

Exodus 1: 8-10, 2:1-10 "Got It From Mom" Rev. Janet Chapman 5/9/21

Paul Holmer was a distinguished member of Yale University faculty as well as Divinity School, where ministers get trained. He had all the credentials of an esteemed scholar – a doctor of philosophy from a leading university; honorary degrees from outstanding US institutions and abroad; visiting lectureships around the world; author of several important books and contributions to a number of scholarly journals. In a word, Holmer was a scholar's scholar. One day a graduate student asked Holmer why he believed in God? It was an intellectual challenge and the student expected an intellectual answer. But Holmer answered, "Because my mother told me." Because my mother told me... Recognizing that faith is something better caught than taught, Holmer was not discounting the importance of Christian education, but was rather uplifting that there are certain elements of life and faith that are best communicated through experience and influence. He caught it. His mother told him about God as did pastors, Sunday School teachers, and a host of others, but essentially he was saying, "I caught it. I caught faith from my mom."

This may help us in understanding the birth story of Moses – an amazingly perfect story! Scholar Anna Carter Florence summarizes our story as the Bible meets "Frozen," you know that Oscar winning Disney classic, now Broadway musical, which parents endure played over and over until they want to pull their hair out. It is the story of sisterhood in action. In a nutshell, Pharaoh creates chaos, midwives grow sneaky, mother makes ark, princess finds baby, sister brokers deal, baby is saved, and Pharaoh is foiled. A perfect story with surprising, heroic female figures in leading roles. To expound a bit, we are about 400 years after Joseph in the land of Egypt and by this time the current Pharaoh, probably Ramses II, has grown suspicious of the

Hebrews. No longer does he seem them as heirs of the mighty Joseph, whose shrewd policies saved Egypt in the midst of the country's terrible famine. He says to the Egyptians, "Look, the people of Israel are both more numerous and more powerful than we are, so we must cut them down to size." He tries making the slaves work harder so they will stop procreating but that doesn't work so then he calls in two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, and tells them to kill all the Hebrew boy babies when they are born but to let the girls live. It's a stupid idea as who is going to be his construction slaves to build all the monuments he wants if there are no more boys? Besides, if it is population control he wants, shouldn't he be getting rid of girl babies who grow up to birth more babies? Thankfully, the two midwives, who have caught faith in the Israelite God outmaneuver Pharaoh by telling him the Hebrew women simply have their babies too fast so they can't make it in time. They say, "Clearly, Egyptian women are not like Hebrew women; the Hebrew women are filled with life and give birth before we can get there!" Pharaoh buys the story hook, line, and sinker because he is several bricks short of a load. You know the type, his elevator doesn't go to the top floor, he isn't the sharpest knife in the drawer; in short, he is a tyrant of very little brain.

Not taking any chances, the mother of Moses did what she could to protect her newborn baby boy. She hid him for awhile, but babies grow and when she could not hide him anymore, this daughter of Levi does a priestly act, having caught the faith passed on to her. She took papyrus and wove it with the ancient equivalent of Kevlar creating a little ark, a protective basket that floats, to send baby Moses down the Nile. It is heartbreakingly limited because her son has one day, maybe two, before he will die of exposure. Yet it is a brilliant and symbolic act designed to save his life as well as to bear witness to what she has been forced to do. Anyone

who finds him will get the mother's message loud and clear: "This is what we've come to, in Egypt. Take a look: Kevlar arks that serve as cradles; it is all I could do for my child. All I could give him was maybe two more days on this earth." With that, the mother leaves the scene knowing her presence will only add to the danger for her son. At this moment, the sister takes over. That is what big sisters do: they watch, they report back. It may not be what they choose to do, but it's their job as part of the family. The sister too has caught the faith from her mom, having experienced a God who stands for liberation and justice. Stand at a distance and see what happens to your baby brother. Do what you can, hidden deep in the marshy reeds of the Nile.

Enter Pharaoh's daughter, a princess, who has a different agenda, as scholar Florence describes. The royal daughter has come to the river to take a bath, to get away from it all: the court, the pressure, the pedestal. Being the center of attention was her job, as part of the family. Her father was always saying she had to look and act the part of a princess. But there was more to her than looks, if only people could see the real person inside. She has come to the place where the reeds grow tall so she can bathe privately with her own thoughts. In this slippery, in-between sort of place where it can sometimes be hard to find your footing, an unusual event happens. You heard sister Abby say what it was. The princess found a baby in a miniature ark. There in that murky water, she thought to herself, "This must be one of the Hebrew people's children, because no other mothers are reduced to this - making little arks to float in the Nile; trying to save their babies from a flood of hate, trying to give them a better future than torture and death." As Pharaoh's daughter, she knew what was supposed to happen to Hebrew male children - she should tip over the basket and let the baby tumble into

the water. At the very least, she should close the lid, give the ark a little push, and let someone else deal with the child. That is what the law required, like it or not, and she was supposed to uphold it. But somewhere, maybe it was from her mother, she had caught signs of a different truth, she dared to reimagine another path. Seeing her opportunity, the sister watching in the watery reeds steps out of hiding, “Do you want me to find a nurse among the Hebrew women?” she asks. In other words, do you want me to find someone to nurse that child... for you so you can keep him? And just like that, the two become like sisters with a plan, a plan which remixes expectations as it defies Pharaoh’s decree and saves a life. It is a plan that will allow Moses’ mom to be his nurse-maid as he is adopted into a house of royalty. At this point, I can’t help but think Pharaoh’s got a horrible record with women – first, he is bamboozled by two midwives, then defied by his own daughter, then outwitted by Moses’ sister, and ultimately made to pay Moses’ mother to care for her own birth child. In the end, Pharaoh ends up protecting, raising, and educating the very Hebrew boy-child who is going to make him sorry that he ever heard of the Hebrews – and without a clue that he is doing it. If there ever was a story that celebrates sisterhood, motherhood, in the Bible, this has got to be it!

Now you may notice that there hasn’t been a lot said about God as a central character in this drama. That is because what plays out here is more about some very gutsy women deciding to act out of pure respect for human life and decency. Such respect is surely born out of a loving Creator and nurtured to maturity through caregivers, ordinary people found in one’s life. The story tells us that God’s liberation of a people can start with two common but creative midwives. It can be experienced by the influence of a mother who dares to say to violence and oppression, “This unthinkable action is what I am reduced to in order to find a life where my

child can have a chance to grow up.” God’s liberation of a people can be realized through sisters, bonded not by blood, but by purpose, and that is a glorious and amazing truth! It is a truth which is caught better than taught. So on this day of honoring mothers, I invite you to praise God for any individual who has dared to reimagine love and graciousness triumphing over hate and jealousy. Whenever the sisters, and brothers, of God claim the freedom to remix this world – well, then, Moses can grow up and we can have the next chapter of a perfect story. Maybe you’ll help write it - thanks be to God.