

Defeating Empires

August 27, 2023

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When our daughter was born, so many wonderful people gifted us with so many things. It's fun right now, because she's on a kick of asking where things are from, and I get to tell her about all of the kind and generous people who gave her this or that. I do this even though her follow-up question is inevitably, "Was it for my birthday when I was a baby?"

A friend who knew I love "Star Wars" gave her a T-shirt. The shirt has a silhouette of Princess Leia and says, "Well behaved women seldom defeat empires." When another friend, who has kids several years older than our daughter, saw the shirt he said, "You'd better hope she outgrows it before she learns to read." Of course, he was joking about parenting struggles and wanting our kids to be well behaved. I've joked with many of you already that one of the frustrations with wanting to raise a strong woman is that she's already a strong woman.

I think of this shirt and this dynamic of raising strong women when I read our passage from Exodus today. However, I recently read an article by Korean-American theologian Erna Kim Hackett critiquing what she called the Disney Princess Theology. In a nutshell, Hackett points out that far too often in American Christianity, when reading a scripture text, we identify with the heroes, we see ourselves:

“. . . as the princess in every story. We are Esther, never Xerxes or Haman. We are Peter, but never Judas. We are the woman anointing Jesus, never the Pharisees. We are the Jews escaping slavery, never Pharaoh.”

And so, while it would be tempting to laser-in on Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives who subvert Pharaoh, today I'm going to lean heavily on Meg Jenista who is doing public theology at Fuller University, and invite us to see how identifying with several of the characters in the story can be spiritually instructive.

The Scriptures

Pharaoh

Today's passage starts, "Now a new king rose over Egypt who didn't know Pharaoh." Immediately this should set off red warning lights in your head. This is not going to be good. He says:

“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.”

(Exodus 1:9-10).

Karla Suomala points out:

“What's interesting about the king's assessment of the Israelites in verse 9 is it's simply not true — the Israelites have not grown more populous than the

Egyptians. These verses are a clear strategy to create an ‘enemy within’ and to stir up fear of the foreign or immigrant other.”

Whereas the previous king had seen things in a Godly way and had dealt with the Jewish people favorably, the new king sees them either as a threat or a political pawn.

And so, one question this passage begs is of those in power. None of us are kings, but some do have influence in government, in education, in business. One challenge this passage makes is for us to wield the power we have, whether in the boardroom or the ballot box, whether grading student papers or writing performance reviews, whether making budget cuts or paying wages, is to see those actions through the eyes of faith. To look upon everyone upon whom we have influence as a beloved child of God, whose dignity is my responsibility to uphold.

Jenista writes:

“As we continue in this story, take a minute to sit in Pharaoh’s seat of power and privilege (which perhaps has more similarities to your own than you would first assume) and talk to God about the tension and disparity between the way you see things and God’s unfolding plan for the world. Will you let your will be bent to God’s plan or will your heart be hardened?”

Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives.

“These women have absolutely no positional power but they are bound and determined to obey God and preserve human life and flourishing.”

(Jenista)

Much is made of the fact that, when summoned to the palace (which is a terrifying command), these two play the only card they have; they use men’s age-old fear of women’s reproductivity to serve not only their purposes, but God’s. They tell Pharaoh that the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, they’re so vigorous that they give birth before the midwife even arrives, and that’s how these baby boys keep surviving childbirth.

If there were any women in the room, they would have laughed out loud. If we’re looking for the challenge that these characters offer us, Shiphrah and Puah challenge us to integrity and creativity, especially when immense risk is involved. These two women risked everything, lied to the powers that be, and in turn averted genocide. The key here is that their lie isn’t for the purpose of saving themselves, but rather, it is for the purpose of Godly integrity.

Moses’ mother and his sister Miriam.

Just a couple of textual notes here. Most often the NRSV translation of the Bible is the gold standard, but there are places where it misses the mark, and there are two such in this passage.

