

13th Sunday after Pentecost; Proper 16A
Sermon 8.21.26

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. 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." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians subjected the Israelites to hard servitude and made their lives bitter with hard servitude in mortar and bricks and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live." But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this and allowed the boys to live?" 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." So God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live."

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. 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. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

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. 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. 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?" Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. 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. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

Matthew 16:13-16

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist but others

Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” (746)

Science Magazine published the conclusions of a study three years ago. Somehow I caught wind of it and it has stayed with me, geneticists theorizing on what they call “the bottleneck.” Apparently, 900,000 years ago, the population of our human ancestors dwindled to just 1,280 “breeding individuals,” meaning we very nearly went extinct. “For unknown reasons,” the article explains, “perhaps difficult environmental conditions, their numbers plunged dramatically to a point where our lineage was within a whisper of total extinction.” Paleontologist Chris Stranger is quoted: “The estimated population size for our ancestral lineage is tiny, and the bottleneck lasted for a remarkably long time,” an estimated 120,000 years.

History narrows to a pinch point. It proceeds with astonishing precarity, unnerving precarity, like a baby laid in a basket and left to bob down a river. To life? To death?

I was on the seacoast of New Hampshire for a few days this last week. We Goodmans went to visit the place where I grew up, where my parents each still are. We make an annual summer pilgrimage there.

Like always, so this time, I ate lobster.

A lot of it.

One time was in Portsmouth on a restaurant deck overlooking the mouth of Piscataqua River, where it flows into the Gulf of Maine and the North Atlantic. For reasons of the amount of water to flow down the river from Great Bay while meeting the tide coming in and going out while steering around several small islands, the currents here are some of the strongest in the world. You look over the water to the near shore of Maine, and you see the surface water taking on all sorts of strange shapes and patterns. There’s the usual chop of wind or a passing boat, but then there are these smooth-topped swirls that not even the roughest chop can disrupt.

Once you know what you’re looking at—currents deep, swift, powerful—there’s something menacing about it, like a pit of coiled snakes. And when the tide is going out, my father tells me, and you’re in a sailboat, he speaks from experience, and you’re a little early for the semi-hourly raising of the vertical lift of the Memorial Bridge, you have to take

shelter in one of the tiny inlets along Portsmouth. Otherwise, you'll get pulled out with the tide only to get your mast crashing against the bridge.

But it's not just small sloops that find this pinch point precarious. The Portsmouth Naval Shipyard is set though in Kittery, Maine, and is the oldest shipyard in the county. It is, in fact, just across the water from where the Revolutionary War began, on New Castle Island in 1774. Nonetheless, it's nearly always about to be closed, on the government's chopping block. They build nuclear submarines there, which is easy enough to manage, but they also repair them there, which is quite a bit harder. It's easy to get a nuclear sub out of the Shipyard, launching into the Piscataqua, around the sharp curve in the waterway, and out to sea. It's much more difficult to get them in, having to push against those currents.

We've been riding the current of history lately. This passing week, we've suspended from where we left off last week with Joseph in service of the Pharaoh of Egypt. From there, he urged his many brothers and his father Israel to leave the land of Canaan, to leave behind its deadly famine, to come to this kingdom where there were stores of grain. Here, there would be food for them, as for all Israel.

Apparently, they did so, a portion of the story we didn't hear having the people Israel fleeing south—for where we take up with them today, they'd stayed past the death of the Pharaoh who knew Joseph, who'd relied on Joseph. Now, we find ourselves under new Pharaohs, rulers who have no living memory of what these Israelites might be good for, what indeed they were even *doing* here. We're long past any asylum status. "Look," this new king said, "the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we," this, probably several generations into new kings.

Then, outlining the playbook for how strong societies deal with refugees in their midst, this Pharaoh goes on to lay it plain: "Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, they'll join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Like, when enslaved Black southerners joined the Union effort, which some White southerners *still* deny happened, believing instead the enslaved fought in favor of their enslavers.

Because there's nothing more frightening, unimaginably frightening, to slave-masters than the possibility that their slaves don't love them, the possibility of a slave-revolt.

Because, maybe the enemy is in your midst. The one who acts in your service, acts like your friend (because you force them to act in your service, to act like your friend): maybe they're an enemy and they're in your midst and you've given them the keys to the house. Frightened by the but barely imaginable, you create conditions that will likely embolden them as your enemy.

Kimberly Jones, following the murder of George Floyd, spoke of how lucky is our larger society "...that what Black people are looking for is equality and not revenge."

"Therefore, they set taskmasters over them," the ancient playbook tells us, "to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians subjected the Israelites to hard servitude and made their lives bitter with hard servitude in mortar and bricks and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them."

There's a tricky calculation to be done here. In slave-based economies, there's a tricky calculation. You want enough slaves to build the cities and the palaces, to build the pyramids and pick the cotton. You want enough slaves to do the dirty work that needs to be done—and likely in conditions hot or brutally cold, with biting insects and crushing quarries, collapsing mines. But you don't want so many that revolt is likely, and likely to succeed. Because they do talk even while being crushed by work. They do talk. They can get ideas. There's a tricky calculation: too few undercuts the economy, too many is the proverbial iceberg flipping over because the weight distribution has radically changed. What's on top becomes too heavy compared to what's underneath.

