

The Waters of Compassion

Exodus 1:8 - 2:10

Sunday, July 9, 2023 – Parkminster United Church

Forget any summer blockbuster movies, this morning's Scripture reading is one to be remembered, the story of the tiny baby bobbing among the bulrushes. But the political scene surrounding this story is anything but kind. Too many and too mighty, declares Egypt's new pharaoh and the oppression of Israel in Egypt continues; first he assigns them to work on more construction projects, hoping he might wear them out. But they thrive even more. So, the pharaoh enlists a purge of all male babies born to Israelite women. When the midwives refuse to cooperate with this madness, the pharaoh commands that all male babies be thrown into the Nile.

An unnamed Levite baby boy is born to an unnamed mother who manages to conceal him for three months without anyone coming for him. But she knows the baby is in danger and so is she. So, she weaves a waterproof basket for the baby and sets him in the river, hoping for rescue further downstream. His sister watches from the corner of the bulrushes as her mother places the baby in the water and prays for his safety and life. And what person wouldn't pluck that basket out of the water when they hear the cries of the baby? Pharaoh's daughter (princess) knew that this was one of the endangered Hebrew children, but she picks up the basket anyway.

The baby's big sister steps out of the marshes and comes forward with an offer to find a wet nurse for the baby. And so, he is returned to his mother again, alive, and safe. I will call him Moses, declares the princess, because he was drawn out of the water.

Moses will be raised by an Egyptian princess and nursed by his own mother. He will grow up to be a world class leader, delivering his people out of the bondage of oppression and setting their eyes upon the Promised Land.

And yet this story is just the beginning: it puts into motion the Exodus narrative, with God, behind the scenes and more powerful than the powers-that-be, taking first steps in response to the suffering of the people whose ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, so far away and so long ago, had been promised abundant numbers (more than the stars in the sky), overflowing blessings and a land of their own. Even though everything seemed hopeless, the situation will be transformed through the acts of God, and in spite of the opposition of Pharaoh: God, working through the defiance of daring people. As so often happens with God, the transformation will come in unexpected, surprising ways, through the most unexpected, surprising people.

Those who have no power at all in the scheme of things act with courage and compassion to change the course of history and the story of a people. The list is impressive. First the midwives who disregard the pharaoh's orders about killing males, then the mother who cannot bear to part with her child; a watchful and courageous sister rescues her baby brother and finally, an entitled young woman acts with clear-eyed compassion and common sense to give a baby a shot at life. It's a conspiracy of compassion, in the midst of tyranny, oppression and threat of death. The women act with courage and respect for human life; they make life-changing decisions by cleverly outsmarting power and pursuing radical justice with dignity and common sense. They defy the tyranny of power and move comfortably across political and class borders in order to bring life and hope not only to the little boy in the basket, but to a whole body of people. This story sorts out the genesis of power, real power, asserting that it comes from those who are willing to act with courage and compassion, rather than control and domination.

Reading it over and over as I did this past week while enjoying seeing photos from some members of our community faith who are at cottages or camping near beautiful lakes, it was not hard to imagine what it might have been like to be that little baby bouncing along in the bulrushes. We all learn a little about strength and weakness and about the kind of compassion and courage which comes to us sometimes in the most challenging times and when we are willing to open to it. When a loved one becomes ill or is in danger, as one of my friends says, you begin to think with your claws. Negotiating hospitals, treatments, and doctors, as many of you already know, can be a complicated maze of appointments, conversations, and activities. It is exhausting and confusing at best; at worst it can lead to a feeling of helplessness and even despair. Thank goodness, for wonderful healthcare professionals, supportive family and friends, and the care and support from those in our community at Parkminster and beyond. But there is also something to be said about the kindness of strangers and the conspiracy of compassion, which seems to be everywhere if we are willing to grasp it.

In a book entitled, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*, Henri Nouwen writes, "Here we see what compassion means. It is not a bending toward the under privileged from a privileged position. It is not a reaching out from on high to those who are less fortunate below; it is not a gesture of sympathy or pity for those who fail to make it in the upward pull. On the contrary, compassion means going directly to those people and places where suffering is most acute and building a home there."

It seems to me that is exactly what happened out there in the bulrushes. Those considered weak by those in power were strong through direct action and a willingness to go there. Help of the helpless arrived through the attention of those who were willing to be present by simply opening themselves to the moment at hand and acting with courage and compassion.

But it took all those hands to make a difference. At any given point, Moses might not have made it out alive. It took the midwives, being willing to turn the other way and a brave mother acting against the force of tyranny. It took the watchful eyes of a sister and the open heart of a young princess, willing to risk her own position and power in order to save a tiny baby. There were many hands and many hearts involved and only then was a real difference made.

God is not mentioned in the story of Moses' birth, but we have a sneaking suspicion that God is present in the story through the activity of care and compassion surrounding Moses' young life. God comes alive in God's people and in the intention toward the common good. God, it seems to me, becomes more wholly present, not less, in the midst of suffering and moments of great fear and anxiety. God is the great conspirator of compassion. In Nouwen's words, "God builds a home where our suffering, fear and sorrow are the deepest."

In every life, there are times when we feel as if we are out there on the water, paddling for our lives without a strong boat to hold us. It is at this precise instant that we can open to a deeper trust in the holy and the presence of God in the hands around us. This moment can come at the death of a partner or parent, or in the midst of an illness or even at the birth of a child. It can come through news of a business failure or job loss or transition. These are the moments that can deepen our lives and enrich our faith, if we are only able to trust in the outrageous love God has for us, even in the midst of those difficult times.

In these moments of utter helplessness, when we cannot see or trust that God is present then the strong hands of active compassion must come forward, or we will be swept away in the flood or be left out on the sea alone. The waters will go over us, as the Psalmist reminds us. This is where the community comes in, we are asked to make real the presence of God, just like the women of today's story.

We in the midst of another season of summer which is often a time of rest and relaxation. But we are also aware that these times still present many challenges for us and the world around us. The economy continues to be challenging for so many with grocery prices and more increasing. This is the same for many churches who walk a fine balance of acknowledging the financial realities that are challenging while maintaining a deep gratitude and hope for the many ways communities of faith uplift and transform.

As a congregation we continue to live into our commitments of becoming an anti-racist church and living into right relations as well as discerning our hopes for our future through the Lifting the Lid process and more. I am convinced that we can face these challenging times as a community who embraces a conspiracy of compassion with each other and the world in the midst of anxious times. Our Scripture story was meant to assure the exiled people that God

would deliver them. Today it assures us that delivery comes in the form of human instruments of peace and compassion. To make our way out of our comfort zones, we will take a rough ride. Perhaps we will worry about steadying our own small boats on such a turbulent sea, but as theologian Walter Brueggemann says, we are a people who have “so little to lose, so much to hear and say, so much to hope....” We may feel overwhelmed by the floodwaters of suffering in the world, but we are still called to take action, and being together, in communities of faith, makes it possible to do something significant in the face of that heartache.

Let us be the midwives of courage, freeing each other from the tyranny of fear and anxiety and let us be guardians of each other’s lives, standing up for the values and virtues that make us a more loving and compassionate community, encouraging each other’s leadership and calling as persons of integrity and hope. May it be so. Amen.

Rev. Heather Power