

## Something in the 'water' (Exodus 1.8-2.10)

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Over the next two months, the Old Testament readings in the lectionary come from the book of Exodus. I'm not going to preach on all of these but I do want to spend these final Sundays in August in the opening chapters. In chapter 1, as you've just heard, we join the children of Israel in Egypt. Decades have passed since we left Jacob limping away from Peniel after his nocturnal wrestling match. Jacob and his twelve sons have died, but their offspring are multiplying and filling the land (Ex 1.7). So much so, that they're becoming a threat. Pharaoh wants them there – they're useful as slaves. But he doesn't want them getting too strong; he's doing all he can to keep them in their place. But it isn't working. Indeed, for all his power and ruthlessness, there are signs here that Pharaoh's position isn't as exalted and secure as he thinks – that his isn't the only game in town.

The undermining of his authority begins early in this narrative. In fact, we got a hint in the first verse of our reading (1.8): 'Now a new king arose over Egypt'. King!?' 'King' was never a title that Egypt used of its rulers. It was always 'Pharaoh', a title connoting divine status. Yet, more than once, this text refers to him simply as 'king'. It's easy for us to miss this slight on the Egyptian ruler, a textual device to expose the fact that he is no god – he is merely a man.

Then, in the next few verses, we see this threatened ruler doing what threatened leaders do – bullying, oppressing and scapegoating... He commands that the Israelites be subjected to increasingly hard labour, in support of 'building' himself up. But the more these people

are oppressed, the more they multiply!! This calls for increasingly draconian measures, in his view. In response, ‘the king of Egypt’ (there it is again) commanded the Hebrew midwives to kill any new baby boy born. This’ll do it, he thinks, but there’s another problem, for the midwives ‘*did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them*’. They were letting these boys live, and when they’re grilled by ‘the king’, they have a perfect excuse. These Hebrew women are ‘vigorous’; their babies just keep arriving before we get there!!! Their ‘fear of God’, says the text (capital ‘G’), is greater than their fear of Pharaoh (the little ‘g’ god), who after all, is only *a king*.

This is the second hint that the Egyptian ruler is not as all-powerful as he thinks. And a third is coming, for another authority, also of divine standing, is about to intrude into Pharaoh’s domain. As this story keeps subtly insisting, his is not the only game in town.

At this point, the story focusses in on one Hebrew couple who have recently given birth to a ‘fine baby’ son. Despite Pharaoh’s general edict that every boy born to the Hebrews be thrown into the Nile, his mother has bravely hidden him for three months. When she could hide him no longer, she made a little basket boat, and placed him among the reeds of the river. And we are told, ‘*his sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him*’. He’s entrusted into the hands of God ...

This is subtly reinforced in the use of language here. The Hebrew word translated as ‘basket’ is *tebah*. The only other biblical use of this word is back in the flood story (Gen 6-9), where it’s translated as ‘ark’. *Tebah* means box, container, coffin. We can understand why it’s translated here as ‘basket’, but the connotation of ‘coffin’ is also

meaningful. This little boy lies in a coffin in the waters that were supposed to drown him. His mother has prepared him for death, but she has also acted in the hope of his life being preserved, just as Noah and his sons were saved from the waters by his *tebah* (ark).

And so it happens!! The daughter of Pharaoh comes to bathe in the river. She sees the basket/coffin/ark floating in the reeds and sends her maid to fetch it. She opens it, sees the boy crying and takes ‘pity’ on him. *‘This must be one of the Hebrews’ children’*, she says. At which point, his sister (who’s been watching) catches a glimpse of possibility, and steps in with a suggestion: *‘Shall I go and get a nurse from the Hebrew woman to nurse the child for you?’* She’s given the go-ahead, and in a delicious twist brings back the boy’s real mother (her mother). *‘Take this child and nurse it for me’*, Pharaoh’s daughter says, *‘and I will give you your wages’*.

So, this Hebrew mother gets to raise her own son legally, right under the nose of Pharaoh, and *gets paid* from Pharaoh’s coffers!! You’ve got to marvel at the irony in all of this. Pharaoh decrees that every Hebrew boy should be drowned in the river and his own daughter not only rescues one from the river, but then calls him Moses (which means – ‘drawn from the water’). Talk about defiance!! Clearly, a power, an authority, a plan greater than Pharaoh’s is at work here – something is in the air, or in this case, the ‘water’.

