

“The Power of Love”

We have been following the saga of Joseph and his brothers over the past weeks. Joseph is an aggravating little brother and his father’s favorite. After his annoyed brothers sell him to traders he ends up in Egypt. There he goes from being a household slave to imprisoned to being the second in authority in all of Egypt. The latter advancement was due to his ability to interpret dreams, one of the aspects that irritated his brothers so much. The famine that Joseph predicted through his interpretation of Pharaoh’s dream also affects the people of Canaan and specifically his family. The brothers come to Egypt in search of food. After some anguish and trickery Joseph finally reveals his identity to his brothers. He then invites them to bring everyone including his father to Egypt where he will take care of them. While all of this was a trial for Joseph, one might say “all’s well that ends well.” Indeed, after the scene of the family reunion, the next thing that happens is that Joseph dies at age 110. It really seems that after reuniting everything went smoothly. And so we get the kind of ending to Genesis that reminds me of the end of Bond movies, where there comes on the screen the words “James Bond will return in [Movie Title] in [year].” A teaser for the next installment.

Sure enough we turn the page and there is the book of Exodus. While neither Bond nor Joseph have returned the Hebrew people have. We get a quick reminder of the tribes of Israel and that living in Egypt they had multiplied and grown exceedingly strong. Then there is a rather abrupt change occurs when we read, “Now a new king rose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.” One can imagine a happy people living and working in Egypt and then boom the scene grows dark, and moves indoors. There we meet a cruel Pharaoh. He does not know Joseph and all that he did to save Egypt during the seven-year famine. He only knows his fear of the growing population of Hebrew¹ people. To resolve his fear he decides that all of the male newborns should be killed.²

Things have turned upside down for the Hebrews. What once had been a safe refuge from the famine has now become a prison. The Pharaoh has gone from being their friend to being fearful of them, all because he does not know Joseph. People who after generations of living as neighbors and friends are suddenly a threat.

Don’t for a minute think that this is something that plagued the “ignorant” people of the ancient world. Think of how neighbor turned against neighbor over religion in the former Yugoslavia, Germany, Egypt and Ireland. Or the difference in tribal ancestry led to genocide in Rwanda. Or how in Japan ethnic Koreans are shunned. Let us not forget how in the US race and country of origin have been an ongoing blight. These are just a very few examples of how we humans continue to vilify the other over the tiniest of differences when as human beings we have so much in common.

What is most compelling about this story is how it shows the weakness of Pharaoh. I have said many times how the Old Testament is rife with unnamed women. Yet in this story two women, Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives of the Hebrews, who have their names recorded in Exodus, defy the supposedly all-powerful Pharaoh who

¹ I will do my best to continue to call them Hebrews even though the text uses Israelites. But Israelites is an anachronism as these people are not Israelites until they settle the Promised Land, which is more than forty years hence. Calling them Israelites is like calling the Pilgrims Americans before they board the Mayflower.

² Does that remind you of anything in the Gospels? How about Herod killing the children of Bethlehem after he learns of the birth of Jesus? Matthew 2:16-18

is unnamed. Pharaoh, who by the way is unnamed, may think he is all-powerful but he is undone by two midwives who tell him a tall tale about how Hebrew women give birth more quickly than Egyptian women. An example of racism being turned on its head and used against the oppressor.

When Moses is born he is hidden by his mother for several months until she cannot hide him any longer. She makes a basket to float him down the river. Ironically, Pharaoh's second solution to the Hebrew problem is to have all newborn boys thrown in the Nile. But in the case of Moses it is the river that brings the child to his salvation.

Pharaoh's daughter finds the child and asks a young woman nearby (who turns out to be Moses' sister) to find her an appropriate wet-nurse for the baby. Of course, the sister knows the perfect woman to do this is Moses' birth mother. Thus the mother gets her son back until he "has grown up" at which time Pharaoh's daughter takes him as her son and names him Moses.

Not only has Pharaoh been undone by the two midwives, but by his own daughter. The clues are not subtle at all. Pharaoh is not strong and powerful. He is undermined at every turn by Hebrew and Egyptian women. In a patriarchal society these are all clues to his powerlessness. Of course, this will be magnified when Moses confronts him with the power of YHWH, and then when his entire army drowns in the Red Sea while chasing the fleeing Hebrews.

This is more than just a well-crafted story. It reminds us of the power of God. The midwives Shiphrah and Puah did not act against Pharaoh just because his decree was unjust. Rather it is because they "feared God" more than Pharaoh. They understood the power of God to be more than that of a human king, no matter how highly exalted he makes himself.

It reminds us of the words of St. Paul "If God be for us, who can be against us?"³ We may face trials and unjust treatment by others, but no matter the perceived greatness of their power or authority it is God's power, authority and love that prevail. God does not abandon us to the corrupt powers of the world. God's love is everlasting from age to age regardless of the ways of the world. God's love is not whimsical. God is not afraid. God is steadfast and righteous in all things. God is where we can pin our hopes. For as the psalmist wrote "Our help is in the Name of the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth."⁴

Thank God for all of the "powerless" women in this story who took hold of power in the ways that they could. By the grace of God, they used their perceived weakness to overcome the cruelty of the powerful who sought to use power for evil purposes. They knew millennia before Paul wrote it that, "If God be for us, who can be against us?"⁵

³ Romans 8:31 KJV

⁴ Psalm 124:8 BCP

⁵ Romans 8:31 KJV