August 23, 2020 Sermon – Bishop Lynne McNaughton

(Preached in Fernie, B.C.)

A READING FROM THE BOOK OF EXODUS 1:8-2:10  
Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them. The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live." Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

Titles I played with for this sermon: Naming the unnamed! The unnamed power. Five magnificent women. The famous five in Hebrew scripture.

This past week at camp OAC (Okanagan Anglican Camp), I was chaplain for one of the teen day camps, and we took as our theme “What does God require of us: justice/fairness, kindness/compassion and humility.” For the Fairness/social justice section; I used this 5000 year old story from Exodus. I asked them, as they listened to the story, to look for the 5 people who fought injustice, examples for us in our call to resist injustice in our own time.

The story starts off by saying there arose a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph – a simple way of saying the new king forgot there was a relationship of respect and honour between the Hebrew people and the Egyptian people. And from this forgetting about relationship comes fear; unfounded fear that the Hebrews would turn against them; how often fear drives oppression!

Pharaoh enslaves the Hebrews, demands hard labour, which of course increases the fear as the slaves become angry and bitter. So Pharaoh ups the oppression, demanding that all baby boys be killed. Sexism of that time …girls didn’t count enough to kill them. When I asked the kids to name the kinds of oppression in the story, they were quick to answer: Racism, classism, sexism.

Who were the five who defied evil?

The first two who resist Pharaoh’s policy of genocide are two midwives. Astounding for the Biblican narrative, these women are actually named: Puah and Shiprah. Women in that culture were only named in relationship to men; so and so’s wife, daughter, or sister. (I named my two daughters Biblical names, Elizabeth and Anne (Hebrew Hannah); they are grateful I did not go with my desire to call them Puah and Shiprah☺, although they are still doers of justice)

Pharaoh demands that when Puah and Shiprah, the midwives, tend the birth of Hebrew babies, they kill the boys. This era was, of course, before the Hippocratic oath, but killing babies was still absolutely against who they were as midwives, their ministry of assisting birth, giving life! The Biblical text says the midwives “feared God” – to fear God is not fear as in “terror” but reverence, awe, respect – “feared God” means they were loyal to God’s ways, God’s wishes.

Because they respect God’s ways of justice and compassion, they disobey Pharaoh. What’s more, when Pharaoh calls them in to ask why the baby boys are still thriving, they lie to him. It is an almost comical scene – they tell him Hebrew women are so strong they give birth too fast; the midwives can’t get there in time to kill the babies. Pharaoh doesn’t even know enough about birthing to figure out they’re lying!

So once again, in fear, Pharaoh “ups the ante”. Interesting contrast here that speaks to our own lives – Whom do we fear? Fear of God – reverence for life-giving ways of God? Or fear of economic insecurity, fear of people who are different than we are? What fear rules us?

Pharaoh, fearing for his economic and military security, tells everyone to throw all Hebrew male babies into the Nile. The Nile River, the life-giving waters of Egypt, becomes a weapon of genocide.

It is a brilliant insightful story of how economic oppression, systemic racism, itself increases fear and brings about the very thing feared; unfairness leads to insecurity; it all become a vicious cycle.

Next scene: a Hebrew couple conceive a child and the woman gives birth to a beautiful, strong baby boy. We do not know her name; she is simply the Mother. She hides the baby, and when he is too big to hide, she makes a basket, water-proofs it with pitch, puts the baby in, and hides the basket in the reeds on the edge of the Nile: lovely irony of obeying Pharaoh’ order to put the baby boy into the Nile…but floating in a safe basket. The Mother enlists the help of the baby’s older Sister (unnamed for now, but probably the Miriam who would later lead her people dancing when they escape Egypt; the name Miriam means Rebel!). The Sister stands guard to watch the baby. Mother and Sister, two more women who disobey the evil policies of Pharaoh, two more life-givers who disrupt the death-dealing of the Empire.

As the Sister watches, Pharaoh’s Daughter arrives to bathe. Another Unnamed woman. Pharaoh’s Daughter sees the basket, peeks in and sees the baby. Of course, she knows it is a Hebrew baby, alive in spite of her father’s decree. The baby is crying, and, the text says, she had compassion. Compassion for suffering.

(Compassion is a quality of God; common scriptural refrain: The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. The Hebrew word here is related to the word for womb; a good translation would be “womb-love”, God’s “womb-love”). Pharaoh’s daughter is moved with compassion.