So, the task-masters would limit the number of the enslaved, would only allow the girl-babies to survive, would require that the midwives kill off the boy-babies, never to make it past their own births.

But they wouldn't do it: the midwives wouldn't. Fearing God, recognizing what's right and what's wrong, the midwives wouldn't do it, though they couldn't fully admit to their resistance, rather came up with a cover story to tell: "...the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them."

So, the Pharaoh enlisted the whole society, every Egyptian ordered to kill any male Hebrew child, to take any such baby or even toddling little one, and throw him into the Nile. Which can only unleash society-wide pandemonium, right? Which can only make it so extra-legal murder is everywhere, might be anywhere, done by anyone, done to anyone. Like having some members of society deputized and armed with electrified gloves that can cripple you with one touch, which touch can come at any time for any reason.

(This is real, beloved of Christ. This is something that ICE agents now have. Electrified gloves.

What have we become?)

I've enjoyed the flow of these ancient stories in a new way, how they pan out and take a wide-angle view, and then zoom in and engage with one small moment, one single person. The providence of God, according to Genesis, according to Exodus, and according to Marilynne Robinson whose reading of these has me seeing them in a new way, manifests in a grand historical sweep generations-long, and then in a minute family squabble or even a moment of private, personal choice. The providence of God flowing like a lazy river, which river then gets pinched into a bottleneck, intensifying into urgency if it doesn't strangle to death.

Moses is put in a basket, and (as per the order of the king, sort of) gets left to the Nile, which becomes at once a lazy river and a pinch point of urgency. The promise dwells in whether the reeds will shelter him or strangle him, in whether the Pharaoh's daughter will love or will kill, will pity or will destroy.

She pities. She pities Moses' cries.

She loves her capacity to save, loves her indomitable urge to love, and she will indeed embark on a decades-long project of undermining her own father, undermining her own people and nation with this one, if long-term, act of compassion and righteousness. And what does *one* matter, right? What can *one* do when it comes to a tide so mighty as history and imperialism? Because it's possible that Moses was a superhero in his infancy. It's also possible that he was just one more baby, one more normal human baby just like any of us, thrown into the tide of history full of latent possibility that things could be wondrous and things could commonplace and maybe there's little difference between the two, maybe that's true for each and all. Wondrous and commonplace, each and all.

She gives Moses to a nurse-maid from among the Hebrews, which the story knows, and which likely the characters all know though to admit as much doesn't need to be done, that this nurse-maid is also Moses' actual mother. Pharaoh's daughter gives the Hebrew nurse-maid her own baby to raise and everyone agrees to call it something else, an honesty around which might risk it being lost.

And Moses would grow, and grow strong, a citizen of two worlds, the oppressor's world and the world of the oppressed. A child of the Hebrews he'd be raised as an Egyptian yet under the care of a Hebrew, a child of the enslaved raised eventually to enter and to occupy the palace of the chief enslaver. It was a bi-focal view that would eventually force a confrontation, history squeezed into the bottleneck of his own mind and soul and experience, to come out the other side having taken new form.

I sometimes feel our society has been a wide lazy river. For the length of my lifetime, our wider society has seemed to move on a current steady and slow. In fact, my generation, Generation X, was back in the day often mourned as not having some crucible event. We came after the heat of the Civil Rights era and the Vietnam War that the Boomers knew. We had no world-wide fight against Fascism, as the so-called Greatest Generation did. We had no Great Depression as the Silent Generation did. We came of age, were forged in the fluorescence of America's shopping malls, which was thought to be a pity for its incurring no sense of purpose—as if every generation should be bashed in knees before being sent on their way.

Which might not be entirely wrong. Maybe a pinch point of urgency isn't so bad a thing. It focuses the attention. Try to get a nuclear submarine to move against the strongest current in the world while hugging into a ninety degree turn: it focuses the attention.

We've got a lot demanding our attention these days. From climate to massive migration to a global politics forged in reaction, we've got a lot these days demanding our attention.

Worse, if we're flowing into pinch points, we're doing so under leadership I, for one, don't trust.

I do, however, trust in God to provide. I do trust that the currents of history, whether slow and steady or intense and furious, are somehow also guided (which isn't to

say controlled) by God whose purpose is life, whose way is love, whose power is redemption, and whose presence is unfailing. If life these days amounts to a close call, then we know at least that we've been here before, many times and long before, and the way through is faithfulness, becoming of this bunch of frightened little mammals rather a body of many members, a living sacrifice whose joining together with the hope of abundant life is holy and acceptable to God.

We are the boat. We are the precious cargo. We are the promise and fulfillment is, by God, a sure thing, if not in history and the living of *our* days, then certainly in eternity, an end in glory, thanks and praise, "Alleluia! Alleluia!"

Thanks be to God.