

Once More to the River

Exodus 2:1-10

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, (July 23) 2023

Kyle Childress

Rivers are never just rivers in the Bible. They are laden with symbolic power and are places of transformation and change. Cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz used the term “thickness of meaning” which means there are multiple layers of meaning going on when we are at a river in the Bible. The same is true of other places and events and things in the Bible. The sea is never just the just a body of water, eating bread is never just about physical nourishment, healing the blind is never simply about curing the inability to have eyesight, the wilderness is not just about being out in the country , and so on.

Rivers in the Bible, especially the Jordan River, but other rivers like the Nile River in our reading today, are boundaries of definition. Who we are and who we will become are delineated at rivers. Rivers change us. God is at work in and through and around rivers.

It is why baptism is such a big deal. We go into the waters one way, and we come out another and we live the rest of our lives figuring out the implications.

Today we come once more to the river. The Nile. We were here just a few months ago in this same story from Exodus 2, but I felt we needed to return to the river this morning. We’ve a mission team going to the river next week down at Brownsville. It’s the Rio Grande and here in Exodus it’s the Nile but when we think biblically, it is the same river.

This week there was a lot of news coming from the river. An email from a Texas Dept. of Public Safety (DPS) trooper/medic working on the river near Eagle Pass hit the news. *The Houston Chronicle* and the *San Antonio Express-News* first broke the story on Monday night and I'm quoting excerpts from the full email released by CNN and CBS News. The trooper begins by describing his patrol checking on the fence line and the "casualty wire" (or razor wire) in the river.

We came across 120 people camped out along the fence line. In this group there was several small children and babies who were nursing. The entire group was exhausted hungry and tired. We called the shift officer in command, and we were given orders to push the people back into the water to go to Mexico. We decided that this was not the correct thing to do. With the very real potential of exhausted people drowning. We made contact with command again and expressed our concerns and we were given the order to tell them to go to Mexico and get into our vehicle and leave. After we left, members of the brush team coordinated with Border patrol and got the people processed and taken care of.

In this group was a 4-year-old female who attempted to cross the wire and was pressed back by Texas Guard soldiers due to the orders given to them. The temperature was well over 100 degrees. Shortly thereafter the 4-year-old passed out due to exhaustion and a DPS Sgt and Texas Guard Soldier extricated the patient and transported to us.

On 6/30/23 at approximately 2130 while patrolling the casualty wire near Pecan Farms we came across a 19-year-old female who was in obvious pain stuck in the casualty wire who was doubled over. We cut her out of the wire and medically assessed her. She was pregnant and was having a miscarriage. We promptly coordinated with Eagle Pass EMS and transferred care.

The DPS trooper/medic concludes:

I believe we a have stepped over a line into the inhumane. We need to operate it [Operation Lone Star] correctly in the eyes of God. We need to recognize that these are people who are made in the image of God and need to be treated as such.

Let's pause a moment over that remarkable email from a trooper on the river.

You know and I know this is not right. God will hold us accountable. May God have mercy on us.

Now hold that river story in your mind while I shift us to our other river story, this one from Exodus. I will try to summarize quickly a very interesting story. There is a new Pharaoh in office in Egypt and he does not know anything about the Hebrews except to fear them. The population growth of the Hebrews was setting off alarms among the ruling elite of Egypt, and in a kind of "replacement theory" Pharaoh said "the Hebrew population is growing faster than we are and it won't be long until they are numerous enough to take control and rule over us. We've got to do something. Build walls, put up razor wire, send them to work camps building our cities and building our economy. Our Egyptian way of life is under attack! We must act!"

But feeling the fear and the pressure Pharaoh realized he had to get even tougher, more ruthless, so he ordered all Hebrew boy babies to be killed.

I think it is interesting that we have no record whatsoever of any Egyptians registering a complaint, raising a question, or lifting a hand to resist this drastic command. Somewhere there had to be an Egyptian who said, "This is not right!"

This is inhumane. We must make a stand against this! We must speak out!” But according to Exodus, everyone went along. Not one Egyptian said, “No!”

I also think it is interesting that though the entire Egyptian Empire does the will of Pharaoh, he cannot get two Hebrew women to do his will. Two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, commit civil disobedience and refuse to kill the Hebrew baby boys.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the UK, says, “The significance of this story is that it is the first recorded instance of one of Judaism’s greatest contributions to civilization: the idea that there are moral limits to power. There are instructions that should not be obeyed. There are crimes against humanity that cannot be excused by the claim that ‘I was only obeying orders.’” (*Lessons in Leadership: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible*).

