

Pharaoh's Child

Exodus 2:1-10

The Second Sunday after Epiphany/Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday

January 15, 2023

Kyle Childress

*White America's first racial victim is its own child.*

-Thandeka, *Learning to be White*

*To bathe in the Waters of Life, to wash off the Not Human.*

-William Blake, *Milton*

“Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph” (Ex. 1:8) is how the old King James puts it. That’s how our story begins. Before, the Pharaohs of Egypt had some sort of relationship with Joseph and the Hebrews, a relationship and story that said they had worked together. Egypt had given the Hebrews a safe place to live and grow and the Hebrews had given Egypt insight, wisdom, and administrative skills. It was not always smooth or always pretty, but it worked.

But in the first chapter of Exodus, it says “there arose a new pharaoh in Egypt, who knew not Joseph.” This ruler did not care about the old relationship with Joseph. For the new Pharaoh the Hebrews are an abstract people – he does not know them. He only has read about them. He sees them from a distance, on news videos, he looked at statistics about them, heard reports, looked at social media and as a result, Exodus says Pharaoh is filled with fear. 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 them in ghettos, monitor them, enslave them, make them wear a Star of David on their clothing, send them to work camps building our cities and building our economy. We must control them. Our Egyptian way of life is under attack! We must act!"

But it was not long before Pharaoh realized he had to get even tougher, more ruthless, so he ordered all Hebrew boy babies to be killed. Girl babies could live but the boys were 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. Surely there were some Egyptians who still remembered Joseph. Somewhere there had to be an Egyptian who said, "This is not right! 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.

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. You are commanded to throw the baby boys into the Nile. You will not be prosecuted; you will be rewarded. You will be performing a national service!" In other words, no one is a bystander. Everyone is complicit.

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.

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 Moses 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. They must be controlled with ruthless power, she was taught, and they were threats and enemies, therefore do not hesitate to destroy them if the need arises. This child 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. A racist child 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.

Let's pause a moment. Way over in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul says in Romans 12:2 “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is

good and acceptable and perfect.” This child of Pharaoh was having her mind transformed right here in the waters of the river. And the Spirit of God would continue to transform her in the years to come.

What prompted this change? Where did it come from? We don’t know. But 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. The Spirit of God hovers over the waters and is at work.

And there is more.

Many years ago, when I was young, slim, and single, I was in jail in Washington D.C. for committing non-violent civil disobedience by sitting in the driveway of the U.S. State Department, protesting the Reagan administration’s war in Nicaragua. After a couple of days in jail, the new had worn off. The excitement and the adrenaline were drained, and we were simply tired. Tempers were raw. There was one minister who was getting on everybody’s nerves. He was belligerent and argumentative with most everyone, an arrogant know-it-all, and after two days there was no more social cushion between him and us. I remember Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest and author, going over and sitting down beside this guy. Richard was calm and patient with him and I remember he said to the guy, “My brother, you are full of God, and you are full of [crap].” Although he used a more earthy word.

Over the years I’ve thought about Richard’s words to that belligerent brother, and I’ve read and reflected much since then. For our purposes this

morning, let's think about Rohr's words in the context of this child of Pharaoh. As we've mentioned, standing here in the waters of the river, something happens to her. Her mind is being transformed, her heart is being tenderized, she has compassion when all she has been taught her whole life and her entire cultural understanding has been that this child is a threat. In a sense, her eyes and heart are opened, and she sees this infant, as a child of God.

At the same time, this racist child of Pharaoh is also a child of God. She is full of crap, and she is full of God. God is at work outside of her hovering over the waters, but God is also at work inside of her tenderizing her heart, prompting compassion, opening blind eyes, transforming her mind.

Dan Snyder is a White pastoral therapist over in Black Mountain, NC, who is a practicing Quaker. In his book, *Praying in the Dark* he talks about White privilege and White Supremacy as soul wound or soul trauma. As the Black womanist theologian Thandeka says, "White America's first racial victim is its own child." Snyder says, therefore, part of what is needed is soul repair. Soul repair, he says, requires a sustained uncovering and an ability to wrestle and struggle with the healing which also includes pain. Snyder says in his own soul repair of his racism he has learned to say two important things: "Ouch," and "Thank you." "Ouch" because it hurts to learn that we are children of Pharaoh and must spend our entire lives working on it. And "thank you" because God is at work and we too, are children of God (see Snyder, pp. 124-132).

Back to our story. 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: to confirm Christina's sermon on water and baptism from last week, 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.

There is a line from the poet William Blake in his poem "Milton" I love which uses the imagery of baptism: "To bathe in the Waters of Life, to wash off the Not Human." God creates us as children of God, to be fully human, to be who God creates us to be and calls us to be. But we are enthralled by the Powers of Sin and Death while at the same time, Sin and Death are inside of us, making us "not human," less than, other than, who God created us to be. Part of what is going on in this story today is that the daughter of Pharaoh is wading in the water and washing off the "Not Human." She 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.

About a week after the end of the school year of my junior year in high school, four of us boys went camping down on my favorite place in the world, the Clear Fork of the Brazos River. Jerry, Pat, Stephen Paul, and I got permission to go to the river and camp, fish, and swim for two or three days before starting summer jobs. Jerry and Pat were White, and Stephen Paul was Black. Stephen Paul was probably my best friend, partly because he was a wide receiver on our football team, and I was the quarterback. We spent untold hours together on the practice field throwing and catching the football, running routes, and learning to read each other's minds. We had been in each other's home numerous times.

But that first night on the river, there were three men up on the bluff above staying in an old cabin we planned on using after their departure. That first night, while we were sitting around the campfire, those three men came down to our camp riding in a couple of golf carts. We knew them enough to know their names and one man in particular we knew because he was Stephen Paul's father's boss. I knew him to be a smart-aleck jerk and that night he was drunk. He had a dead snake in his hand and decided it would be fun to poke Stephen Paul with it. He didn't poke the rest of us, just Stephen Paul. No doubt he was hoping to provoke Stephen Paul to act out racist stereotyping of being afraid of the snake and getting up and running off. Stephen Paul didn't flinch but kept asking the man to not do that. Stephen Paul knew what was going on, but he couldn't say anything for fear of retribution toward his father. We White boys sensed some of what was going on, but we were conflicted. On one hand our friend was being provoked and shamed and we were increasingly angry while on the other hand, we had been taught to respect our elders. We didn't know what to do or say. I took my shotgun



and laid it across my knees, clicking the safety off and on, hoping that the men would get some message of our anger, but they were too drunk to care or notice. Finally, not getting any of the response they wanted, they left us alone.

We spent much of the rest of the night talking about it and again, Stephen Paul didn't say much. We White kids, children of Pharaoh, were not sure what had happened, but he knew exactly what had happened.

Over the years, I've reflected on that night many times. That was not my only learning experience about racism, but it was an important one. Looking back, I've learned to say both "Ouch" and "Thank you" about that night, as God continues to change me. I've long known that that man with the snake that night, was full of crap. I'm still working on coming to terms that he was full of God, too.

I was seventeen but God was already at work, helping me to see Stephen Paul, though we were already friends, were more connected than we realized. We were children of God, brothers in Christ. Over the next three days we bathed and swam and fished in that river, washing off the Not human. Me, beginning to wash off the Whiteness of thinking I was more than human and Stephen Paul washing off thinking he was less than human.

We never know when the gospel will break the power of generational and systemic racism and free another child of Pharaoh. Sin and Death, racism and bigotry do not have the last word. And at times, even like in this story, when God never says a word or is even mentioned, 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.