

Exodus 1-3

Let My People Go

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Rev. Kelley L. Becker

\*Title Slide

Sometimes when I initially read the text scheduled for Sunday, my first reaction is, “I don’t want to preach about that. I don’t have anything to say about that at all.” And then, it takes the rest of the week for God to bring me around to having something to say. I often think, when I hear a colleague say, on Wednesday, that their sermon is finished, that they must not be as stubborn as I am, they must not resist the text or have to argue with God about it. One of my biggest “preacher fears” is that someday I will get to the end of the week and still not have anything to say. Fortunately, this week, was the exact opposite of the kind of week I have just described. This week, I read the text and thought, “There are so many choices. What will I choose?”

I started the week assuming I would focus on Moses. I planned to talk about leadership, so the fact that the scheduled text includes Moses was a gift. I mean...if I was going to make a list of the great leaders in the Bible, Moses would be on it. After all, he led God’s people out of slavery in Egypt. He parted the waters of the Red Sea and the people walked across, on dry land, to safety. If ever there was a leader, it was Moses, right? But, as I worked with the text and paid attention to the world around me, it wasn’t Moses that I found my mind dwelling on. It was the women. It was the women who led, not in the same way Moses led, but in their own ways. They led covertly, working around Pharaoh and his oppressive system in which they lived.

Recall that last week, we left Jacob on the bank of the Jabbok, anticipating a meeting with his estranged brother, Esau. In case you are wondering, the meeting went well. Genesis 33:4, “...Esau ran to meet

him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.” At this long-awaited reunion, Jacob introduced Esau to his wives, Leah, and his favorite, Rachel, and his children. He had 12 sons. One of the sons, Joseph, belonged to Rachel, therefore, Joseph was his favorite son.

The other brothers got fed up and sold Joseph into slavery and he was taken to Egypt where he ended up serving Pharaoh. The brothers lied to their father and told him Joseph was dead. Meanwhile, Joseph gained Pharaoh’s trust and was basically Pharaoh’s right-hand man. Sometime later, there was a famine in the land of Canaan where Jacob and his family lived, so the eleven brothers went to Egypt because, thanks to Joseph’s management of grain supplies, there was food. Many cool plot twists later, Jacob and his whole household moved to Egypt where Jacob’s sons were fruitful and multiplied. And at the end of Genesis, Jacob died, Joseph forgave his brothers, and Joseph died.

So, here we are in Exodus. The book begins with a demographic problem. The problem was there were too many of “them” and not enough of “us.” There was a new Pharaoh in power who did not know Joseph when he served the previous Pharaoh. This new Pharaoh was afraid of the Israelites because there were so many of them. He did not want the Egyptians to be the minority. He began to “tell the story” that the Israelites living among the Egyptians were a security threat. Because of this, they were enslaved, they were the forced builders of Egyptian cities and they did the work the Egyptians didn’t want to do. That isn’t so hard to imagine, right? But even as they were oppressed, they continued to multiply, for life finds a way. So, Pharaoh hatched a plan, as the evil characters in the biblical narrative always do.

Exodus 1:15-23

<sup>15</sup> The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, <sup>16</sup> “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill

him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” <sup>17</sup> But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. <sup>18</sup> So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” <sup>19</sup> The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” <sup>20</sup> So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. <sup>21</sup> And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. <sup>22</sup> 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.”

Pharaoh’s plan was thwarted at the hands of two women, Shiphrah and Puah, whose covert actions in the form of civil disobedience, undermined it. It isn’t clear whether the women were Egyptian or whether they were Israelites. I tend to think they were Egyptian, but regardless, the midwives resisted Pharaoh brilliantly. They lied to him *and* played to his fear of “the other,” which when you get right down to it was the fear of Israelite fertility. The women, at great risk to themselves, chose the way of God (the way of life) over the way of Pharaoh (the way of certain death). When Pharaoh’s plan didn’t work, he upped the ante, ordering all Hebrew boys to be thrown into the Nile, which is where the next heroic chapter of this story takes place.

