

## **Whose Side?**

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

12th Sunday after Pentecost - August 23, 2020

Texts: Exodus 1-2, Psalm 124, Matthew 16:13-20

Exodus 1 and 2, adapted: Through the trials and triumphs of Joseph, God brought Abraham's descendants to Egypt to escape famine. With Pharaoh's aid, they prospered. But after many years, a new king arose, who didn't remember Joseph. Fearing that the Hebrew people would become stronger than the Egyptians, this new ruler set out to oppress and enslave them. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and grew strong. Then the Egyptians became more and more ruthless in their demands.

Pharaoh the king said to the Hebrew midwives, named Shiphrah and Puah, "When the Hebrews' babies are born, kill the boys, but let the girls live." But the midwives feared God, and they let the boys live. And the people grew even stronger. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Throw the male babies of the Hebrews into the Nile."

Now a Levite woman gave birth to a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months. Then she placed him in a basket and put him among the reeds of the river. His sister stood at a distance, watching to see what would happen.

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to the river and found the basket among the reeds. She saw the baby crying and said, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children." Then his sister asked her, "Shall I get one of the Hebrew women to nurse him for you?" Pharaoh's daughter agreed. So the boy's mother raised him for a time. Then she brought him back to Pharaoh's daughter, who named him Moses and raised him as her own son.

When Moses grew to adulthood, he learned of his people's oppression. When he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, he killed and buried the Egyptian, believing he was not observed. But later, when he tried to separate two Hebrew people fighting, one of them taunted him with that murder. Fearing that word of his crime would spread, he fled for his life and lived for a time in the land of Midian. There he married a daughter of a priest of the land, and started his own family.

After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

RESPONSIVE READING Psalm 124

If God had not been on our side, let Israel now say—  
If God had not been on our side, when our enemies attacked,  
then they would have swallowed us up alive in their anger;

**Our help is in the name of our God,  
who made heaven and earth.**

The flood would have swept us away,  
the torrent would have gone over us;  
then over us would have gone the raging waters.

**Our help is in the name of our God,  
who made heaven and earth.**

Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us as prey.  
We have escaped like a bird from the snare;  
the snare is broken, and we have escaped.

**Our help is in the name of our God,  
who made heaven and earth.**

**Matthew 16:13-20**

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

The earliest documented act of civil disobedience (to my knowledge) was performed by two midwives. Their names were Shiphrah and Puah. They were ordered to kill all the male babies of Hebrew mothers. But instead, they “feared God and let the boys live.” Not only that, they lied about it. Taken to court, they said, “Oh, those Hebrew women are so strong, they just pop those babies out before we can even get there.” For their courage, they received the rare distinction of being called by name in the Bible. Shiphrah and Puah. Don’t forget them!

The second documented act of civil disobedience was also performed by a woman, a Hebrew mother. She got around the law that required her to drown her own baby in the Nile by putting him in a floating basket. The third act was by Pharaoh's own daughter, who rescued the baby and gave him back to his own mother to raise. Eventually, the Egyptian princess adopted him and gave him his name: Moses. And don't forget, Moses' sister was a co-conspirator, too. Like the rest of them, she risked her life for the same illegal baby.

To these five women - four Hebrew and one Egyptian - I say, "You go, girls! You've got God on your side and I'm signing on, too!"

As for Moses' killing the Egyptian, it's not civil disobedience, it's just plain old murder, but maybe with some provocation. I mean, the guy was beating on a fellow Hebrew. So illegal baby Moses, who survived because five women risked their lives for him, has to run for his life, abandoning his people. Things look tough. Back in Egypt, the Hebrew slaves are groaning. So where's the prophet, the liberator, the Ten Commandments dude? Living the life over in Midian, doing his own thing, married to a rich priest's daughter, having sons of his own. Not illegal ones. So whose side are you on, Moses? Don't you know your people need you? Listen, their cry goes up to heaven. And God hears. And is she ever mad!

But we're going to stop right there, because that's as far as our text takes us today. Instead, let's fast forward to colonial America, say, 1800 or so, where a robust economy is thriving in this rich new world. Christians who fled religious persecution at home in Europe have come here to carve out a new life. They pride themselves on rescuing the African heathens from their sinful ways and introducing them to the one true God, the God who's gonna carry them home to heaven when they die. What more could anyone want? They were fond of preaching texts like Colossians 3:22: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord." Slave owners were sure that God had rewarded their righteousness with great prosperity. Clearly, they thought, God was on their side. So was the law. Slave owners were legally justified in punishing those who did wicked things like...learning to read. Of course they castrated or killed males that got too dangerous. Of course they used the females as breeding stock. Do you think these God-fearing Christians had just a tiny little blind spot when they read the opening chapters of Exodus?

