

Sermon – Ordinary Heroines
Sunday, August 27, 2017
Scripture Readings: Exodus 1:8-2:10, Romans 12:1-9
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Our first scripture reading is Exodus 1:8-2:10. The Book of Exodus begins by setting the stage for Moses whose birth is dated in the 12th century BCE. Genesis closes with the story of Joseph whose powerful leadership role meant the Hebrew people were treated well for a time in Egypt. Time has passed and we learn the new Pharaoh “does not know Joseph.” This is a story rich in irony, filled with puns and sets the stage for biblical writers to explore different kinds of power. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

8 Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. 9 He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. 10 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." 11 Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. 12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. 13 The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, 14 and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them. 15 The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 16 "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birth stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." 17 But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. 18 So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" 19 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." 20 So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. 21 And because the midwives feared God, God gave them families. 22 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."

1 Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. 2 The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. 3 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. 4 His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. 5 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. 6 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. 7 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?" 8 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. 9 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him. 10 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." Amen.

Our second scripture reading is from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 12: 1-8. Paul has brought the theological argument of his letter to an end and now turns to the practical. Paul is neither teaching a lesson nor giving a pep talk in chapter 12 – rather Paul is persuading with all the strength of his being. Hear now God's Holy Word.

1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. 3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6 We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7 ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8 the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “Ordinary Heroines”

The text: “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly that you ought to think...” Romans 12:3a

Let us pray: Gracious God, thank you for the power that is present in each of our lives. As we reflect together on Scripture, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Monday's solar eclipse was possibly the most watched eclipse in history. Some estimate as many as 20 million Americans witnessed it. How refreshing to be a part of a shared experience that puts into perspective our minuteness in a world too vast to comprehend, and as people of faith, to be given the opportunity to be in awe, to give thanks, and to sing a new song to our Creator God, the One who has done marvelous things. For many, especially young children, this was a deeply spiritual experience as they were given a glimpse into the wonder, the mystery, and the beauty of what is beyond us.

As Peter was sharing the eclipse calculations, finely tuned to the second, so that we could determine the destination in our hunt for the closest and longest period of total darkness, I was reminded once again of the mathematics and physics behind these calculations and the miracle of the mind that can compute them.

Babylonian records of ancient eclipses date back to 518 and 465 BCE and reveal the careful notations of Babylonian astronomers who eventually were able to predict eclipses with a fair accuracy. It was English astronomer Edmund Halley who was the first to predict the solar eclipse within an accuracy of 4 minutes over London on May 3, 1715.

We sometimes forget that prior to the age of computers, these calculations were made by human minds and accuracy was essential. In the recent film, *Hidden Figures*, America was introduced to the ordinary heroines behind the NASA program. The title “hidden figures” refers to both the hidden mathematical numbers and the segregated “hidden” team of African-American women who did the calculations in their work as “computers.”

One of the African-American women featured, Katherine Coleman Goble Johnson, physicist and mathematician celebrated her 99th birthday yesterday, August 26 and is a fellow Presbyterian. She sang in the choir of the Carver Presbyterian Church in Hampton, Virginia for over 50 years. Pioneer astronaut and Senator John Glenn specifically requested Katherine Johnson verify the IMB calculations before his historic launch as the first American to orbit the earth in 1962.

In Dr. Katherine Johnson's inspiring "hidden" story we see parallels with the ordinary heroines found in the Moses narrative. In this biblical story, filled with irony, we see God's power at work in the world and we are reminded that things are not always as they appear. Pharaoh, perhaps the most powerful man in the world at the time is paralyzed in his effort to control. In fact, his efforts lead precisely to the opposite of his intentions. The more he oppresses the Hebrew people, the stronger they become.

The irony continues with the two midwives. The storyteller, by naming these two seemingly powerless women in their dialogue with the "King of Egypt," and by not referring to the king by name, hints at who holds the real power in this story.

By disobeying the King's orders, these women risk their lives. However, rather than seeing themselves as powerless puppets of Pharaoh, their inner strength and reverence for God empowered them to act courageously.

Terence Fretheim writes in the *Interpreters' Commentary*: *In the refusal of these women to cooperate with oppression, the liberation of Israel from Egyptian bondage has its beginnings. It can rightfully be said that women are here given such a crucial role that Israel's future is dependent upon their wisdom, courage and vision.*

Pharaoh in his final attempt to control a situation well out of hand orders the Egyptian people "Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live."

When he did this, how could he know what a powerful role these daughters would play in preserving life? And so the daughter of the house of Levi cast her son into the Nile River...well in a sense. She strategically placed him floating in a basket near the place where Pharaoh's daughter bathed. How could Pharaoh know that even his own daughter would play a role in saving the Hebrew people? Or that the future savior of Israel would be raised in his own home, that Pharaoh would give the education and cultural advantages that would assist Moses in delivering God's people from bondage. Moses will do for all of Israel in the crossing of the Red Sea what Pharaoh's daughter did for him...draw them out of the water.

So the irony in this story reveals a divine irony that we see again and again in Scripture and in our life together. Namely, that God uses the weak to shame the strong...the seemingly powerless to overcome the seemingly powerful. Yahweh chooses unlikely candidates and unconventional means to demonstrate God's power...a power that doesn't seek to control worlds or destinies. God moves in this story even as God moves today in hidden, unlikely, and vulnerable ways, through ordinary heroes and heroines.

Terence Fretheim concludes: *...it may be said that the ironic mode fosters a sense of hope amid any situation in which God seems to be absent. What appears to be a hopeless time is actually filled with positive possibilities but it takes faith 'The conviction of things not seen' (Hebrews 11:1), to perceive that God is at work.*

It takes faith and it takes people of faith with courage and compassion. People like Shiphrah and Puah, who are empowered to be guided from within, to take risks, and to stand up for what they believe to be the will of God. God's power is never used to oppress or intimidate, to control human beings or their destiny. When we see this kind of power at work we are witnessing the pinnacle of human power or a human being out of control.

A life empowered by God, rather than trying to control those around him or her, is able to demonstrate self-control— to act from within—not react from without. A life empowered by God does not think more highly of himself than he ought to –neither does she underestimate the impact her life can have.

A life empowered by God is able to live with dignity no matter what circumstances arise in this unpredictable world because that dignity does not come from this world. “No,” Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is within you.”

When we feel overwhelmed by circumstances in our lives or by the circumstances in our world; when we feel hopeless, paralyzed, powerless; remember the unexpected, hidden figures in the Hebrew story, and remember the appeal made by the Apostle Paul for the hidden potential within us ...remember and be strengthened. Recognize the power within, and make choices based on that power, not the standards of power set by this world.

By the wisdom and grace of God, may we each evaluate our circumstances and how we are able to respond with compassion, justice and courage. And then...let us respond with hope and a new perspective on the hidden powers within our ordinary lives. Amen.