Just then the Sister, the little girl, speaks up. Courageously approaching the Princess, she offers to get someone to nurse the baby. And then, of course, she fetches the Mother. In another delightful moment of irony, Pharaoh’s daughter offers to pay the Mother to nurse the baby for her can you imagine acting out this scene? Wink, wink, nudge, nudge, between the women. …Pharaoh’s daughter must have known it was the baby’s real mother, but offers to pay the Mothe to feed her own baby, so that Pharaoh’s Daughter can adopt the baby. (maybe only time in history a Mother is paid to feed her own baby?)

When I was in India in January, I was privileged to be an ecumenical guest at the Synod of the Church of South India, and heard a brilliant homily about the Daughter of Pharaoh by an Indian Hebrew Bible Scholar, Dr. Peniel, on staff of World Council of Churches. He told us that Jewish midrash, the ancient Bible commentators on Hebrew Scripture, called Pharaoh’s daughter ‘Bitya’. The Exodus text doesn’t name her, but Jewish tradition says that because she *named* Moses, God *named* her, God named her “Bitya”, which means “daughter of God”. She was honoured by God and by Hebrew people for her act of courage. She did not just have a moment of compassion when she saw the baby crying, she had a sustained, long-term, strategic commitment to justice. She refused to be dehumanized by being part of the oppressor. She adopts Moses to save his life, names him and brings him up in her privileged household, brings him up to be in solidarity with his own people. He will become the leader whom God sends to set God’s people free.

Dr. Peniel called the Daughter of Pharaoh a role model for us who are wealthy and privileged and find ourselves unwittingly and unwillingly part of the world’s system of oppression. (remember he is speaking to Indian Church people, poor by our standards, but middle-class and wealthy by Indian standards). Pharaoh’s daughter was privileged and wealthy because of the slave labour of the Hebrew people, just as we ourselves have so many consumer goods at the expense of cheap labour and exploitation of Earth. She is a role model for us, moved by compassion to do what she can to undermine the oppression. Sustained compassion and generosity.

Magnificent women: 5 women who disobey Pharaoh, who put God’s life-giving priorities over the demands of Pharaoh.

When I asked the teens this week where they could see current examples of these five acts of civil disobedience, five acts of justice, they suggested protesting against systemic racism, stopping someone when they were telling a sexist joke, calling out a homophobic person who was bullying someone, writing a letter to remind governments of care for the environment.

The marvelous story of Exodus, which we will be following for the next few weeks, the story of God’s work to free the Hebrew people from slavery, begins with the work of some nameless nobodies, people who had little social power, who could fly under the radar of the powerful Pharoaoh, but together they conspire to overturn evil. They co-operate with God in freeing people from oppression.

In the face of the evils of todays’ world we often feel small powerless.

But at our Baptism we were given our name, “beloved child of God”.

Our baptismal names put us in line with Puah, Shiprah, the Sister, the Mother, and the Daughter of Pharaoh who became instead named the Bitya, Daughter of God.

Pharaoh, throughout all of Exodus, remains unnamed, simply Pharaoh, the Ruler of the Empire, symbol of all systemic oppression. God still works, through us, to free us from all systems of oppression, all Pharaohs.

At our Baptism, we vow to renounce the evil powers of this world which destroy the creatures of God, to persevere in resisting evil, to respect the dignity of every human being,

to seek and serve God in all persons, to strive for justice and peace among all people.

This Exodus story reminds us we do not do this alone, we do it in a community of others who likewise are named by God. As one small voice I am fragile, but we gather with many to resist evil, in the strength and cooperation of fellow conspirators. We can draw out the compassion in each other; we can encourage, bolster and reinforce the courage in each other, we can strengthen and amplify the voices for change.

When you tell yourself “I am just one person”, remember Miriam as a little girl. When you need courage to stand up to forces of wickedness, remember Puah and Shiprah.

In midst of the pandemic, we are called to be creative in our ways of resisting evil – evils of systemic racism, environmental degradation, overconsumption.

Lockdown is the perfect time to write handwritten letters to politicians and business leaders to call them to God’s social priorities.

We are Named and Called as Children of God; we belong to God. May we find courage in that identity, belonging to God, may we find sustained ways to revere and commit to God’s way of justice and compassion.

Amen.

Credit for the insights on Pharoah’s daughter: The Rev. Dr. Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkaumar, Programme Executive and Coordinator of Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation, World Council of Churches, preaching at the General Synod of the Church of South India, January 13, 2020, Tiruchirappalli. (I was an ecumenical guest at this Synod)