

Sermon – Hidden Figures

Sunday, August 23, 2020

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. The Book of Genesis closes with the story of Joseph whose 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 story is rich in irony setting the stage for a new understanding of power and the unexpected, hidden figures who fulfill God’s purposes of justice. Hear now the word of God.

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: Hidden Figures

The text: "But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. Exodus 1:17

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, thank you for the strength and power of the hidden figures who have played significant roles in our salvation history. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

One of the most valued possessions my husband Peter has from his progressive, paternal grandmother, Catherine Morgan Kieffer, is a Harding pin from the 1920 presidential election. It was the first year women had the right to vote in the United States of America. Tennessee, the 36th state to ratify the 19th Amendment did so on August 18, 1920 making it the law of the land and granting 50 million hidden figures the right to vote. This year marks the 100th anniversary!

Susan B. Anthony is among the hidden figures in our American history whose resilience, courage, and persistence made this momentous change possible. Other voices "crying out in the wilderness" on behalf of women toward this end include Alice Paul, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone, and Ida B. Wells.

How fortuitous it is that the lectionary reading on the Sunday following this centennial anniversary would be the story of two hidden figures in our salvation history, Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives who feared and revered God rather than Pharaoh, and who refused to partake in the genocide of little boys.

The biblical 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 with civil disobedience and when confronted by the powers that be, to use humor about the Hebrew women's vigor in giving birth.

Old Testament Scholar, 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 rightly be said that Israel's future was dependent upon the wisdom, courage and vision of these hidden women.*

At this year's 224th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the four African American women featured in Margot Lee Shetterly's 2016 book *Hidden Figures* and the movie that followed, received the esteemed Crystal Teardrop Award from our Stated Clerk, the Rev. Dr. Herbert J. Nelson, for making a positive difference in the world. Dr. Christine Darden, Dorothy Johnson Vaughan, Katherine Goble Johnson, and Mary Jackson were not only brilliant mathematicians whose hidden figures and untold story helped win the space race, all were steadfast and faithful Presbyterians.

Whether we are talking about the women who played a role in the suffrage movement or the women who helped win the space race, we see parallels with the hidden figures found in the Moses narrative. In this biblical story, filled with irony, we see God's power in unexpected, hidden places. 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.

When he allows the daughters to live in his edict to throw the boy babies in the Nile, how could he know what a powerful role these hidden figures would play in preserving life? And so the daughter of the house of Levi casts her son into the Nile River...well in a sense. She strategically places 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 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 life. Namely, that God uses the humble to shame the arrogant...the seemingly powerless to overcome the seemingly powerful. God chooses unlikely candidates and unconventional means to bring justice, peace and joy to the kingdom. God moves in this story even as God moves today in unlikely and vulnerable ways, through hidden figures.

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.* However, as the author of Hebrews 11 affirms, it takes faith, *the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*, to perceive that God is at work

The well-known children's television personality and Presbyterian minister, the Reverend Mister Rogers' favorite quote, one that he framed and hung on the wall in his office, came from the French children's book *The Little Prince*, and is translated: *The essential is invisible to the eyes.* It is a great paradox and at the heart of faith, as articulated by the Apostle Paul in II Corinthians (4:18). *So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

May this be a word of hope for all the hidden figures among us, the essential workers, the parent-teachers, the remote learners, the healers, the sick and the downtrodden, so that we may see beyond our current circumstances during this world pandemic and economic recession. In the midst of oppression, God is working within and through our invisible acts of kindness, our compassion and respect for one another, and our advocacy toward greater justice.

The God, who led the Hebrew people out of bondage, who lived among us as a hidden figure in Jesus Christ, and whose unseen spirit empowers us, indeed celebrates our courageous acts of faith and welcomes our Hallelujahs. Amen