

SERMON: Sunday – 20 August 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Set Free Stay Free

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Galatians 4:21- 5:1

The story of one child's escape from Pharaoh's brutal campaign to kill all baby boys born to the enslaved Hebrew people is recorded at the very start of the book of Exodus. It is there to set the scene for the bigger story that gives the book its name: God's rescue of his people from slavery in Egypt, using Moses, the Hebrew child brought up as an Egyptian prince, as his agent.

The baby's survival is an essential part of the divine plan, but, as is so often the case, human co-operation is needed for God's providence to be put into effect. Moses may be destined for greatness, but he would neither have lived into adulthood nor been in a position to help his people had it not been for an unlikely alliance of five remarkable women: the two 'Hebrew midwives', the baby's mother and sister, and Pharaoh's daughter and her maid.

Out of the large cast of characters who populate this story, only two, apart from baby Moses, are named: the midwives, Shiprah and Puah.

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I heard them describes as midwives of hope. A wonderful description of God using people to help birth something new even in dark times.

The names, Shiprah and Puah, have a semitic ring to them, but it is not clear from the text whether they were Hebrew or Egyptian women. Either way, it is remarkable that two ordinary women doing what women have done for each other since time immemorial, should be singled out in this way, when Pharaoh and his daughter, Moses' parents and his sister, all remain anonymous. The reward for their courage and inventiveness was not only to have families of their own (v. 21) but to be named for posterity.

Throughout human history, there have been instances of female children being killed or allowed to die because boys were valued more highly. In this case, it was the boys who were at risk, but the reason is essentially the same: they were assumed by the Egyptians to be stronger and more influential than their sisters, and therefore of more threat to national security. The actions of the five women in this story show just what a serious miscalculation that was.

There have been two cases in the UK, thirty years apart, of pediatric nurses (Beverley Allitt 1993; Lucy Letby 2023) being accused of murdering or

attempting to murder babies in their care. Such cases cause shock and revulsion because they go against every human instinct to protect our young and against everything we expect of those who choose nursing as a profession. Midwives, and the wise women before them who brought new life into this world and accompanied the old and dying on their journey into the next, occupy a sacred role.

Not only did the midwives in Exodus remain true to their calling but they were extremely inventive in deflecting the king's suspicions about why so many Jewish boys seemed to be surviving his cull. Their explanation—that the Hebrew women gave birth much more quickly than Egyptian women—would have played into his belief, common to many tyrants, that the people whom he had enslaved were less than fully human. Their mothers gave birth, like animals, without need of medical intervention.

The nurses' compassion overcame their fear of punishment, just as Pharaoh's daughter's compassion for the abandoned baby boy found by her maid was stronger than any hatred she felt towards the Jewish people or any loyalty to her father the king.

Working together, these women's courage, ingenuity and moral integrity proved more than a match for male violence based on fear.

Moses comes from the Hebrew verb which means to draw out of the water. So Moses is named as one drawn out or pulled up, in order to become someone who would draw others out of slavery. That seems a good description of the life of faith - drawn out in order to help save others.

And who named him and who drew him out but none other than Pharaoh's daughter (or at least one of her servants acting on her command). God uses all sorts of people in God's plan of salvation.

And whose faith placed him in the water in the first place - Moses mother, an unnamed Levite, who gives him up to the mercy of the River Nile not knowing what would become of him.

When she could hide him no longer from the tyranny of Pharaoh's Empire, she hid him in the reeds on the river bank.

God moves in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform.

I came across another Moses this week.

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Harriet Tubman was born a slave in 1822 and became an American abolitionist and social activist. The slave catchers of her day as well as those

whom she liberated, called her Moses, because she was the one whom God had chosen to set his people free.

Harriet had a deep connection with God and a deep conviction that she was called to her freedom in order to lead others to the same.

Born into slavery in she was beaten and whipped by various enslavers as a child slave which caused dizziness, pain, and spells of hypersomnia, for the rest of her life. But strangely, after her injury, she began experiencing strange visions and vivid dreams, which she ascribed to premonitions from God, which combined with her Methodist upbringing, led her to become devoutly religious.

She herself escaped slavery and made some 13 missions to rescue approximately 70 enslaved people, including her own family and friends,

In her later years, she was an activist in the movement for women's suffrage.

She never gave up on her ancestor's "dream" of a better world ... a kinder world, a more loving world, a world in which justice and compassion would extend to everyone....

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One writer recently wrote about how that same desire is stirring again in the words:

"Through Harriet, you, me, and the spirited songs sung on Sunday mornings in Black churches, Moses is rising again."

[Spring Washam, *The Spirit of Harriet Tubman: Awakening from the Underground* (2023)]

There is in the church that same strong call of ordinary people being called to their freedom in order to lead others to the same kind of freedom. And it is a call that is not divorced from people discovering a new sense of life and values in life that calls for loving kindness and justice and peace for all. The New Testament describes it as taking off the old life and putting on the new life in Christ.

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Someone else from the pages of history that embraced this new life in Christ was Catherine of Siena, a 14th century prophet to the church. She was known for having prophetic visions of God's kingdom. Her biography records that early in life she asked the Christ who called her in visions,

“How can I be of any use in the work of saving souls for I am a woman, and it is not seemly for my sex to try to teach men, or even to speak with them. Besides, they take no notice of what we say.” ...

To which Jesus responded:

“All things are possible for God who has created everything from nothing. I know that you say this from humility, but you must know that in these days pride has grown monstrously among men, and chiefly among those who are learned and think they understand everything....

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I have chosen unschooled women, fearful and weak by nature, but trained by Me in the knowledge of the divine, so that they may put vanity and pride to shame....”

[Raymond of Capua, Life of Catherine of Siena]

She went on to be an adviser to priests and tried hard to keep the church true to her calling. Much of her influence was not recognised until after she died at the young age of 33, the same age at which Jesus died.

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As Paul puts it, we are children of the free woman, set free by Christ, make sure you stay free (Galatians 4:31, 5:1).

The implication being that it is perhaps too easy to slip back into our enslaved condition, or to take one's freedom for granted. We can too easily go back to making religion all about rules - do this, don't do that.

Whilst we need rules to keep us safe, as one of our children here reminded us of two weeks ago, all rules must be truthful and just and birthed in love, and aim at love.

We're set free by Christ. Free from being slaves to sin. Changed, in Christ, to be slaves to righteousness as Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 3:17. In that letter he talks about how wherever the Spirit of God is, there is freedom. And if we have the Spirit, as the free gift of Christ, then we are free indeed. Free from the desire to do wrong. Free to be our truthful selves, who God made to be

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“God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10).

Those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit (and not the things of the flesh) and to do so is to “life and peace” (6).

There's this great conflict raging inside of us between the flesh and the Spirit and the Spirit will prevail because its the same life-giving Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead.and which helps us to put to death the misdeeds of the body.

Yes we still struggle and suffer but we also live in the day of victory and overcoming and we have hope that these good things will prevail. Until then nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:39).

So let's be inspired by the same Holy Spirit who inspired the Hebrew midwives that we too might help usher in new life in the midst of a dangerous world.

Let's be inspired by the same Holy Spirit who inspired Harriet Tubman to be a Moses to others, helping to draw them out of whatever waters they might be in.

Let's be inspired by the same Holy Spirit who inspired Catherine of Siena to speak out against things that were just wrong.

Let's be inspired by the same Holy Spirit who blesses us with freedom and who aspires us to do good things, today, this week and always.
Amen.