After a while, Pharaoh realizes something is amiss. There are still growing numbers of Hebrew baby boys, so he commands every Egyptian to participate directly in infanticide. “Every Hebrew baby boy born must be thrown into the Nile, but the Hebrew girls can live. And I command everyone to be alert and report any Hebrew baby boy sightings.”

Which brings us to where we began reading this morning with chapter two of Exodus and the birth of Moses. Jochebed gives birth to Moses and therefore, finds herself in an insufferable situation. Either obey the law of Pharaoh and kill Moses or break the law and protect him. She chooses to raise Moses and does so for three months until he is too old to keep secret from Pharaoh. Desperate, worrying, praying, asking God for help, she decides to throw Moses into the Nile ... but in a waterproof basket.

Once again there is a thickness of meaning in the Hebrew. The Hebrew word for “basket” is the same word as “ark” and the word for the bitumen and tar used to waterproof the basket is the same word for waterproofing the ark back in Genesis 6, and it is the same word used for the mortar (Ex. 1:14) used by the Hebrew slaves in making bricks and mortar. So here, early in this story is God’s grace, the very substances and methods used by Pharaoh for oppression, is turned, is used by God, through a mother’s hands, as means of salvation.

Jochabed knew the risk in placing Moses in his little ark, but unlike Pharaoh, she is not controlled by fear. Though afraid, she trusts God more than she trusts her fear and puts him in the river. This story is all about trusting God more than our fears, though it pushes us to our limits, because though the Spirit of God protects and guides the little ark of a basket down the river, it ends up in the reeds along the banks of the worst place on the river it could be – the banks of Pharaoh’s palace. The very place where the decree to kill Hebrew baby boys originated.

This is one of the most riveting scenes in the entire Bible. Miriam, Moses’ older sister, is standing nearby in the reeds trying to watch over her infant brother. Coming down into the water is Pharaoh’s daughter, the child of the chief enemy of the Hebrews. Here is a child of Pharaoh, a daughter, raised in a home of bigotry and fear and power. She has been trained to understand Hebrews as subhuman and disposable, as property. The daughter of Pharaoh makes her way into the river and sees the basket and instructs her female slave to bring her the basket.

She opens the basket and sees that it is a Hebrew baby boy. What’s she going to do? Her entire life she was taught to be xenophobic – to fear the stranger – and suddenly here she is face to face, up close and personal, with an infant stranger. She was well acquainted with the law – she is supposed to kill this infant,

an infant who is crying. But the Bible says she took pity. She had compassion (Ex. 2:6).

Remember that the second verse of the entire Bible says, “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2, KJV). And here standing in the water is the daughter of Pharaoh, looking at a Hebrew baby boy whose very existence is evidence of the lawlessness of the Hebrew slaves. Nearby stands the infant’s sister, also standing in the river, in the water. We are on the edge of chaos and destruction, yet the Spirit of God is moving upon the face of the waters. Whether anyone knows it or not, God is at work bringing order out of chaos and destruction. The daughter of Pharaoh does not know it, but the living God is at work. The Spirit of the living God is going to change her, change the chaos, change the world, and set the Hebrew slaves free.

It makes me think about our earlier story from the Rio Grande. What opened the eyes of the DPS trooper/medic as he was at the edge of the water so that he could see we were crossing the line into the inhumane?

In the Rio Grande the higher-ups ordered the 4-year-old little girl suffering from heat exhaustion to be “pushed back into the river.” Essentially, this is the same order given by Pharaoh. If you see Hebrew baby boys throw them into the river.

Why did they refuse to push them back into the river? What kept the trooper and Pharaoh’s daughter humane, to use the trooper’s language? To be inhumane, means to lose compassion and mercy. And Exodus 2:6 tells us explicitly the daughter of Pharaoh had compassion when she saw the Hebrew baby in the basket.

What I do want us to know and not overlook, is that from time to time, there are unexplained moments when something clicks, our understanding changes, our shriveled and hardened hearts become tender and compassionate ... and we realize that there is more going on than just us. There is more present than simply a child of Pharaoh and her maids, a Hebrew baby, and nearby a Hebrew young girl. God is present. And there is a thickness of meaning going on the Rio Grande, and that DPS trooper knows it. The Spirit of God hovers over the waters of these rivers and is at work. Biblically rivers are never just a river.

