

Exodus 1: 8- 2:10
Romans 12: 1-8
Matthew 16: 13-17

Transforming
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Mary R. Brownlow

Rarely do we get 18 verses so packed with drama as we did this morning in our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. And rarely are the main actors almost all female: two midwives, a mother, a sister, a princess and a slave girl. Together, the story-teller writes, these six women manage to transform their world. This story from the book of Exodus is shocking, poignant, scary, humorous, heart-warming – and a wake up call. It speaks of the way that empires are challenged by “women’s work.” It speaks of the re-definition of a person’s self-understanding: the transformation of souls and the transformation of relationships.

Maybe this story of babies and midwives and water seems especially timely to me. Last Wednesday, I visited Ava Carol Calsbeek, the 3 day old daughter of Ryan and Brittney, the sister of my good friend, the 3 year-old Isabel. The conversation was about the length of the labor and the birthing tub and the visiting grandparents and the big sister: all the wonderful words that are exchanged when a family of 3 is changed, in a moment, it seems, to a family of four. What a great conversation, what a great visit!

But then, how distressing to go to the first chapter of Exodus, and think of that ruthless pharaoh, with his genocidal order to the midwives: kill the male babies at birth. Shiphrah and Puah were being instructed to go against every instinct, every sense of professional duty. They were being told to become angels of death instead of tender caregivers of new life. What a fearful command!

But it all begins with fear, really. We have learned that this new pharaoh did not know Joseph, who, 10 generations before, had been the Hebrew mastermind who engineered the agricultural plans that saved Egypt and the surrounding nations from starvation. Joseph was honored and powerful in his own lifetime, and his extended family reaped the benefits of his position and thrived in Egypt. But this new pharaoh saw only the population statistics, and the numbers filled him with fear. They were different, these Hebrews. What if they turned on the Egyptians... who could trust them? So they were enslaved and oppressed, forced into building supply cities for the Egyptians. Out of fear, the Egyptians “made their lives bitter with hard service.” The trouble with this approach is that it does not lead to a neat solution. In just leads to more fear, and harsher treatment: a never ending escalation of oppression. Hence the plan for infanticide, the devil’s arithmetic: a 50% reduction in the birthrate.

Shiphrah and Puah must have felt fear too. Who likes to be hauled in front of Pharaoh with orders on how to do your job? But they were not defined by this feeling. What defined them was their fear of God. If asked who they served, or to whom they felt allegiance, the answer would have been “the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph.” This defined them, formed their actions, and transformed the future.

Today we might hesitate to say, “I fear God.” It feels politically incorrect, or abject, or unhealthy. Wouldn’t we rather hear that Shiphrah and Puah loved God, or were devoted to God, or loved babies and their moms? But fear in this story implies a sense of an unknown mystery coming very close: a healthy respect and honor for an ultimate power that makes demands on our lives. A defining and compelling power of transformation.

What does a pharaoh know about the self-understanding of these midwives? Why would he bother to find out? Why would he ask, “Whom do you fear and serve?” He assumed allegiance and obedience. But, the story-writer tells us, “The midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.”

This story-writer is allowing us in on the conspiracy, so when the midwives are hauled before pharaoh again, we get to snicker behind his back when we overhear their alibi. They defy pharaoh with a deferential lie: Egyptian women and Hebrew women are different, they say. Your wives are delicate, and birth is a slow and dangerous process. These Hebrew women are as strong and vigorous as animals. They are so strong that they push those babies out in no time, before we can get there. Oh, really? This civil disobedience, this blatant lie seems designed to flatter pharaoh’s prejudices, and tell him the kind of thing he likes to hear. When we are done shaking our heads at the *chutzpah* of the midwives, we hear how they are rewarded. It says, “And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.” What a gift! God gave them a future. The Egyptian pharaoh remained trapped in his fear, his prejudices, his palaces. The women began the transformation of the future into freedom. They were god-mothers, in their courageous disobedience, to the child about to be born as liberator.

