

We all know the story of cute baby Moses who was placed in the basket and floated towards the princess by his sister and mother in order to save his life. I suspect it is one of the top 10 Bible stories that children remember. Recently we heard not only how Moses was saved, but further how his sister and mother arranged for the princess to order his own mother to be his wetnurse, raise him in the palace, and educate him as a prince of Egypt. We love that story.

As in all good public narratives there is an earlier personal story; in this saga; this one is not focused on Moses and his origin story, but in the strong Hebrew women that created a culture of resistance.

There was a new king in Egypt, a pharaoh that had forgotten or chose to forget the relationship with the Hebrew people, and the relationship the Egyptians had with Joseph. It was Joseph you will remember that interpreted the dream that predicted several years of drought and famine and managed their resources to save Egyptians and Hebrews alike by putting aside grain during years of abundance.

This new king was worried that the Hebrew slaves were becoming too numerous. He was afraid that these other people would join with their enemies in the event of a war. They worshiped a different God, spoke another language, were not of the same cultural, economic, or racial class as the Egyptians. Scripture reports that the more they were oppressed the more they multiplied the more numerous they became, and the Egyptians feared them.

To be clear, Pharaoh is afraid. 'let us deal shrewdly with them, those people, the other, they smell and live in ghettos.... He does not feel the gratitude or respect towards this family that his forebears did. And by this time, the sheer number of the Hebrews is enough to worry him; what if their culture and language change Egyptian traditions, we can almost hear his speeches. These strangers are a threat that will undermine Egyptian interests! We can do to them what we want to protect ourselves...

We don't have to stretch very far to compare this story to the immigrant crisis we currently have in our own country. Subsistence only wages, questions of legal status, families separated, locked in cages.

So, Pharaoh summoned the Hebrew Midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. He commanded that when they summoned to assist as midwives, and a boy was born, they were to kill him.

I can imagine the dialogue between these two women.... They probably were thinking of the hundreds of children that they helped bring into the world. What would be the consequences if we disobeyed Pharaoh, more importantly what would God do if we killed all of those babies. They feared God more than Pharaoh and ignored the demands.

When they were again summoned by Pharaoh, they explained that the Hebrew women were simply more vigorous than the Egyptian women, and the birth was completed before they arrived.

Consider their actions from the lens of non-violent civil disobedience. Using the descriptions from non-violence, their actions were nonviolent direction action, civil disobedience, and ultimately divine obedience. For reasons we are not told Pharaoh did not punish them, and God preserved them blessing them with families.

Consider the importance of these women, as well as the women that protected Moses in the subsequent story.

We understand that God is active in this human history; God has chosen the Hebrew people because they were in bondage. As Kelly Brown Douglas writes in *Stand Your Ground*

*God's identity is connected to God's very free movement in history. More importantly, God's identity is not a stagnant identity. God says: I am who I am. In the very use of a verb as a name, God clearly self - identifies as movement, an ongoing presence in history. In other words, God is to be known by the way in which God moves in the world. God is not to be known by being identified with any particular people.*

Shiphrah and Puah open for us a window to name the other women in our biblical narrative who have had significant impact. Most often these women have assumed significant roles in subverting man made and male power structures. Consider for example Sarah, Hagar, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Ruth. Judith who kills the enemy general, Esther who saves her people from genocide, and of course Miriam the

older sister of Moses who saved his life as an infant, argued with him as the leader of the Hebrew People, and taught the women Torah.

More recently in our history there are numerous women who have followed the threefold path of non-violent direct action, civil disobedience, and divine obedience.

Patria, Minerva, and Maria Teresa Mirabal, helped expose the corruption and brutality of Trujillo's regime in the Dominican Republic. The sisters were assassinated; however, their deaths led to Trujillo's own assassination six months later. The United Nations General Assembly designated November 25 as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women in honor of the Mirabal's.

African-American journalist Ida B. Wells was a leader in the Civil Rights Movement, battling sexism, racism, and the threat of extreme violence. Born into slavery, Wells' journalistic skills (she's considered the first female journalist) opened up the world to the inhumane conditions of the South, particularly the lynching of African Americans. She follows in the path of Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman.