First, when Moses’ mother gives birth, the NRSV says, “She saw that he was a fine baby,” which is an okay translation. It misses the mark, however, because the Hebrew words actually say, “She saw that he was good,” and in doing so, she echoes the voice of God in the first creation story, wherein after each day, “God looked on creation and saw that it was good.”

The other missed opportunity in the NRSV is in how it translates the vessel Moses' mother puts him in to float down the Nile. The word translated as "basket" is the same word as "ark" in the Noah story. Thus, listeners in the original language would have heard that the baby had been put in an ark and all of the fear and destruction of Noah's story, and also God's promise, would have come right to mind. If our challenge is to see this passage from a perspective that doesn't put ourselves in the hero's seat, Moses' family invites us to remember that this is a story about a broken family and an adoption plan.

Here, Jestina suggests we:

"Sit and rock a moment with Moses's birth family. Because their story creates a container that holds so many stories of broken families. Some are collapsed from the inside by abuse and contempt, by unfaithfulness, infertility, death, by ordinary disappointment and extra-ordinary challenges. And those families broken by external pressures: children taken from their parents, vulnerable in refugee camps around the world, separated by systems of mass incarceration, by human trafficking, by broken people and broken systems."

And so, yet another challenge this passage offers is for us to do right by the broken families in our midst.

Pharaoh's daughter.

If there is a Disney princess in this story, she's it. And, along with the midwives, she's the hero as the story is presented here. As Pharaoh's daughter, she's got a tremendous amount of power and privilege. The text doesn't tell us why she decided to keep the baby – Did she have some unfulfilled maternal longing? Had she been seething about her dad's horrifying politics? Was it as simple as the basic human instinct to help someone, particularly an innocent, when we find them? – the text doesn't say. But here's the interesting part: she could have taken the baby back to the palace immediately. Surely there were nursemaids available among the palace staff. She could have whisked the baby away, but instead navigates the tricky waters of having him go back to his people until he is weaned.

In this, she sets up the dynamic that he will have two allegiances. He will always have the tension of two belongings.

"Pharaoh's daughter shows us it is possible to be a part of a dominant and dominating culture without giving up and in to the structures around you. Although she stands to gain from the system as it is, she chooses to align herself with those who have no power. She seems to stand in solidarity with the oppressed."

(Jenista)

Conclusion

It's true that well behaved women seldom defeat empires. All too often, as churchgoers, we imagine ourselves as the good kids, the rule followers, the folks who don't break the law and pay our taxes.

But, as we seek to find how God is still speaking to us today through our scriptures, a helpful corrective is to position ourselves in various places in the text, not just as the hero, not just as the good person doing their job, not as the main character or Disney princess. By engaging the story from a multiplicity of positions, we are able to see how God can use these stories, not to uphold the patterns and systems that are, but rather to commission us into the divine work of liberation.

Several years ago, at the WI Conference UCC Annual Meeting, there was a motion on the floor to be an immigrant welcoming Conference. There was a small but vocal minority. At one point, someone proposed an amendment. I'm not going to remember the exact language, but in essence, the amendment said that we would welcome immigrants inasmuch as the law would allow.

As debate raged on, I brought up this passage and the fact that many of the most powerful stories of our faith hinge on people following God's ways over and against current law or religious practice. In the end, the vote wasn't close, and I'm proud to say that the WI Conference UCC is an immigrant welcoming Conference.

As I laughed with you when I began, my friend thought he was being funny, hoping that my daughter will outgrow her "Well behaved women seldom defeat empires" T-shirt before she learns to read. But the truth is that it's going to be hard to be a well behaved woman if your mommy preaches the Gospel.

No matter that outcome, my prayer this week is that you'll find some inspiration in our scripture story. Maybe you're in a position of power and this story will motivate you not to behave with a hardened heart, like Pharaoh. Maybe you're like the midwives, in an impossible situation, and you'll find the creativity and chutzpah to find a new and better way. Maybe you're like Pharaoh's daughter, able to navigate systems to make real change.

Whatever your place, may we take a phrase from our passage from the Letter to the Romans and not be conformed to this world but be transformed by God's grace.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Exodus 1:8-2:10
August 27, 2023