

Exodus 1:8 - 2:10

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 16A

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“What’s saving your life right now?” It’s a popular question at the end of podcast interviews and substack articles. “What’s saving your life,” elicits answers from running to poetry to chocolate cake to a good night’s sleep. Earlier this spring when we hosted an absurdly fabulous lineup of preachers and theologians, Jennifer Bailey, among them, commented that Christians are obsessed with the question of salvation, of how and why we are saved, and what Jesus has to do with it - maybe not so much Episcopalians. Still, whether as a dinner table query or a theological test, the question of “what’s saving your life” is an engrossing topic. However, there are times when the question is actually literal, as the question lands in the first two chapters of Exodus.

What’s saving your life? In the face of very real, yet also ordinary, daily precarity upon which newly manufactured insecurity is piled, this question takes on a different cast. What’s saving your life? Well, two midwives. A desperate mother. A savvy and assertive big sister. And a princess. Pharaoh looked around at the hard-scrabble lives of the Israelites and saw a reason to be afraid for his own security, and he wielded his power and influence to oppress them further with forced labor, making their lives bitter with hard service, encouraging the other Egyptians to be ruthless in their treatment.

When that wasn’t enough to assuage his fear and dread of what might come, he tried to enlist the midwives to join his genocidal campaign. They balked and refused. And the Levite mother who knew that every boy was to be thrown into the Nile? You could say that she technically abides by this edict, but only after waiting awhile and then preparing a small basket for him with his sister watching over him as he floats among the reeds. And then Pharaoh’s daughter, seeing the child, recognized him as one of the Hebrews’ children. She drew him out of the water and arranged for his care, knowingly or unknowingly, back at his mother’s breast.

It’s true that anyone can feel insecure. There’s not an objective, measurable benchmark; it’s subjective, it’s a feeling. We are all small, mortal, limited creatures; no matter what things look like on the outside, we are all acquainted with frailty. We can feel uncertain no matter what rung of the ladder we’re on. So, even though this story does not invite pity for Pharaoh, we have to start by acknowledging his fear. And as with another genocidal king in another book of the Bible, when the king is afraid then all the land is afraid around him. What Pharaoh believes will save him is what makes everyone else around him tremble, what makes their dread become all too real. Pharaoh’s insecurity, however much we might roll our eyes at that idea, turns him against the descendants of Joseph: ironically the former savior of Egypt in a time of famine, another insecure age. And this Pharaoh’s fragile hold on the reins of power blinds him to a different kind of power that five women exert, five women who are surely templates for many, many others who creatively disobey.

One of the reasons that the women are successful in their pushback against Pharaoh and his diabolical campaign is precisely because of their lack of his kind of power: they are essentially invisible to him. As a group, as women, none of them have status. And in their individuality, they are even more likely to vanish: women attending to other women in childbirth, a place of extraordinary vulnerability and welcoming no men, a mother suckling her child, a little girl, and even Pharaoh's daughter, whether a dilettante or not, surely he was not taking her counsel. In his machinations, Pharaoh doesn't account for any of them because they don't count. Yet, they know what will save them perhaps because they are accustomed to living at the edges in every sense. And they lean into the power of being overlooked. Like a cloak of invisibility, they are able to move through the world and slide in and out of places where all the difference can be made.

Most significantly, they have learned in their vulnerability and insecurity not to turn away from each other, but to turn toward each other. The midwives in solidarity with those on the birthing stool. A mother and her young girl-child hatching a plan to keep her baby brother afloat. And Pharaoh's daughter not buying the story that scapegoats the Hebrews and denies them their humanity. In the most vulnerable moments, with uncelebrated strength, each one makes a choice turning toward care, toward tenderness, toward hope. Instead of hardening their hearts and building walls of mortar and brick, five women soften and take risks beyond their boundaries; they choose to act in the little corner of the kingdom that is theirs in ways that bring health and hope, and, yes, salvation.

In precarious and insecure times, whether those are internal worries or existential threats, what direction do you and I turn? How do we learn what they learned, to turn toward and not away? Where does the hope to act in the face of fear come from? The word fear is actually only used in this story to describe the fear that the midwives felt not for Pharaoh but toward God; this fear is more akin to awe and reverence, the kind of "fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom." When they remember their place in the scheme of things and are aware of the magnitude of God's presence, they are more able to choose bravely. When they are attuned to their relationship with God, they are able to see the ties that bind them to the people all around them. And lives are saved. Moses' life for sure, but also the unnumbered lives of other children. And maybe more lives are saved, if we expand our definition beyond being pulled out of a river to include the idea that some lives are saved when they are changed. Wouldn't you agree that the five women's lives were saved too?

When the river is more metaphorical than actual, we still need to figure out what is changing us and saving us. What is saving your life? Could it be the same things? A reverence for God and a turning toward connection. Our lives are made more bearable and people are quietly saved by the bonds of friendship, by the way we are moved when we see acts of bravery, by the small choices we make to align our lives with integrity and faith. What's saving your life right now? Perhaps some of the very same things that saved Moses and his generation: an apprehension of God, the invisible kindness of others, the strength of character your mother taught you. Our feelings of vulnerability and insecurity are real. Everyone feels them. And in times like these, just like in times long ago, we need to know the answer to the question "What's saving your life?"