

COME TO THE WATER

Water as Liberation

Exodus 2:1-10

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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."

We don't know her name. We know her as a mother. We know she lived in a time when a certain set of people were enslaved and forced into labor in a ruthless way. We know she lived in a time when even the healthcare system was corrupted, with directives given to midwives to only let baby girls live. Law and order demanded that baby boys were to be drowned in the river.¹

We don't know her name. We know that she hid her child for three months, trying to keep him quiet, nursing him every few hours, watching him sleep, soothing his cries. We know that she saw him growing. Beginning to laugh. Rolling over. Becoming more aware of the world around him. Getting too loud to be hidden for much longer.

We don't know her name. But we do know her story. We know what she did. She made the impossible decision, relinquishing every ounce of control, risking everything, desperately hoping it would mean life for her child. She wrapped up her heart and placed it in a basket, to float among the reeds of the river.

We don't know her name. But we know her. She is the mother of every black child who has the "talk" — not the one about the birds and the bees, but the one about how to speak and where to keep your hands. She is the refugee mother who straps on a backpack and holds her child in her arms as they leave memories and possessions behind, setting off on foot, or sometimes by sea. She is the mother — the father, the parent, the caregiver — who sends a child off to school each day, all too aware of what can happen on a bus, or in a school, in a world gone awfully awry.

There was another woman. We don't know her name, either. We know her as a daughter. Pharaoh's daughter. We knew she wanted for nothing and had all her needs met. We know she was down at the river to bathe, like Egyptian princesses would.

We don't know her name. She knew that she heard a whimper, and saw a basket, and peeked in, and gazed upon a little baby's face. And because no one would wrap up a baby so carefully if they weren't desperate for it to live, she understood that the child was a Hebrew baby. She knelt down next to the basket and everyone was waiting for this girl to make a decision: her servants, the child's sister lurking nearby in the reeds, and even God. No doubt God was waiting to see what she would do, too.

We don't know her name. But we do know her story. We know what she did. She made the impossible decision, relinquishing every measure of good sense, risking everything, desperately hoping it would mean life for this child. She pulled another woman's heart out of the basket, and welcomed it to beat as her own.

We don't know her name. But we know her. She is the conductor on the underground railroad, the freedom rider seated on the bus. They are the teenager with a "love is love is love" sticker on their water bottle. She is the young adult standing in quiet witness on the state capital steps. She is a woman who knows the law, but who also knows that in looking into another person's eyes, in seeing that person's face, something has to be done. Something has to change.

Oh, I know. This story we're talking about, the story Lucy read, is a story about the one person whose name we do know: Moses. But if I understand the text, this story is mostly about these two unnamed women. It is a story about what happens at the river's edge, and how the choices that get made there change the world. Moses will grow up to voice the words of every protestor's chant, every refugee's dream, every oppressed parent's prayer, every weary plea: Let my people go! Moses, the one who should have died in the river, but who was drawn up out of the water — he will be the one to part the waters of the Red Sea and lead the people to freedom. Moses, the one destined for death, but who makes a way for life, he will be the one to stand on Mount Nebo and look out over the promised land and say something that sounds an awful lot like, "I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, we will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."²

But none of that would have ever happened had it not been for those women and the choices they made down there at the river's edge. Choices made by one woman who had nothing to lose, and one who had everything to lose.

And did you notice that nowhere in this story do we hear the voice of God? That nowhere in this story do we see the action of God? Don't get me wrong. God is there. But maybe one of the lessons this story teaches us is that God's will can be done not just through divine intervention, but also through the choices, words, and actions of God's faithful people. Or even — stay with me here — remembering that Pharaoh's daughter was not an Israelite, but rather an Egyptian, maybe this story also teaches us that God's will can be done through the choices, words, and actions of any person who, when push comes to shove, when they are standing where the water meets the weeds, chooses right over wrong. Life over death. Good over evil.

Is it not good news to know that God has far more to work with than just us?

Jonathan Sacks, a Jewish scholar and rabbi, says that this story, as much as any other, maybe perhaps more than any other, teaches us to hold on to hope in any situation, even one in which God seems to be absent.³ Rabbi Sacks also points out that throughout the Torah, the first five books of what we call the Old Testament, parents give a child its name, or, in the case of a special individual, God gives the name.⁴ It is God who gives the name Isaac to that first promised child. God's angel gives Jacob the name Israel. God changes the names of Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah. But the hero of the Exodus, the greatest of all prophets, the one who leads his people to freedom, he is given and retains the name bestowed upon him by his unnamed, adoptive mother. An Egyptian. An outsider. An oppressor, by ancestry at least. She names him Moses, which means, "I drew him up out of the water." Not even God sees reason to call ever him anything else. What happened down by the river's edge is what defines his life and, ultimately, all of ours.

In the summer of 2016, a young Syrian boy, Omran, became the face of the Syrian refugee crisis. His photo was taken as he sat silently in an ambulance after an air strike. That photo was circulated around the world, and a young boy in New York City saw it. His response was to write a letter to then-President Barack Obama.⁵ He wrote:

“Dear President Obama, Remember the boy who was picked up by the ambulance in Syria? Can you please go get him and bring him to [my home]? We’ll be waiting for you guys with flags, flowers, and balloons. We will give him a family and he will be our brother. Catherine, my little sister, will be collecting butterflies and fireflies for him. In my school I have a friend from Syria, Omar, and I will introduce him to Omar and can all play together. We can invite him to birthday parties and he will teach us another language. We can teach him English, too, just like we taught my friend Aoto from Japan. Please tell him that his brother will be Alex who is a very kind boy, just like him. Since he won’t bring toys and doesn’t have toys, Catherine will share her big blue stripy white bunny. And I will share my bike and I will teach him how to ride it. I will teach him additions and subtractions in math and he can smell Catherine’s lip gloss penguin which is green. She doesn’t usually let anyone touch it. Thank you very much! I can’t wait for you to come. Alex, 6 years old.”

At six years old, Alex didn’t realize it, but he was kneeling at the river’s edge. In writing that letter, he made a choice about the kind of world he wanted to live in.

The truth is, we all kneel at the river’s edge every day of our lives, with choices to be made. Some will be bigger and some will be smaller. But they will keep coming, as sure and as swift as the current can carry them. And just like those unnamed women, God will give us the strength to do what we have to do. To do what is right, and good, and just. There will always be a million reasons to do differently, but God will always give us the compassion and the courage it takes to reach down and pull the baby out of the water.

And you never know — our efforts to save others could turn out be the means by which God saves us, and even the generations that come after us. It’s happened before.

¹ Inspiration for the beginning of this sermon, and some language, comes from my friend and colleague, Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin, Co-Pastor of University Presbyterian Church, Chapel Hill, NC.

² Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” April 3, 1968.

³ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Exodus: The Book of Redemption*, page 25.

⁴ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Exodus: The Book of Redemption*, page 27.

⁵ As reported by NPR. ‘He Will Be Our Brother’: Boy, 6, Asks Obama To Bring Syrian Boy To Live With Him, by Bill Chappell, September 22, 2016. Accessed online: <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/09/22/495021467/he-will-be-our-brother-boy-6-asks-obama-to-bring-syrian-boy-to-live-with-him>