As the daughter of Pharaoh has compassion upon the baby Moses crying, Miriam, Moses' sister, steps forward and says, "Would you like a Hebrew nurse to care for this baby?" And Pharaoh's daughter says, "Yes, I would, and I'll pay her to take care of the baby." So, Miriam goes and gets Jochabed, Moses' mother to nurse him. The story concludes saying that as the baby was weaned and grew, Pharaoh's daughter took him as her son and named him Moses, which means "I drew him out of the water" (vv. 2:7-10).

It is interesting to me how much irony is in this story. In his fear Pharaoh goes out of his way to stop the threat to his empire: Hebrew men. Meanwhile God uses the women to outfox him and eventually free the slaves. To echo the Apostle Paul, God uses what the empire saw as weak, what Pharaoh saw as lowly and despised to shame the strong (I Cor. 1:26-29). God uses the faithfulness of the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, and Moses' mother Jochebed and sister Miriam, women without power as it is defined by the empire and Pharaoh, to overturn the empire. And God uses Pharaoh's own daughter, who is faithful without even knowing it.

A second observation: we had better be careful when we're around rivers and water. In this story, God's Spirit hovers over the waters of the Nile River and is at work changing the empire of Egyptian bigotry, supremacy, and privilege. Who knows what might be happening down on the Rio Grande.

The DPS officer said we are in danger of becoming inhumane. I believe that there is even a greater danger: that we are becoming inhuman. To be inhumane means to lose compassion. To be inhuman means we lose all human qualities. Part of what is going on in this story today is that the daughter of Pharaoh is discovering that she is not simply a child of Pharaoh, but more importantly, more essentially, she is a child of God, created to be fully human. Somehow or another she says, "No!" and so has the DPS trooper this week.

That DPS trooper has been once more to the river and I daresay, will never be the same again. His superiors ordered him to be less than human, but he declared that the people in the river are made in the image of God, too, and he refused to go along. My prayer is that his testimony will be a tipping point in changing policies both federal and state, and that it will help us all recover our basic humanity.

The French Catholic philosopher Rene Girard says sometimes it is "disruptive empathy" that keeps us human when everyone around us becomes inhumane and, even more – inhuman. Disruptive empathy describes what goes inside of person when we reconnect with someone suffering – empathy. But more, we take the next step and are compelled to say, "No!" and break with others around us and say, "This is not right!" and we refuse to cooperate with it; we resist! (see Victoria Barnett, *Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust*, p.150-157).

I have talked many times about the French village of Le Chambon and their pastor, Andre Trocme, who practiced disruptive empathy during WWII and rescued over 2,500 Jews from the Nazis. Interestingly, just down the valley, Albert Camus was writing his novel *The Plague* during this same time. There are many similarities between the Le Chambon and Camus' novel and between Pastor Andre Trocme and the character of Dr. Rieux in the novel. Author Philip Hallie writing about both Pastor Trocme and Dr. Rieux said, (Please forgive the antiquated masculine language.) "Both men knew that the plague of mankind is man's desire to kill, or, more usually, man's willingness to allow killing to happen without resisting it." (Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, p.249).

After WWII, young William Stringfellow, as a student, did volunteer relief work in France and Germany. He asked how some of the people with whom he worked how they remained human in the midst of the Nazis terror? They said they learned to resist day after day by small efforts. And those small daily efforts to resist "were the only way to stay human and not give into the certitude of death – of moral death, of the death of one's humanity, of death to sanity and conscience..." (Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*, p. 118-122).

Let us pray for the imagination and creativity of God's Spirit to help us find small daily efforts to remain human. I remember years ago, when Jane and I were in Louisville, KY, that across the river in Indiana (there's that river again!) Sen. Richard Lugar changed his vote and his perspective on nuclear weapons and the nuclear freeze because of the mail he was receiving. His staff began to log his mail and traced most of it back to a nursing home in Indianapolis where a group of elderly ladies gathered every day after lunch and wrote cards to Sen. Lugar. Every day making small efforts. Every day. It changed the senator, but writing those

cards also kept those ladies human. Postcards are never just postcards when God is involved.

Those of you going to the river next week, part of your mission is to help us all stay human. To learn more of what other churches are doing and what we can do back here and how we can better practice disruptive empathy.

Remember, the river called the Rio Grande, is never just a river. And there are times, like in this story, when God never says a word or is even mentioned, but God is at work making a way out of no way.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.