

Moses



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

So begins the story of Moses and the Exodus. For the past 9 weeks, we have heard bits and pieces of the stories of the Great Patriarchs; the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and their wives, and their children, and I have tried with my sermons to fill in some of the gaps to form a long and coherent account of their lives, which as we saw were full of deceit and lies. Now,

today, the Old Testament Reading shifts to the story of Moses and the great Exodus of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, and we shall hear bits and pieces of that story for the next 9 weeks, and like with the stories of the Patriarchs there are parts of the story that you never heard in Sunday School or from the Readings on Sundays, with details in the story that sometimes are very different from what you see in Hollywood portrayals.

So how did get from last week's celebratory reunion of Joseph and his brothers in Egypt, where Joseph served as the Prime Minister to the Pharaoh, to the story today where the Pharaoh, or King of Egypt, wants to kill all the male children of the Hebrews? Well, last week marked the end of the book of Genesis, with the Patriarch Jacob arriving from Canaan with his family and reuniting with Joseph and his brothers, and settling we are told in the land of Goshen. The Book of Exodus, which continues the story, begins with the important note that Joseph and all his brothers and that whole generation died, but that the Hebrews were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong in numbers in the land of Goshen, so much so that the land was filled with them. And now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph and how he had saved the people of Egypt during the great seven-year famine. This new Pharaoh viewed the large number of Hebrews in his land as a threat, which was unusual in the Middle East where it was usually though that the more slaves a country had,

the more projects they could complete. But this Pharaoh feared the Hebrews, that they might join with Egypt's enemies in the event of war and fight against them. So, at first the Pharaoh compelled the Hebrews into forced labor, making them build his cities and monuments, enslaving them. But the more the Hebrews were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Hebrews. Then the Pharaoh ruthlessly instructed the midwives in Egypt to kill the male babies of the Hebrews when they were born. That would solve the problem. Note, however, that there were only two Hebrew midwives, named Shiphrah and the other Puah, so how large could the Hebrew community be really, if they only needed two midwives? Anyway, the midwives fearing God, would not do what the Pharaoh demanded. When Pharaoh asked to know why they were not killing the Hebrew boys, they lied, and they answered, "because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for (the Hebrew women) are vigorous and give birth before the midwife (even) comes to them." So, then the Pharaoh gave out a general order that all the male Hebrew children when they are born were to be thrown into the river Nile, which is a bit odd, because if you really want to decrease the size of a population, you might prefer to eliminate the young girls, not the boys.

Nonetheless, a certain unnamed family from the tribe of Levi had a beautiful son, we are told, and they hid him for a while

after his birth. They did not throw him into the Nile as ordered. But once he was too old to hide any longer, these women devised a clever scheme to keep him alive. Like with the stories of the Patriarchs, God seems to favor clever individuals over their stronger opponents throughout the Bible, like when Abraham and then later Isaac each lied and said their wife was their sisters, so as to preserve their own lives, or like when Jacob dressed up and pretended to be his brother Esau in order to steal their father's blessing, or like when Laban swapped his daughters at a wedding, putting Leah in the marriage tent and not Rachel. The lies and deceit of Genesis continue in Exodus.

So, in today's story this clever Levite mother makes a basket of bulrushes and plasters it with bitumen and pitch, so it is watertight, and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the Nile. We all remember that part from Sunday School, though there is usually no mention of how similar this story is to that of Sargon the Great, who was the first ruler of the Akkadian Empire, known for his conquests of the Sumerian city-states in the time before Moses. Nonetheless, note that the unnamed mother of the child doesn't launch the basket out into the river Nile, as I always imagined as a child, where it would quietly float downriver until it miraculously beached at the Pharaoh's house. No, no. The unnamed mother of the child simply hides the basket with the infant among the reeds along the bank of the river, at the exact

