of their own. And the Israelites continued to increase and become strong. <sup>22</sup> Finally the king issued a command to all his people: "Take every newborn Hebrew boy and throw him into the Nile, but let all the girls live."

<sup>2</sup> During this time a man from the tribe of Levi married a woman of his own tribe, <sup>2</sup> and she bore him a son. When she saw what a fine baby he was, she hid him for three months. <sup>3</sup> But when she could not hide him any longer, she took a basket made of reeds and covered it with tar to make it watertight. She put the baby in it and then placed it in the tall grass at the edge of the river. <sup>4</sup> The baby's sister stood some distance away to see what would happen to him.

<sup>5</sup> The king's daughter came down to the river to bathe, while her servants walked along the bank. Suddenly she noticed the basket in the tall grass and sent a slave woman to get it. <sup>6</sup> The princess opened it and saw a baby boy. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him. "This is one of the Hebrew babies," she said.

<sup>7</sup> Then his sister asked her, "Shall I go and call a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby for you?"

<sup>8</sup> "Please do," she answered. So the girl went and brought the baby's own mother. <sup>9</sup> The princess told the woman, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So she took the baby and nursed him. <sup>10</sup> Later, when the child was old enough, she took him to the king's daughter, who adopted him as her own son. She said to herself, "I pulled him out of the water, and so I name him Moses."

It's one of the most familiar stories of the Bible: Moses in the bulrushes. Moses grew up to become the inspirational leader rescuing the Israelites. He led them out of Egyptian slavery through the parted waters of the Sea of Reeds. Through a forty-year journey across the wilderness he delivered them to the Promised Land. But Moses was alive to lead the people through the Sea of Reeds because as an infant he himself had been rescued from among the reeds along the banks of the Nile.

In the Bible's big picture, the story of baby Moses in a basket floating amid the tall grass at the edge of the river is an important episode that advances the Old Testament's narrative. That narrative began when Abraham was called by the One, Almighty God of

Heaven and Earth. God promised to bless Abraham and his descendants if Abraham would worship and serve the Lord faithfully. Abraham and his wife Sarah passed on the blessing to their son Isaac, who in turn blessed Jacob who blessed Joseph – the son with the coat of many colors. Joseph remained faithful to God even as he served Egypt’s pharaoh. That’s how the book of Genesis ended.

Moving from the book of Genesis to Exodus, about 400 years have gone by. Egypt’s current king has no knowledge or memory of the great things Joseph had done for Egypt. Instead, the current Pharaoh was only concerned with the growth of the Hebrew population in Egypt. He feared the numerous Israelites might soon outnumber the Egyptians and take control of the country. So Pharaoh enslaved the Hebrews living in Egypt. Then he had the slave masters increase the pressure, making their lives even more miserable. Then Pharaoh had an even more sinister idea.

Pharaoh summoned two women who served as midwives to the Israelites. He commanded that when they deliver Hebrew babies, they were to kill the boy babies. But because the women respected God’s ways, they chose to disobey Pharaoh’s command. In time he learned that male babies were surviving and asked the midwives, “What’s the deal?” Their response was amusing but also gave them cover. They told Pharaoh, “The Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they give birth easily, and their babies are born before either of us gets there.”<sup>1</sup> As a result, Pharaoh issued the instruction to everyone in the realm that they should throw any newborn Hebrew boy into the Nile.

Moses ended up in the Nile, but he was not thrown there. His mother saw what a fine baby he is – robust, healthy, thriving – and couldn’t imagine his demise. For three months she was able to hide him, but then she conceived an ingenious plan for his safety. She waterproofed a basket with tar and pitch and set him afloat among the grasses and reeds along the banks of the Nile... in a location where Pharaoh’s daughter was accustomed to coming to bathe.

Mother posted her daughter nearby to watch, and sure enough, shortly after the princess arrived she noticed the floating basket and had a maidservant retrieve it. Seeing the crying baby, the princess was immediately moved with pity. “This is one of the Hebrew babies,” she told her maids. As if on cue, the baby’s older sister who was watching from the riverbank called out to the princess, “Shall I go and call a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby for you?”

The compassionate princess knew the order issued by her father... but her compassion overcame his murderous intent. “Yes,” the princess replied to the little girl on the bank, “please do.”

As if by coincidence, the little girl brought her mother – the baby’s own mother! The princess instructed the Hebrew woman, “Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you.” Some time later, once the child was weaned, his mother took him to the princess who adopted him.

The princess gave him a common Egyptian name Moses. She explained her choice of that name because in Egyptian Moses means “sonny boy” or “son.” But in the language of the Hebrews the name Moses sounds like the word meaning “pulled out” or “rescued”... which is what the princess did for Moses... and of course, what Moses eventually would do for his people: rescue them from Egyptian slavery.

---

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 1:19 Good News Translation

So the story of baby Moses in the river's tall grass tells where the great leader of the Israelite people came from: Moses was born into a threatening, difficult time, much like babies born today are entering the world in a threatening, difficult time.

But did you notice that in the biblical story most of the people aren't named? Pharaoh's name isn't given or remembered; that callous, murderous figure just disappears from the Bible into the ether of history. The mother and father and sister of Moses aren't named in the story – their names will appear later in Bible, but not in this story, so the focus is not on them. Even the princess isn't named; she's just a daughter of the Pharaoh.

