



Caring for Children

Exodus 2:1-10

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Children's Sabbath

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

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. 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.

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?”

Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Yes.”

So the girl went and called the child’s mother.

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. 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.” - Exodus 2:1-10

The migrants from Central America making their way through Mexico could be a story from the Old Testament. They have been traveling for two weeks. Thousands of asylum seekers—mothers, fathers, and children—many on foot, makeshift camps, sleeping on the ground, and bathing in rivers.

They left home with the clothes on their backs and what they could throw into a backpack. Local people bring food, water, clothes, diapers, blankets, and money. Doctors treat them for blisters and dehydration. Churches bring rice and beans. Priests offer communion. Bands come and play and the migrants muster up the energy to dance.

They are trying to make better lives for their children. Honduras has one of the highest murder rates in the world. They are trying to save their children from violence and poverty. They are not carrying bombs. They are carrying infants.

They are driven by desperation, by the belief that this is their best chance to save their children from the suffering that surrounded them. They are not seeking the American dream. They are fleeing the Central American nightmare.

They do not have a plan, but they know their children were in danger and they want them to be safe. When you are desperate, you believe in miracles. How frightened would a mother have to be to take her children and run away from home?

When we hear this story our hearts break for these children. We might hope the concern we feel for these children could be shared with the children who are already here.

This is a scary time for America's children. As new policies eliminate the safety net that millions rely on to survive, America's children are suffering from hunger, poverty, homelessness, hopelessness, juvenile incarceration, and gun violence.

Nearly one in five children in the United States is poor. Nearly 70 percent of poor children are children of color. A parent working full-time at minimum wage cannot afford the monthly fair market rent for a two-bedroom unit and have enough money left for food and utilities. More than 100,000 children are living in homeless shelters. More than one million homeless children are enrolled in public schools.

In the United States a child is arrested every 31 seconds, a child is confirmed abused or neglected every 47 seconds, a baby is born into poverty every 49 seconds, a baby dies before their first birthday every 23 minutes, a child or teen is killed with a gun every 3 hours, and a child or teen commits suicide every 3 hours (*Children's Defense Fund*).

Every day in the United States, eight children or teens are killed with a gun, almost 3,000 a year. Among first world nations, the United States is last in protecting our children from gun violence.

Experts offer the horrifying estimate that one in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused before their eighteenth birthdays.

Many of our schools are under-funded. The United States spends an average of three times more per prisoner than per pupil. Can you think of a more backwards policy?

Children are the poorest people in America, but it is not because we have a money problem. We have a priorities problem. Robbing children to subsidize tax cuts for millionaires is wrong. The desires of the rich can wait. The needs of children cannot.

We should be horrified by the dangers children face. When we hear about a baby left in a car, we react with horror. Like the horror the first people who read this story in Exodus felt. Imagine the headline in *The New York Post*—MIDDLE EASTERN INFANT FOUND IN THE EAST RIVER! HOLY MOSES!

Our Sunday school teachers were not particularly sensitive, because most of us heard the story of Moses drifting along in the Nile when we were children. We certainly hope they would not have told the story if it had not ended well. The Hebrew people would have difficulty imagining their lives if the story had not turned out as happily as it did. How much different would our lives be if

St. Paul, Abraham Lincoln, or Martin Luther King, Jr. had died when they were infants?

Moses' story begins with the warning "a new king arose over Egypt who didn't know Joseph" (Exodus 1:8). Joseph's children are enslaved by a pharaoh who sees them as a threat. The Hebrews had not committed treason and were not planning an insurrection. The Pharaoh was worried because the Hebrews were doing so well. Their numbers made them dangerous (1:9-10).

How many government leaders have tried to gain votes by calling some oppressed group a threat to national security? Politicians who blame immigrants for our problems may think they have a new idea, but Pharaoh had it long ago. The plan does not work, because "The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied" (1:12).

Not only do the circumstances change, the Egyptians' attitudes change, too. They had lived in peace together, but now the Egyptians "become ruthless" (1:13).

The king moves to the second stage of his plan for ethnic cleansing. He orders two Hebrew midwives to kill any male babies born to Hebrew women. But Shiprah and Puah refuse to follow orders and let the boys live (1:15). When the king calls them on the carpet they offer a transparent excuse: "The Hebrew women give birth before we

can get there” (1:19). Mothers who have been through hours of labor wish it were so.

The King comes up with another evil edict, “Every boy that’s born to the Hebrews will be thrown into the Nile” (1:22). Moses’ mother recognizes the irony when she follows Pharaoh’s command and places her baby boy in the Nile: “Other baby boys had lost their lives in this river, but Jochebed claimed it as a river of life for her son” (Joyce Hollyday, *Clothed with the Sun: Biblical Women, Social Justice and Us* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994] 117).