Be that as it may, the slaves, when they secretly learned to read, saw themselves in the tale of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. Rather than rejecting their white owners' God, as you might expect, they cried out to him. They groaned in song, creating the powerful musical tradition we call the spiritual. "Go Down, Moses," did you know, was originally known as "Song of the Contrabands?" Contraband is property illegally separated from its owners. It was sung by fugitive slaves fighting on the Union side: they were *living* contraband. They used biblical

language to sing in code about present reality. Harriet Tubman was an escaped slave who risked her life again and again to bring more than 50 other slaves to freedom. She used “Go Down, Moses,” as a code song for slaves fleeing Maryland.<sup>1</sup> They called her “Moses.” But I prefer to think of her as Shiphrah and Puah, disobeying the law, but acting as midwife to freedom.

Please don’t misunderstand. I’m not advocating for or against civil disobedience today. Noncompliance with laws as a form of peaceful protest is an entirely individual matter, between a person and her God. What I am advocating for is holy obedience, which may happen to look like civil disobedience now and then. I am asking for trouble, as long as it’s “good trouble.”<sup>2</sup>

Are we, as the church, ready for *good* trouble? When Jesus pressed his disciples on the question, “Who do *you* say that I am?” it’s Peter who blurts out, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” “Correct,” Jesus says. “You got that answer straight from God (I know you didn’t think of it yourself). And you will be the rock of the church, and the church will hold the keys: the power to bind and the power to set free.” Of course, in the next section, Peter protests when Jesus talked about suffering and trouble and dying; that’s when Jesus says to him, “Get behind me, Satan. We’re not quite together on this Messiah thing yet.” But Jesus still has Peter’s back. He was on his side, even when Peter messed up.

So whose side is Jesus on today, August 23rd, 2020? Sometimes it feels pretty clear. But sometimes it’s not clear at all. Peter’s failure teaches us that we can be really right about one thing, and totally wrong about something else. Moses’ failure teaches us that you can try to do the right thing (by beating up the guy who’s beating up your friend) and still get it wrong. The slave-holding Christians teach us that material prosperity is not necessarily a sign of God’s approval. And that you can be the oppressed in one generation and become the oppressor in the next. It’s almost a given that people who are abused become abusers, if the cycle isn’t stopped.

I think what the Bible is teaching us right now is this: Jesus came to stop the cycle of oppression. God does hear the cry of the downtrodden. And God hears your pain, no matter how well-guarded, how secret your tears. The Messiah stands with people who are rejected, people who fear for their lives, not their fortunes, because they usually have no fortunes to lose.<sup>3</sup> Is God on your side? Well, that depends. Who are your other allies? How about your donors?

No, if you even have a shred of worry about that, put it away. Because if you doubt, God is at your side to reassure you. If you hurt, Jesus is there to heal you. If someone you love is sinking

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-go-down-moses>. August 20, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> John Lewis makes his way into another sermon!

<sup>3</sup> “God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged.” Confession of Belhar, adopted 1986 in South Africa.

down in ways you can't comprehend and are powerless to help, the Spirit is there to do the heavy lifting for you. I want to say to you today that I have seen my share of joy, and I've seen my share of sorrow. Haven't you? And in the end, joy wins every time. No contest. I've seen a lot of harshness and hate in the world, but I've seen a lot more love. Love wins. Love trumps hate. And if you are on the side of love, and compassion, and understanding, then love is on your side. God is on your side. God is *for* you. God stands with you. It may not be obvious today; and it may not happen overnight. It may not happen in our lifetimes. But love prevails and, here and now, we of the church hold the keys to bind the hate and let love fly free in the world. We are the midwives, the Shiphrah and Puah of a new creation. No matter who gives the order to kill it, God will not let that happen. Sure, labor is hard. But it's worth it in the end.

Oh, and one last thing: no human being is illegal. Not baby Moses, not babies on the border, not you, not anyone. And most assuredly not God's new creation. Amen. TBTG

The words of our hymn come from Desmond Tutu, Bishop of South Africa, who was also instrumental in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to heal the post-*apartheid* society.

### Prayers

God, you are all goodness, and your goodness cannot fail to triumph in the end. Make us partners and midwives in bringing to birth a new creation where each wronged and injured soul is recognized, comforted, and made whole.

While we rejoice in the beauty of the fields and meadows, and the promise of the harvest to come, we ache for those suffering loss: the devastated farmland of Iowa, the burned lands and homes in California, other areas affected by climate change and extreme weather;

We pray for your wisdom to guide our elections this fall, and for truth and peaceful discourse to prevail; we pray once again for the people of Portland and other cities where people are striving to make their voices heard.

Once again, we lift up to you all those we have already mentioned, all covid patients and their caregivers, all those we name in our hearts. Comfort all who grieve with the sure and certain hope of life in you, promised and guaranteed to us by the death and resurrection of your son, the Messiah, Jesus, in whose name we pray: Our Father, who art in heaven...