What's unusual is the two people who *are* named in the story: the two midwives to the Hebrew people. Those women circulated among the commonest of the common in that enslaved society. They helped with the common but difficult and potentially dangerous process of childbirth. Those women who stood up to Pharaoh by "accidentally" failing to carry out his infanticidal order are remembered by name: Shiprah and Puah. They aren't mentioned elsewhere in the Bible, but the fact that they stood up against Pharaoh's unjust, murderous edict elevates their status far above what someone in their social position ordinarily would have received.

But Mom isn't named. Dad isn't named. Nor sister, or the princess nor her attendants. And yet it was because of the cleverness and compassion and courage of each of them that Moses survived and grew.

- Mother and father conspired to hide their precious infant son from the threat of being thrown into the Nile, and after three months hid him in plain sight in a basket boat floated among the river reeds and grasses. So mom and dad went to extraordinary measures to try to save their baby boy.
- The baby's older sister played her part by making sure that the princess noticed the baby floating in the basket, and then by arranging for her own mother – and the baby's own mother – to be given the role of nursemaid for the infant.
- The princess immediately noticed that the baby was a Hebrew not an Egyptian, perhaps by skin color or by the cloth he was wrapped in. But she chose to ignore her father's order and instead arranged for the child to be nourished and nurtured.

Even though they are not remembered by name, every player in this story made a constructive, even life-saving difference because they resolved to do the right thing. How had they been trained or prepared to rise up to make a positive difference?

We might ask that question about the disciples of Jesus. How were they qualified to join with him in a ministry of teaching and preaching and healing? At least four of the twelve were commercial fishermen, one was a tax collection agent, and we don't even know what the others did... but we can be pretty certain they weren't scholars and teachers and preachers. So what sort of orientation did Jesus give them? He just told them to follow him and learn. Learn to do what is right.

That's our opportunity day by day – to follow Jesus, to learn from his way to do what is right so that people are respected and nourished, saved from difficulty and helped through adversity.

- As a church we strive to do what is right to help people facing homelessness and hunger and challenges to mental and physical health.
- As a denomination the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. strives to do what is right by addressing causes of senseless gun violence, by dealing with the root causes of addictions, by focusing on ending the trafficking of people for sex trades or labor.

The Presbyterian Church shines a light to expose and correct discrimination against persons of color and members of the LGBTQ+ community.

- For their part, the many denominations that comprise the worldwide Christian church put so much energy and resources toward making education available to boys and girls and adults, too, and toward promoting respectful, peaceful understanding of the differences that characterize cultures and languages and nations and peoples—learning to better appreciate the variety that depicts the greatness and grandness of God’s rich and diverse creation.

We don’t have to rely on our church denomination, or even our local congregation, to try to do what is right. We can act on our own. Last week I heard about twin girls Meghan and Monica, sophomores at Brunswick High School, taking on that challenge themselves. On their own the girls launched an effort to collect new face masks of any kind that they can make available to their fellow students. Even though their school district, like many others, will begin the new year with remote learning, that hasn’t stopped the girls from trying to do the right thing for their classmates and their community.

“There’s so much negativity and there are so many people struggling right now and even though school’s online, people are still in need,” said [one]. Her sister adding, “Kids still need masks, all of us do, so I think we need to be responsible about wearing them and keeping our community safe so [we] can go back to the way things were.”<sup>2</sup>

Or perhaps you heard the story about a Parma couple’s wedding last weekend. Tyler and Melanie had to change various aspects of their wedding plans several times because of the pandemic. But when they’d finally settled on last weekend for their big day, and then realized that they couldn’t have the reception they had envisioned—and already paid for!—it wasn’t hard for them to find a way to make something wonderful come out of disappointment. According to Channel 3 News,

The newlyweds, still dressed in their wedding gown and tux, spent their first few hours as husband and wife in the City Mission’s kitchen dishing out fried chicken, mac and cheese, greens and others items originally intended to be served to guests at their reception.

“We paid for it already so we’re, like, ‘We might as well donate it,’” [Melanie] shared just before entering Laura’s Home [Crisis Center] with her groom. [The CEO of The City Mission said,] “They’ve could’ve done a hundred other things, you know, and yet they’re choosing to do this, a real act of giving and compassion on a day that is the most important day of their life.... I just thought ‘Holy cow, what an unselfish, wonderful idea....’ I think it communicates to the women [in the shelter] that there are people who care for them.”<sup>3</sup>

Meghan and Monica, and Tyler and Melanie are named in those stories, but they didn’t set out to make names for themselves. Like the nameless actors in the story of baby Moses, they simply decided to do the right thing. Let us continue to commit to following the way of Jesus: caring for neighbor, caring for stranger, doing what is right.

[sermons: se20200823; © 2020 Jon M. Fancher]

<sup>2</sup> <https://fox8.com/news/brunswick-twin-sisters-collecting-face-masks-to-distribute-to-fellow-students-in-the-district/> accessed 8/17/2020

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.wkyc.com/article/life/heartwarming/parma-newlyweds-donate-and-serve-their-own-reception-food-to-women-and-children-living-at-the-city-mission/95-7b8c9660-be20-47b7-a50c-4679606c74fd> accessed 8/17/2020