The other joke here is that it turns out that it is the girls, those worthless females, that the Pharaoh *should* fear. They are way too clever for him. The conspiracy continues. An unnamed woman gives birth to a boy. She sees that he is a fine baby (Duh! of course his mom thinks he’s wonderful). She cheats pharaoh and manages to hide this fine baby for three months, first in her own home, and then (ironically) in Pharaoh’s own sacred river . . . the same one that was supposed to be the graveyard of all the Hebrew boys. And then another unimportant female, the baby’s older sister, goes to watch over the baby in the basket.

Two more women are part of this conspiracy of compassion, and these two belong to pharaoh’s own household. His daughter sees the basket; her maid fishes it out of the Nile. Somehow the princess knows that this is a Hebrew child. You would think that she at least would serve pharaoh or fear pharaoh by turning the child in, or setting him loose again. But the child was crying. And she takes pity. Pity for the tears overcomes her fear of authority. (An aside here: there is something about the cry of a 3-month old baby that is designed to set a mom on alert: a sort of biological trigger of compassion or pity or need to care for the weak.) At this crucial moment, the story-teller gives us another bit of Old Testament humor at pharaoh’s expense: the baby’s sister turns up and asks if she can help out with a wet nurse referral. Pharaoh’s daughter arranges for the Hebrew baby’s survival within his won biological family, while adopting officially as her own son. She gives him a blended name: in Egyptian Moses means “child;” in Hebrew it means “drawn from the water.”

There are so many twists and turns in this story that we need to list all the transformations that take place. Midwives become subversives and freedom fighters; a mother becomes a wet nurse to her own child, a princess becomes the compassionate mother of a slave and a foreigner; the slave

girl wades into the waters of death and draws out new life; the sister becomes a conspirator in this web of deceit and freedom. Six women: Shiphrah, Puah, Moses' mother and sister, pharaoh's daughter and her maid are driven by a kind of transforming awe: an ethical framework which is devotion to God. And no one could stand against them. Born out of all that feminine compassion and resistance, Moses inherited their spirit, and was a resister all his life: an agent of transformation.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Roman church about the way we can be changed from within, so to speak, to be this kind of resister, this kind of subversive. He wrote, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." He goes on to say that we do not do this as individuals only, but in community, allowing our different gifts to multiply the effect of our actions. When we look out at this world of trouble – and it is troubled, by war and injustice and the killing of young people – our first reaction may be fear. We are justifiably afraid of the powerful forces that seem to stamp out life. And then, we are angry, too, justifiably angry. The scale of suffering, in Iraq and Syria, on our southern border and in our Midwestern cities, in Nigeria and in Afghanistan, is mind-boggling. It is too big for us.

Where is there a savior who can make a difference? Where is our Joseph, the dreamer who rescues people from famine? Where are our midwives, who defy the tyrant to save the weak? Where is our Moses? Where are our prophets and Messiahs? Is there anyone who fears God enough to start the ripple effect of change? Or is it a form of "woman's work," quiet and steady in its defiance: one life at a time, one rescue at a time.

The story-teller says to us, a long time ago, two women, then 2 more, then two more decided not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by renewal. They took a chance and changed the world. Our decisions and our actions and our choices will ripple out in the same way – with unknown consequences. We start with that self-defining question: whom do we fear? Whom do we serve? When we know this, our actions start to form a certain kind of future. Some actions will be bold and newsworthy. Others will be as small and simple as holding a newborn baby. The story-teller says that Shiphrah and Puah quietly stood up to Fear in the form of a genocidal tyrant. Maybe soon, you or I will be saying, with the Apostle Paul, "I will not be conformed to this world of violence and injustice, I will be transformed." I will make the gesture that gives my child and your child and God's children a future.

That story-teller isn't writing anymore, but that doesn't mean we can't join the conspiracy. We can still join those six women, and the child pulled out of the river, and the child laid in a manger. It's good company, a great conspiracy. We can live out these words of blessing and benediction:

*May you love God so much that you love nothing else too much.
May you fear God enough that you need fear nothing else at all.*

Amen.

