

“From the Weeds: Stepping Towards Courage”

Sermon from Exodus 2:1-10

Given Sunday, June 27, 2021

at the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

Reverend Erika Marksbury, Senior Pastor

There was a man from the house of Levi who had married a Levite woman, and she conceived and gave birth to a boy. And she saw that the baby was good, so she hid it for three months. When she could hide the baby no longer she took a papyrus basket, daubed it with bitumen and pitch, and placed the basket among the reeds by the banks of the Nile. The baby's sister watched from a distance to learn what would happen.

Pharaoh's daughter came down to the Nile to bathe, while her attendants walked along the river bank. She noticed the basket among the reeds, and sent her attendant to fetch it. Opening it, she saw the baby - and how it wept! She was moved to pity and said, “This must be one of the Hebrews’ children!”

Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, “Do you want me to go and find a nurse for you among the Hebrews to suckle the child for you?”

“Yes, go,” she answered. So the sister went off and brought the baby's own mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, “Take this child with you and suckle it for me, and I myself will pay you.” The woman took the child and nursed it. After the child was weaned, she brought it to Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted it as her own. She called him Moses - “He Who Pulls Out” - for she said, “I pulled him out of the water.”

—

You know, every mother does it differently. Every culture has its own norms. The World Health Organization recommends breastfeeding for at least two years. For some moms, that isn't practical, or even possible. For some moms, that's just a beginning, and they'll go on to nurse until their baby is a full-fledged toddler, even four or five years old. Sometimes, even

after regular breastfeeding has ended, a child will come looking to his mom for milk if he falls down and scrapes a knee, if she has a nightmare and wakes up crying, if they need comfort, to be held and known and nourished.

I wonder how long Moses' mom got to keep him, once she was reintroduced to him as his nurse.

I wonder if she ever whispered her connection in his ear as she held him, if she sang to him the same lullabies she'd sung to his sister, if she told him stories about his people, those times when she had him. I wonder if she explained to him that this heartbreak - this giving him away - was also saving his life.

And you know, every dissident, every ally does it differently. I wonder how much Pharaoh's daughter knew, how much she made possible for Moses and his family. I wonder how much she risked, defying her father's order. Womanist commentator Wilda Gafney wonders if she was married or single, older or younger, one of a few children or one of so many, by so many different women, that Pharaoh barely paid her any mind. Which makes me wonder again: if Moses was the only one, because his mother and the princess saw that he was "good" - echoes of the creation story there - if he was the only baby she fished out of the river - or if she and her attendants came to bathe daily, hoping to undo the horrors of Pharaoh's edict, wading in the water close enough to where babies might be set afloat so that they could scoop them out.

I wonder what would have happened if Pharaoh one day made an uncharacteristic stop by his daughter's quarters, and discovered a baby boy - or several - held, rocked, loved, by her attendants, against his orders. Would his heart soften, like hers did when she saw the baby's face? Would his fear, his hatred, be strong enough to stomp out any compassion a baby's cry might stir in his heart? Could his own adopted grandson change his mind?

And every coming out story happens differently. When we first meet Miriam, she's in hiding. She doesn't have a name - she doesn't receive one anywhere in this story, it's only much later in Exodus that we learn Moses' sister is called Miriam, a name that means "beloved" in Egyptian and means "bitter water woman" in Hebrew. When we first meet her, she's in hiding, but she's watching. She's worried about being found out, but she's even more worried about what will become of her brother. She watches and she waits and when the time is right, she steps out from the weeds, from the reeds, and she offers up the truth of herself. Specifically, it's that she's connected to the Hebrew community, and she could find a nurse for this baby boy, who's going to need one, and no doubt soon, if the princess' hope is to keep him quiet and satisfied. But more broadly, what she offers up is who she is, who she loves, and what she can do.

And when she does that, when she steps fully into her own truth, she makes good happen for all those around her. It's risky, and surely there is some struggle, some suffering, as this new family figures itself out, learns how to navigate a new way of relating, of sharing, of understanding. But I have to believe there is more gift here than struggle, as each one in this new family is able to offer

their own gifts to keep each other alive: the sister connects, the mother nurses, the princess protects, the baby gives them all hope for the world that is still coming to be.

In 1959, in rural Washington, Patrick was a high schooler with a slot in the school assembly. He applied his costume in the car his older brother drove them both to school in - a costume that involved applying lots of eye shadow and glitter to his face. Patrick's brother called their dad and said, "You might need to see this. It isn't good." Patrick's father came to school, straight from the farm, his overalls caked with cow dung, his feet in clodhopper boots. He watched his son on stage, singing and dancing his heart out, his face painted and brighter like he'd never seen it before. Patrick had seen his father that day, too, and he ducked and hid around the corner - not because of what he was wearing, he remembers as he tells this story to NPR's Story Corps project, but because of what his dad was wearing.

Later that same evening, Patrick's father said to him, "You know, I thought I saw a kid at your school today - looked a lot like you, but he disappeared quickly - I knew it must not've been you, then, because you would never do that to your dad." And Patrick said he squirmed and hesitated and finally he said, "Well, dad, did you have to wear your cow-crap jeans to my assembly?"

And his dad said, "Look, everybody knows I'm a dairy farmer. This is who I am." And Patrick remembers his dad staring him square in the eye and asking, "What about you? When you're a full-grown man, who are you gonna go out with at night?" And Patrick said, "I don't know." And his dad said, "I think you do

know.” And his dad told him, “Don’t ever sneak again, like you did today. If you sneak, it means you think you’re wrong, and that, more than anything else, is what will endanger your soul.”

And Patrick said out of all the things a father in 1959 could have told his gay son, his father told him to be proud of himself.

And he spent that summer denying it, getting out in the hayfield and flipping fifty-pound haybails in the air, adamant: “I’m not a queer, what’s he talking about?” But he never forgot the way his father knew him, claimed him, encouraged him to step toward his own courage. And then one day, he did.

We’ve got a few more stories coming up after this song, so that’s all I’ll say this morning. But I want to leave you with the questions I think the story of Miriam poses to all of us:

Like Moses’ mother, what might you need to let go, so it can live? How can you nurture what is both yours and shared? Like Pharaoh’s daughter, how can you take meaningful, concrete action in those places where your own heart is burst open with compassion? Like Miriam, how might your own coming out, your own embrace of yourself as God’s beloved, enable good for yourself and for those all around you?

As you live those questions, may you know God living in and through you also. Amen.