Moses is the only character in the story that is named. We do not get the names of his parents here. Spoiler alert: Amram and Jochebed (Exodus 6:20). We do not get his sister’s name. It is Miriam (Numbers 26:59 and 1 Chronicles 6:3). We do not get Pharaoh’s daughter’s name or Pharaoh’s name. It is usually the child in danger who goes unnamed, but the writer of this story knows the child is the one to whom we need to pay the most attention.

No parents ever wished for a girl more fervently than Moses’ parents. This is one of the few places in the Bible where there is an advantage to being female. When Moses is born their hearts sink, yet Moses’ mother sees that he is a “fine baby” (2:2).

Moses must have been a quiet baby since they are able to hide him for three months. When his crying picks up, his mother comes up with a peculiar

plan. Moses' father is smart enough to trust his wife and stay out of the story.

Sometimes we take babies for a ride in the stroller to get them to stop crying. This is not that. She prepares a "basket" in which to float him in the Nile. Just like the mangers in nativity scenes look suspiciously like baby beds, drawings of Moses' tarred and pitched basket look suspiciously like waterproof bassinets.

What does Jochebed feel as she hatches this desperate plan? How horrible is it to take such a terrifying risk with your own child? What if the current picks up? What if it rains? What if the baby is not alone among the reeds?

How desperate does a mother have to be to give up her child to save him? The only workable explanation for what Moses' mother is doing is that she knows exactly what she is doing. She knows that the Pharaoh's daughter bathes right at this spot—which you would think would be a better-kept secret.

Jochebed stations his sister a little way off to keep watch. Some older sisters would gladly sail their crying little brother down the river. But Miriam understands that most of the possibilities are frightening. An Egyptian who follows Pharaoh's orders could find Moses. The boat could drift downstream and be gone forever. Crocodiles do not

inhabit that part of the Nile, but a little girl could imagine that they do.

What is she supposed to do if he cries? The instructions sound crazy even to a child: “We’re hoping the princess will come to take a bath. She’ll see your brother’s boat and look inside. She’ll think he’s adorable. That’s when you jump out and offer to have your mother take care of him.”

Some children given this job would be too frightened to stay, but Miriam is the heroine of the story. When the “daughter of Pharaoh comes to bathe at the river” it does not guarantee a happy ending. The attendants with her are not paying much attention if they do not notice a crying baby. And how many attendants does it take to watch a princess bathe?

Miriam’s heart beats wildly. Even if she hears the princess’ words—“This must be one of the Hebrew children”—she cannot know what the princess’ reaction will be. She is amused as this little girl appears and begins the conversation with an offer to find a wet nurse.

The princess knows what is happening. Miriam runs as fast as she can to get her mother. When she started making the basket, Jochebed realized that one possibility was that her son would live, but that she would never see him again. The way things are turning out is almost too much to hope for. The

princess asks her to take care of Moses and promises to pay her for her trouble.

The Pharaoh's daughter not only saves Moses' life, but makes sure his family has enough money to care for him. How could such a terrible king have such a fine daughter? The queen must have done most of the parenting.

How old do you think Moses was when they told him the story of his sister saving his life? Did Moses grow up recognizing that his life would have ended before it really began were it not for people who cared for children? Did he understand that it did not have to turn out the way it did?

Not all children escape. We may want to think of Moses' story as a children's story, but the truth of this harrowing tale is that children are in danger and we have to help them. If Moses' story had ended in tragedy, like many do, we would not have heard it. Most of the time we do not hear crying children.

But we can turn from our complacency, complicity and inaction and become voices for justice. We can stand against the powers that harm children. We can stand guard over children who are in danger. We can stand up for children who are threatened. We can make a difference.

We can start with children close to home by making sure that our church cares for children—inside our building and around the world. We can welcome all children. We can teach children that we

serve God by caring for children. We can live out of concern for the least of God's children.

We can pray for children who stare at photographers from behind chain length fences, who are born in violent countries we would never visit. Pray for children who never get dessert, watch their parents watch them die, and cannot find any bread to steal. Pray for children whose nightmares come in the daytime, will eat anything, have never seen a dentist, are not spoiled by anybody, go to bed hungry, and cry themselves to sleep.

Pray for children who will grab the hand of anybody kind enough to offer it. Pray for justice for all of God's children. Pray for our nation, its leaders and citizens, that we make choices that recognize each child's worth.

We can pray in a way that leads to action. We can push politicians to act as champions for the rights and needs of children. Every child should be safe from neglect, abuse, and violence. Every child should have an opportunity for an education. Every child should be loved.

God calls us through the cries of children. The way we live as God's children is by caring for God's children.

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