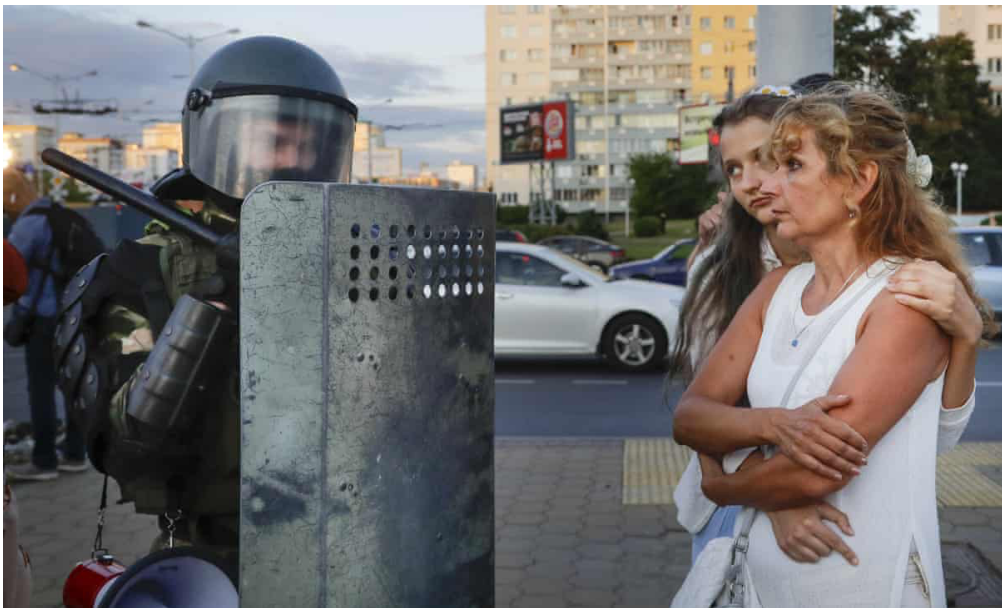
So, what strikes you in this story, how does it speak to you?

I’m struck by the parts played by women here, mostly nameless women, and mostly seemingly small parts, but when you add them together so crucial in what’s unfolding. First, those two Hebrew

midwives; they are named (Shaph'rah and Pu'ah), defying Pharaoh's command and quietly working to protect new-born babes. They took a huge risk. Then there is Moses' mother; once again, defying imperial command, hiding her son and then entrusting him to providence in the ark, hoping against hope that his life will be preserved. And then Moses' sister; how old was she? 8? 10? 15? Let's not forget her part... her watching and waiting; her seemingly 'innocent' suggestion: 'Shall I go and get a nurse from the Hebrew women?' We never hear of her again, but it's a crucial part she plays. And then there's Pharaoh's daughter; of all people, we would expect that she'd obey her father's command. But it's compassion, her tenderness towards life, that comes to the fore. She takes pity on the child and takes him in. It's so ironic. Pharaoh thinks it's males he has to contend with, who pose a threat, but here it's the women who defy him, who refuse to support his brutal, narcissistic agenda. Each part, on its own, would not have been enough. *All* their parts were necessary. Without each (mostly humble) contribution, there would've been no Moses, and so, potentially, no Exodus... no liberation.

What's also striking to me is the nature of these women's subversive action. They don't meet the violence of the Pharaoh with brute force, locking horns at the same level. Instead they quietly and undramatically subvert the whole game he wants to play – gently undoing violence by non-violent resistance and compassionate action. They don't do what they're ordered to do, nor give in to fear – they just do what life needs of them and calls forth from them, moment by moment. And when women do this, it's incredibly dis-arming. And this is still happening and still making a difference.

Think of effect of that ‘*Wall of Moms*’ in Portland recently, standing between the protesters and Trump’s special forces – disarming violence and quelling bloodshed; think of those chains of women dressed in white, holding flowers aloft in Belarus, quietly and yet powerfully standing against the gruesome violence being inflicted on Belarusians daring to question Lukashenko’s rigged election win (picture below); think of the ‘*Mothers of the Disappeared*’ in Argentina (picture below), and of all the aunties and elder women in Aboriginal communities, tirelessly advocating for the future of their children and grandchildren. Think of Leeton Dungay, Mother Theresa, Rosa Parks, Greta Thunberg, Marion McConnell...



The women in Exodus didn’t march with flowers or stand with arms locked in front of Pharaoh’s chariots and enforcers – they weren’t even consciously acting as a collective. They were just each doing what they could in their place, taking responsibility for the life entrusted to them. The verse that comes to mind is from Micah – this is what the Lord desires, to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (6.8).



A lot of water has flowed down the Nile since Moses was drawn from those bulrushes. But brutal, narcissistic dictators and systems, thinking themselves ‘gods’, continue to repress and violate life on earth. And all of us, women and men, continue to be called by the true God to refuse to play along. We are to resist and subvert violence and all that deals death, to respond with compassion to what lies in front of us, to practice mercy daily, in actions large and small. From such participation is freedom and justice wrought, and a way of life that means life for all.