spot where she knows that the Pharaoh's daughter comes to bathe. And knowing that the Pharaoh's daughter was likely to walk by this place, this unnamed mother places her own daughter, the baby's sister, not too far away. So that when the Pharaoh's daughter comes down to the river to bathe, and sees the basket, and has pity on the poor Hebrew baby who is crying, then Moses' sister steps forward and offers to go find a wet nurse from among the Hebrew women to care for this child, and then the sister goes and fetches her own mother, the very mother of that baby. The Pharaoh's daughter then hires the mother of the baby to take care of him, not knowing that she is the baby's real mother. And the baby is named Moses, which is thought to mean "to be drawn out of the water" in Hebrew. So that in the end, Moses survives the Pharaoh's order for the Hebrew males to be killed at birth by the clever scheming of his mother and sister, and Moses is instead raised secretly by his own mother, in the Pharaoh's own household, and the Pharaoh's own daughter actually pays the mother to care for her own child! Pretty clever story!

But there are lots of questions about this story, like why any King would fear more slaves rather than welcome them? Why there were only two midwives if the number of Hebrews was so large? Why kill the males to reduce the population rather than the females? Why give the Hebrews an order to throw their baby boys into the river Nile after birth? Who's going to do that, exactly,

the new parents? So, I imagine that years later, the children of Israel have inherited a heroic story of someone names Moses who led their escape from slavery in Egypt, and someone then asked the simple question, why was he called "Moses"? 'Moses' was a common name in Egypt, which means "son," and adds some authenticity to the story. But by that time of that question, the children of Israel have forgotten it's Egyptian usage, and tried to understand its meaning in Hebrew, where it translates "as to pull out or draw out," technically meaning the one who does the drawing out, say of water, and not the thing itself which is drawn out. And perhaps remembering the famous tale of Sargon the Great, these children of Israel borrowed the story of a baby placed in a basket plastered with bitumen and pitch, to simply make sense of Moses' name, all because they had long forgotten how to speak Egyptian.

Next week the Old Testament story will jump to the land of Midian and the story of the burning bush. But how did Moses end up in Midian if in today's story he is being raised in the Pharaoh's own household? Why did he leave the good life he had? That story is skipped over because it is a bit controversial. It tells how one day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. Moses clearly knows that he is a Hebrew and not an Egyptian, even though he was brought up in the Pharaoh's household. And at that time, Moses saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own kinsfolks. Moses then carefully

looked this way and that, and seeing that no one was watching, Moses killed the Egyptian and then hid his body in the sand. When Moses went out the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting; and he said to the one who was in the wrong, "Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?" And that man answered ominously, "Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then, we are told, Moses was afraid, and Moses thought, "Surely the thing (that I have done) is known." And sure, enough when Pharaoh heard of Moses' killing of an Egyptian, the Pharaoh sought to have Moses killed. And so, Moses fled from the Pharaoh; fled from Egypt, from the good life, fled for his own life, not unlike Jacob fleeing from Esau a few weeks ago.

And Moses settled in the land of the Midianites, on the northwest corner of what we call the Arabian Peninsula, in modern day Saudi Arabia. You may remember Midian. He was a son of Abraham, born after the attempted sacrifice of Isaac. Remember Abraham did not return to his wife Sarah in Hebron after the attempted sacrifice of their son, but settled instead in Beersheba where he married Keturah, and she bore Abraham six sons, one of whom was named Midian.

So, Moses fled from Egypt and came into the land of the Midianites, the descendants of Midian, and at noon day he sat down by a well to rest, always a good place in the Bible to meet women. The priest of Midian, we are told, had seven daughters (and

apparently no sons). And the daughters came to draw water at the well for their flock, but some other shepherds came and drove them away. So, Moses got up and came to their defense, and helped water their flock. When the daughters returned to their father the priest, he said, "How is it that you have come back so soon today?" They said, "An Egyptian helped us against the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock." The girls' father said to his daughters, "Where is he (then)? Why did you leave the man? Invite him to come break bread with us." So, Moses agreed to stay with the priest of Midian, and in the end, the man gave Moses his daughter Zipporah in marriage.

So next week, the story of Moses will begin with him having fled from the Pharaoh for his very life, fearful and ashamed of having killed an Egyptian, afraid of getting caught and instead running away, who is now married and tending the flocks of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest in the land of Midian, when Moses suddenly looks up and see a bush that is burning, but is not consumed, and he goes to investigate. What he finds there is next week's story. Amen.