

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

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Seventh Sunday of Easter

Exodus 1:8 – 2:10

The Mothers of the Hebrew Nation

*God, spark of life and liberty within all who care,
hold the mothers of the world, and the children of their hearts, in your arms,
sharing their joys and soothing their sorrows,
igniting their hope,
kindling their creativity,
and gracing their lives with hope.
May we be your arms.
Amen.*

Rudyard Kipling once quipped, “God could not be everywhere, and therefore God made mothers.”

I doubt Kipling intended to deify mothers. But maybe he wanted to suggest that the love, nurture, and courage that many mothers exhibit reflects and points to God – God being that sacred divine energy that gives life and hope.

Talking about mothers can be tricky. Some have not had the best of experiences. Some have experienced deep hurt and abandonment. Some have been abused. Some have no knowledge of their birth mothers, and might have been mothered by grandparents, foster parents, siblings, or fathers.

For some too Mother’s Day is a reminder of the patriarchal myths that women *need* to marry [code for: need to be under the control of a man], and in order to be fulfilled *need* to produce progeny. These myths can leave lasting scars. And Christianity has been complicit in the propagation of these myths.

Yet, for many others, whose experience and memories of their mothers is largely positive, it is a day to express gratitude, and acknowledge the strength, compassion, and often the feistiness of the women who raised us. We are in their debt. Without them we would not be the people we are. Without them we would not have life. They are the wellspring of the good life we enjoy.

One of great biblical stories about mothers is that of the baby Moses, and his miraculous escape from death.

God does not feature as a character in this story, like in some of the early stories in the Book of Genesis. God is not pictured as a heavenly master with “the whole world in His hands”. Indeed in this story, with its backdrop of the persecution and suffering of an immigrant, refugee people, to picture God as a Supreme Being CEO is deeply problematic. Any God who has the power to prevent suffering and doesn’t is immoral.

The God in Exodus Chapter 1 though is more like a spark, a synergy, which emerges when humans endeavour to protect and provide for those who are vulnerable. God is an empowering spirit who works through and beyond us, and in this story through the courageous feats of five women – all ‘mothers’ of Moses, and ‘mothers’ of the Hebrew liberating exodus from slavery to freedom.

Shiphrah and Puah were Hebrew midwives. On the one hand they were slaves, part of the Hebraic minority oppressed by their Egyptian masters. On the other hand they were health professionals who were personally instructed by the Pharaoh and personally disobeyed him.

Pharaoh wanted them to murder the male babies. Shiphrah and Puah, however, refused. The penalty for refusing would have been death. When summoned by Pharaoh, they lied: "The Hebrew women are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes." It is doubtful that Pharaoh believed them. Instead he circumvented them in order to carry out his murderous intent.

I think we need to remember the ethics and courageous leadership of Shiphrah and Puah. They are the only women in the Book of Exodus to act in an overtly political sphere. They are the first to assist in the birth of the Israelite nation. Shiphrah and Puah understood their religion's priority, and the priority of their profession, to save life had a higher priority than the dictates of any God or what Marcus Borg called 'domination system'. By their actions they revealed their willingness to value the lives of slave children at the risk of their own lives. They also revealed their belief not only in compassion but in equality, namely that slave babies had the same right to life as Egyptian babies did. [Not unlike the ethics of David Thoreau, whom I've been reading since arriving here].

Shiphrah and Puah also were prepared to face the god-like Pharaoh and lie to him. Honesty is sometimes not the best policy. Following rules and protocols is sometimes not the best policy. The ethic of preventing the death of children has a higher priority.

We are next introduced in the story to two nameless women: Moses' mother, whom we know from other texts to be Jochebedⁱ, and his sister, whom we know to be Miriamⁱⁱ. Courage is again to the fore. After his birth Jochebed hides Moses in her house for three months. Think of the fears - that every little cry will be alerting someone, that every neighbour or stranger may betray them ...

Then, in time, the family considers another option: place baby Moses in a basket, down by the riverside - ironically fulfilling Pharaoh's requirements that babies be thrown in the river!! There Miriam stayed and watched over her brother.

Note, too, the bravery of Miriam when the Egyptian Princess finds Moses: coming forward, rather than scuttling off, and bravely offering a wet nurse, namely her mother, for the babe. The Princess could have easily have had the baby thrown into the deep. It would also have been easy to surmise [or see!] the connection between Moses and Miriam, and deal with Miriam as one would with a lawbreaker. Instead Miriam's courage enables Jochebed to carry on feeding, bonding with, and enjoying her infant son, until such time as he was admitted to the palatial environs.

Lastly there is the bravery of the unnamed Princess: walking along and finding the baby; realizing that he is one of the immigrants - racially and religiously other - that her father despises; knowing that her father has asked every Egyptian to throw these babies to their death; and feeling her heart moved to pity and daring to act on the basis of that feeling. The princess of course is not Jewish, nor believes in Yahweh. Yet the divine nurturing spark is alive in her. It is not the princess's belief or lack of belief in God that is all important but her empathetic and saving actions.

The stunning part of the story though, the part that alerts us here we have a princess worthy of that title, is her naming Moses as her son. To save the baby's life she could have taken him as a slave. That would have been enough to get daddy's attention! If she liked Moses she could even have had him castrated and elevated to the status of a royal eunuch. Yet instead she takes this outcast, immigrant child, of the race and religion her father detests, and invites him into the royal inner sanctum as her son.

Biblical commentators often compare birth stories in different traditions. The closest parallel is the birth of Sargon of Akkad, founder of the Assyrian empire, whose mother bore him in secret, and set him in a basket of rushes, sealing the lid with bitumen. A certain Akki lifted him out and reared him as his own son. The striking difference is the role of the five courageous women in the Moses saga, compared with the absence of women, save his mother, in the Sargon account.

Theologically speaking we could say that the hopeful nurturing holy Spirit called God was incarnated, manifested, in this story of Moses in the bulrushes in the solid and confrontational ethics of the motherly midwives, in the love of his birth mother, the solution-engendering bravery of his sister, and the daring inclusivity of his adoptive mother. This Spirit was part of the spirit of these women, whether they were part of God's so-called 'chosen people' or not. This Spirit works from below, in partnership with the brave, in contrast to the kingly CEO God who orders from above and oversees it happening.

This is a story about the mothers of the Hebrew nation. It is a story that warns us not to be fooled by the might and power of god-like rulers/pharaohs, and similar gods in the centuries since, but to find ways to confront them and their discriminatory, often murderous, policies. It is a story that extols the faith of five women, whose power in a patriarchal world was very limited, four of whom were slaves. They were little sparks that brought, in time, a great blaze of freedom into being.

ⁱ Exodus 6:20.

ⁱⁱ Numbers 26:59.