



MOTHER'S DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, May 13, 2012

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Lection – Exodus 1:22–2:10 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 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.’

(v. 1) Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. (v. 2) The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months. (v. 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. (v. 4) His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

(v. 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. (v. 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. (v. 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?’ (v. 8) Pharaoh’s daughter

said to her, 'Yes.' So the girl went and called the child's mother. (v. 9) Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.' So the woman took the child and nursed it. (v. 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.'

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Mother's Day, an international observance of the altruistic nurturing and contributions of mothers to the fabric of human culture, had its beginnings in the United States of America as early as 1870 with the introduction of the concept by Julia Ward Howe. Howe's intention was that the observance be a call to all American mothers to help heal the atrocities and deep wounds caused by the Civil War and to influence the country to seek peace and celebrate motherhood.

In 1912, largely due to the efforts of Anna M. Jarvis, West Virginia became the first State to officially recognize Mother's Day as a holiday, and in 1914 President Woodrow Wilson would sign into law the official national designation of the second Sunday in May as Mother's Day.

It was Anna M. Jarvis who suggested the white Carnation (her mother's favorite flower) be used as a tribute to deceased mothers and that the pink or red carnation would be worn by patrons of the holiday to celebrate living mothers. This tradition continues to this day.

While in America this holiday has extensive humanistic underpinnings and overt commercialization, in other countries like Spain the adaptation of this holiday has taken on more religious significance. In Spain the observance is tied to the Feast of the Immaculate Conception on December 8. In Ethiopia the holiday coincides with the seasons and agriculture and is directly correlated to the Earth as mother. In Yugoslavia it leads up to Christmas commemorating the Motherhood of Christ.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Exodus 1:22-2:10

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

In 1914, when the United States Congress approved Mother's Day as a National Holiday and then President Woodrow Wilson signed it into law, the Congress required that the President of the United States would annually proclaim the day. In recent years, while the sitting President proclaims the observance, many women's groups in league with mothers throughout the country who have lost children due to the carnages of war have chosen to initiate the event as a day of protest against war.¹

The staggering loss of life in America's several contemporary global military engagements, especially as it has adversely and disproportionately impacted the African American community, continues to be a thorny issue both socially and politically. The pericope utilized for this moment on the Lectionary calendar for this year aptly points to a similar time in biblical history wherein the loss of minority lives impacted a community with the "slaughter of the innocents" in ancient Egypt (Exodus 1:22).

Once again the original intention of Mother's Day as a balm to heal a nation divided by the ravages of war has resurfaced as the United States citizenry seeks to find solace and to advocate peaceful resolution to global conflicts. Mother's Day observance, while honoring the vital contribution of mothers to the nurture and development of the family unit, has also become a time to recognize the strength of mothers as agents of change and resources of impartial benevolence.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The chauvinistic themes prevalent in this particular biblical narrative are so obvious as to make them almost laughable, if it were not for the accompanying confidence that in the face of humankind's evil design, the almost imperceptible hand of God is still at work bringing about justice and tempering the wrongs heaped upon creation. Consider the very construct of the nature of Pharaoh's evil intention and attempt at ethnic cleansing or genocide by means of destroying the males of a race. This he attempts to accomplish by three decided movements.

First, the Egyptian Pharaoh's fears of a swelling populace of immigrants in the land (the descendants of Jacob who were known as Israelites) overtaking the government by force and usurping the benefits that naturally fell to the indigenous people (the native Egyptians) was met with a nefarious decisive conspiracy designed to break the spirit and the resolve of the swiftly growing populace of Hebrew-speaking people. This he justified as a means of preserving the security of the Egyptian government and thereby disallowing a sudden shift in power. So, in what he considered to be a stroke of brilliance, the Pharaoh proposed to incarcerate, indeed enslave, the Israelites into a condition of involuntary servitude and cause them to participate in efforts to improve the infrastructure of Egypt. This he did with the additional hardship of manufacturing the materials necessary to build (bricks) without the usual component of straw that gave strength to the malleable clay (Exodus 5:5-8).

But even these hardships were not strong enough to destroy their determination, shatter their spirits, impugn their potential, or break the backs of God's chosen people. Again, Pharaoh attempts to quell the rapidly growing populace of Hebrews by means of a governmental executive order to impose infanticide upon Hebrew males while allowing the Hebrew females to live.

Pharaoh sought to terrorize the Hebrew community by giving strict orders to the Egyptian midwives, who were employees of the State, that upon the birth of the Hebrew babies they were to euthanize the males and spare the lives of the female infants. The biblical record cites two such women, who by name were Shiphrah and Puah, employed by the government to be agents in this plot. However, the Scripture tells us that these women (perhaps mothers themselves) were so impressed and in awe of the God of the Hebrews that they would not be complicit in the senseless slaughter of innocent children. Indeed, it was their calling and vocation to foster life, not take life.

Pharaoh launched an investigation as to how it was that males being born were not terminated at birth. These women were called in to give an account of their stewardship. Their response and

plea to Pharaoh was that the Hebrew women, possibly due to the nature of their lifestyle, were more agile and consequently more vigorous in the delivery process than were Egyptian women, so that before the midwives could make their way to the Hebrew ghettos to assist in the birthing event the babies had already been delivered and hidden away. Reluctantly, Pharaoh accepts the report of these mid-wives and absolves the women of any wrongdoing.

This brings us to the third and final stroke by Pharaoh to stifle the rapidly expanding populace of Hebrews in Egypt. It is to this move that our text specifically addresses itself. Again, women, who have been discounted by Pharaoh as inconsequential and of no real significance, are used by God to thwart the designs and evil intentions of the Egyptian throne.