Swedish teenage activist Greta Thunberg. Her iconic and powerful address to world leaders (theoretically putting old political cronies in their place) echoed through the speakers of computer and cellphones, forever changing the world's perspective

on climate change and the lack of action being taken to assure young people of a future, inhabitable planet.

In today's Gospel Jesus asks his disciples who do people say that I am, and who do you say that I am. This is a reversal of Moses question to the burning bush What shall I say to the children of Israel is your name, and God answers I AM that I AM. In the narrative today we hear the corporate answers from Peter....

Consider for a moment your own responses to Jesus question, who do you say that I am? Use your own words... let us talk further during our sermon discussion later this morning.

Theologian Elizabeth Johnson writes:

*Who do you say that I am?" is an invitation for every Christian and local faith community to infuse that contact zone with new meanings, insights, and possibilities. The richness and vibrancy of the Christian community are diminished whenever the space between Jesus and Christ is fixed, whether, on the one hand, as a result of the need for doctrinal purity, or the fear of contamination from Native cultures.*

One of the most significant developments of liberation theology is that marginalized communities have begun to use their own cultural idioms and religious imaginations to articulate their own understanding of salvation. Instead of a monolithic understanding of Christ as the liberator, a plurality of images of

Jesus have been offered, including the Black Christ, Jesus the Crucified Guru, Jesus the Corn Mother, Jesus the Priest of Han, Jesus the Feminine Shakti, and Jesus the Sophia - God. Some of these images highlight the socioeconomic aspects of salvation, while others have more to do with its cultural - religious dimensions.

The icons of Andrei Rublev that shows the Holy Trinity in three feminine forms, which I have used as a backdrop for my zoom screen are another image of how we might imagine the faces of the Holy.

Theologian Caroline Bynum writes of the medieval devotions to Jesus as mother... Anselm imagines Jesus as a mother hen, Bernard writes of Christ's breast milk of healing, Aelred writes of Jesus as a breastfeeding mother.

As we walk together to dismantle racism, heterosexism, militarism, tribalism, and misogyny we are called to respond to Jesus question, who do you say that I am. We are invited to a consideration of Jesus and the Beloved Community through a different set of lenses. Jesus as black, Jesus as a woman, Jesus as transsexual, Jesus as pacifist....

it will invite us to a multiplicity of meanings that might transform us and unfold the mystery of God's presence in history.

Black Theology as described by Kelly Douglas teaches that *God is free to move through history and eludes our human understanding*. We hear that most clearly in

the Book of Job, in the voice from the Whirlwind when he mocks Job with, ‘and where were we when I created the leviathan’?

The whimsical freedom of God reminds us that the assertions we make about God may not always be about God. What we can trust is that God intends for all people to be free, even if we do not understand what God is about.

It would not have occurred to the fathers of Christianity — or their Hebrew forebears — to conceptualize God in any way other than masculine. Insofar as these theologians were attempting to stay true to Scripture, their personal and relational images of God were profoundly patriarchal . The doctrine of the Trinity was formulated by churchmen and philosophers who could only imagine God as a reflection of their maleness, which was , and is , the basis of patriarchy itself . Any other images — especially those affirming strong women or femaleness as sacred or virtuous — were unthinkable to early church fathers, and so too to most Christian men and women up to the present.

Scripture and narrative are the beginning of a discipleship that leads us along the pathways of the way of love. That path calls us to do the hard work to abolish slavery, and its historical artifacts, to empower women, and try to make peace with each other without exception. To reform laws and customs which dehumanize others, LAWS which are inhumane and cruel, which are racist or sexist or give privilege to one religion over another: laws and practices that are not consonant with the God of liberation.

God calls us to love God and one another, and to when necessary to practice holy disobedience so simply demonstrated by two powerful midwives, Shiphrah and Puah.

Amen

The Reverend Rex McKee

Sunday August 23, 2020

Stand Your Ground, Kelly Brown Douglas

She Flies, Carter Heyward

The Strength of Her Witness, Elizabeth Johnson