

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Psalm 124

Romans 12:1-8

Matthew 16:13-20

Where is God when evil rears its ugly head? All of us tend to ask that question from time to time. When the deck seems stacked against us or we feel we have no power over authority that intends harm, it's hard to remember or to see that God is working in the world. We feel powerless and often we don't see God's actions until we look in the rearview mirror. But one thing that we can be sure of: God partners with ordinary people, people just like us, to exercise His will in the world.

This morning we heard the remarkable story of baby Moses and the circumstances of the beginning of his life. Featured in this story are five women. Only one of them has any power in the world, but all five of them are subversive in one way or another. This story is the first recorded story in the Bible of deliberate resistance to civil authority. These women have little or no power in the world, but their choices of how to respond have critical influence over the outcome for Moses. They find themselves in circumstances over which they have no control, but they *do* have control over their response. And they use that control to effect God's will in the world.

As we learn in our Old Testament scripture passage this morning, a new ruler has come to power in Egypt ... one who doesn't remember the Hebrew, Joseph, who saved Egypt during the famine. This ruler doesn't know history. He doesn't know that the Hebrews were welcomed into Egypt because they were Joseph's family ... and Joseph was a hero.

All this ruler can see is that Joseph's family ... the descendants of Abraham ... have actually become as numerous as the stars ... as God had promised. Over the generations they have multiplied, but they have also become enslaved to the Egyptians. Fear strikes this new Pharaoh as he imagines that these enslaved immigrants are outnumbering the Egyptians. Being outnumbered scares the Pharaoh. If Egypt is attacked, Pharaoh fears the Hebrew immigrants might join the enemy and fight against Egypt and then escape. The fearful Pharaoh plans his pre-emptive strike. Evil actions are often born in fearful hearts. He believes that if he works the Hebrews hard enough ... if he oppresses them enough ... if he makes life as miserable for them as possible ... they won't be inclined to continue to have children and their numbers will decrease. But that's not what happens. The Hebrews actually begin to have *more* children as the labor gets harder. The Lord moves in mysterious ways!

Frustrated, the Pharaoh takes another tack. He tells the midwives to kill any Hebrew baby boys when they are born. The midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, disobey the Pharaoh. They let the baby boys they deliver live and then lie to Pharaoh about it. They play right into his prejudice and stereotypes about the Hebrew women by telling him that the Hebrew women are so sturdy they deliver their babies without a midwife unlike the delicate Egyptian women! The midwives' mission is to bring life safely into the world, not to destroy it. Shiphrah and Puah are more afraid of God than they are of Pharaoh. They are ordinary women doing what they feel called to do. And they obey God rather than obey Pharaoh. That's resistance to evil ... the refusal to follow the dictates of secular authority requiring us to renounce our commitment to the commands of God ... to love God and to love our neighbor.

So Pharaoh tries again. He tells everyone in Egypt to throw Hebrew baby boys into the Nile. The River Nile, a symbol to the Egyptians of all that is life-giving, becomes a symbol of death for the Hebrews.

But there is one Hebrew woman, Jocheved, who gives birth to a baby boy and decides to hide him for three months. She is an ordinary woman ... faithful to God ... and just as desperate as any other mother to protect her child. When she realizes the baby is getting too big to hide, she makes a waterproof basket for him and carefully places it in the reeds of the Nile, upstream of Pharaoh's palace. She puts him in the river, but not exactly as Pharaoh has instructed.

Jocheved sends her daughter, Miriam, just a young girl, to keep track of the basket and to be sure that it doesn't capsize. Miriam walks along the bank of the river keeping a close eye on her baby brother. When Pharaoh's daughter finds the basket, her heart is touched. She knows this is a Hebrew baby boy and she knows her father's command. But Pharaoh's daughter defies him! God shows us that He can move the hearts of those who seem to be un-believers. Miriam is right there on the banks of the river to offer to find a nurse for the baby. Pharaoh's daughter agrees and offers to pay the nurse as well. The fact that Jocheved could get paid for taking care of her own infant is icing on the cake. When the baby no longer needs a nurse, Pharaoh's daughter raises him as her own son and names him Moses.

In the rearview mirror, it seems to us that all these events were coordinated. There are too many coincidences here for all these events to be random. What are the odds that all five of these women would make decisions that put their own lives in jeopardy for the sake of the same Hebrew baby boy? They don't confer with one another. They don't make a plan together. There's no conspiracy here. Each one simply follows the dictates of her own heart and soul. Perhaps resistance to civil authority by these five women is part of God's special plan for this particular Hebrew baby boy.

God gave the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, the will to blatantly disobey the Pharaoh and then lie about it. And God gave Jocheved a courageous heart to save her son. And God gave Miriam the right words to speak at just the right moment. And God melted the heart of Pharaoh's daughter. We can see God's influence and power in each one of these women ... and their willingness to allow God to move them even at great risk to themselves.

But how do we know when we should step up and perform some act of resistance? How can we tell when it is right to disobey an authority? Our first clue is to simply look at our baptismal vows. It's very clear what we are called to do ... to resist evil ... and to respect the dignity of every human being. Pretty clear and pretty simple, but not always easy to figure out how to do. Resisting evil doesn't mean getting rid of evil. That's not our job. Resisting evil means we figure out how to stand our ground against it ... how to refuse to go along with it. The litmus test for us is whether or not we are being required to renounce our baptismal vows.

In his letter to the Roman churches that we heard this morning, St. Paul asks these Christians ... and us ... to present their bodies as a living sacrifice ... not just in giving up their own desires about their lives, but to do with their lives what God has asked them to do and sometimes to put their lives at risk. He begs all of us *not* to be conformed to the world, but to be transformed by renewing our minds so that we can discern the will of God. He reminds us that we are part of the body of Christ ... each with a different function within the body. Our gifts are different. Our calls are different. Together ... all of us using our gifts ... function as the body of Christ in the world. Together ... we support one another ... we minister to one another ... we energize and empower one another and we discern God's will together.

Discerning God's will in resisting evil will be different for each of us ... just as God touched the hearts of each of the women in the story of Moses in a different way. They were each moved by God to do different things. They had no power in the world but they had the power of God and were open to the stirrings of God within. That same power and those same stirrings are available to us. We each have the same goal in mind ... to love God and to love our neighbor ... to resist evil when we encounter it ... and to respect the dignity of every human being.

God gives us gifts. God gives us each other as members of the body of Christ. God moves our hearts to use our gifts in service to His will. God gives us faith and God gives us courage.

Listen to the stirrings of your own heart.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.