A Hebrew couple, of the Tribe of Levi, is married and subsequently gives birth to a son. Having full knowledge of the new edict imposed by the Egyptian government requiring the death of every male born to the Hebrew people, they are successful in keeping the child's birth a secret. For three months, they are able to quell the infants' cries and meet the needs of the child without being discovered by Egyptian intelligence.

By the time the child is three month's old he is no longer sleeping long hours throughout the day and night and has begun to teethe and become irritable. He also has started to pursue mobility by lifting himself and moving about independently. These factors with other attending difficulties occurring in the natural development of an infant make it virtually impossible to continue to keep the presence of the child a secret. So Jochebed and Miriam, the child's mother and sister respectively, devise a plan to secret away the youngster into the Nile River during the time that Pharaoh's daughter usually took her bath.

An ark composed of bull reeds, covered in tar pitch to make it seaworthy, is constructed, and the child is set afloat upon the crest of the Nile River. It is interesting to note that the Nile River is an estuary known by inhabitants along its banks as a means of sustaining life by its delivery of water to an arid and deserted climate as well as providing the fruit of its waters as food and its natural substance as a means of cleansing and bathing both clothes and body. These waters have now become the conduit of death and destruction by the casting of innocent infants into its liquidity to serve as sustenance for the hungry crocodiles that inhabit its murky depths and thereby becoming complicit in Pharaoh's plan to halt the rapid growth of the Hebrew people.

It is of further interest to observe that this is the second time that God has used an ark to serve as a means of safety and deliverance of people who were in trouble. Remember, it was an ark constructed by Noah that preserved Noah's family and representatives from the animal kingdom from destruction by drowning during the great deluge. Now again, an ark is used here to save and deliver a whole people through the preservation of an infant who would become the leader of the manumission and exodus of God's people out of Egypt.

When Pharaoh's daughter made her way to the Nile that day to bathe she saw the little ark bearing the infant and commanded her servant girl to fetch it from the water. Discovering it to be a male child, she surmised that it was one of those babies who, in obedience to the orders of her father, had been cast by the Hebrews into the river.

Miriam, the older sister of Moses, stood off a bit in the distance watching over her little brother and seized the opportunity to offer to assist the daughter of Pharaoh in finding a suitable caregiver (Moses' birth mother, Jochebed). Unbeknown to the daughter of Pharaoh, she had just been drawn into a coalition, albeit unwittingly, that would be the undoing of her father's murderous plan to destroy the Hebrew people and join the forces of other women who in this narrative are used by God to bring about justice.

To make the move of God even more satisfying, God has Pharaoh's daughter to PAY Jochebed, a name that means, "God is glorious," for doing that which she would have gladly done without thought of remuneration. After all, Jochebed lived on the underside of privilege and opportunity and had no expectation of being rewarded for her services. She now was being paid to nurture and nourish her own child whose life was now spared by the hand of God using Pharaoh's own household as the instrument of that deliverance.

It surely must have troubled her knowing that someday soon she would have to yield her son to the arms of the unquestionable enemy of God and the people of God. So, she must have taken every opportunity she had with him to instill into this child the undaunted faith of her people and as much of Hebrew culture and traditions as she possibly could.

It is not just a strange and bizarre twist of events that has given this great moment into the hands of Amram and Jochebed's home. It is more than a mere confluence of circumstances that has meted it fit to prepare the future leader of the Hebrews into their land of promise in this fashion. It is the invincible hand of God that always sets things right and fixes that which is wrong in the world. Here, in a very poignant way, God has utilized the quite unobtrusive hands of women who had been discounted and marginalized because of their gender. God uses them as the formidable key element in bringing about the righteous reign of the God of Israel over and against the mean machinations of a man gone mad and drunk with power.

These women in solidarity, but Jochebed in particular, because of her selflessness and deep abiding love and commitment to God and devotion to family, have foiled the power-hungry and self-serving designs of Pharaoh. Jochebed, whose other two children (Miriam and Aaron) would also become pillars in Hebrew lore and oral tradition, was herself a great heroine and pillar of exemplary motherhood. Aaron as Moses' adjutant and priest in the wilderness sojourn and Miriam as a great prophet (Exodus 15:20) would stand as testaments to Jochebed's faithfulness to God. Jochebed through the ages has been the ensign of all Black mothers who have stood as pillars of their families.

Celebration

Mothers throughout history have been the bedrock and primary nurturer of the family. The Black mother has been even more regarded for her influence, her ingenuity, and her never failing fortitude helping to mold a people and instill an element of hope fostered by a faith in a God who never deserts or abandons a faithful people. If I had ten thousand tongues to sing the praises of mothers of old and mothers today, my words would be so insufficient. So all that it is left for me to do is to say thank you! Thank you for every tear you dried. Thank you for every prayer you prayed. Thank you for everything you went without to sacrifice for your child. Thank you for

being the first to believe in your child. Thank you for every act of kindness and your heart of unending forgiveness and love. Thank you, Mom, and Happy Mother's Day.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

- Sounds:** The rushing waters of the Nile River; the sobs of Hebrew mothers at having to sacrifice their sons; the cooing and gurgling of an infant;
- Sights:** The activity along the Nile River; the entourage of Pharaoh's daughter's retinue; watching the development of a baby; and
- Smells:** The rotting flesh of countless babies fed to the Nile crocodiles, which is a foul reminder of the sinfulness of violence, even retaliatory violence.

III. Other Material That Preachers and Others Can Use

Suggested Internet Historical Resources for Mother's Day:

- www.mothersdaycentral.com
- www.mothersdaycelebration.com
- www.dayformothers.com
- http://nwhp.org/news/history_of_mothersday.php

Note

1. Online location: http://www.democracynow.org/2006/5/12/mothers_say_no_to_war_peace