A baby boy was born to a Levite couple. The Levites were the Israelite tribe descended from Jacob’s son, Levi. The family tried to keep the birth of the baby of a secret, but as you can imagine, as the child grew, it was harder to do. So, in order to save her son’s life, the mom did a very risky, brave thing because that’s what mothers do when their children are threatened. She put the baby in a basket and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. When Pharaoh’s daughter came out to bathe in the river, she saw the basket and had her maid get it. She knew instantly the baby was one of the Hebrew babies. The

baby's sister, who had been watching from a distance, offered to go get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for her. The baby's own mother nursed the baby and even got paid for it. When the child no longer required nursing, the mother took him back to Pharaoh's daughter who named him Moses.

These women...the midwives, Moses' mom and sister, Pharaoh's daughter...these women, in a time when women had little power, used the power they had to subvert Pharaoh's oppressive, deadly ways. I love this story because Pharaoh was so threatened by Hebrew males, that he ordered the baby boys killed, yet it was females who laid all the ground work for his ultimate defeat. One of my colleagues said it well this week, "Watch out Pharaoh! Girl babies may not seem like a threat, but they grow up to be powerful women." The women in this story were leaders, but certainly not in the conventional sense. They were a different kind of leader than Moses would grow up to be, demanding Pharaoh let God's people go. In fact, they were a different kind of leader than most of the biblical characters that would appear on a list of great biblical leaders.

These women were behind the scenes, "do as I do," sacrificial leaders. They were not making speeches, building arks, or wearing technicolor dream coats. They were the kind of leaders who used their power, not for their own gain or recognition, but for the good of the whole. They gave of themselves, at great risk, to save the lives of others and ultimately the future of their people. Author and artist Jan Richardson described them as "Clever, creative, and fiercely devoted to those in their care..." She wrote, "...each woman displayed a sacred stubbornness that will forever alter the story of the people of God." Sacred stubbornness is something I can get behind.

\*I got a glimpse of sacred stubbornness this week as I watched 16-year-old Swedish environmental activist, Greta Thunberg's testimony at the

United Nations Climate Action Summit. Her remarks began with her response to a question about the message she has for world leaders.

"My message is that we'll be watching you," she said. This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!"

She continued, "You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you. We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up. And change is coming, whether you like it or not." Sacred stubbornness.

Greta is a courageous leader, with wisdom and a gift for speaking the truth. She is not the first or the only brave, young female leader talking about the climate crisis though.

Listen to this video of Autumn Peltier speaking to the UN General Assembly in March 2018.

\*Play Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A6LcaTWTx8g>

:51-2:01

Peltier is the chief water commissioner for the Anishinabek Nation, a political advocate for 40 First Nations in Ontario. She was just nominated for the 2019 International Children's Peace Prize. She is a water protector and has been called a "water warrior." Yesterday, she spoke to the United Nations again. Sacred stubbornness.

\*This is Isra Hirsi. She is the co-founder of the U.S. Youth Climate Strike and the daughter of Congresswoman Ilhan Omar. She said, at a recent environmental justice event in Minneapolis, "The climate crisis is the fight of my generation, and it needs to be addressed urgently." Sacred stubbornness.

These young female leaders, like the women in our text today, are not the most powerful among us, not even close. Yet, they are using their power to set what is wrong, right, and to insist we turn in a new direction, toward life. This is God's call to all of us. It is important for us to recognize that most of us have far more power than we claim. Like the women in the biblical narrative, like the young activists fighting for environmental justice, we are called to use the power we have to defy unjust powers, to stubbornly stand for the ones who are vulnerable, breaking the chains of oppressive systems by our actions and with our voices proclaiming, "Let God's people go!"

In the sermons the last few weeks, I've highlighted different chapters in Eric Law's book *Holy Currencies* and I've tried to connect the currency discussed in each chapter to the day's theme and text. This week, I'd like offer a few words about currency of "gracious leadership."

"Gracious leadership," Law writes, "is not about holding power over others; it is about knowing how to empower others to share their gifts and experiences and to do that which is beneficial to the community." Gracious leaders put the common good ahead of their own needs.

Like the women in Exodus and the heroes of today, gracious leaders risk their reputations, their safety, their time, their lives for others. They are more concerned with saving the world than saving themselves.

\*Law says it like this, "They know how to use their privileges and power not for their own gain, but for the purpose of moving the Cycle of

Blessings forward.” In the book, the Cycle of Blessings refers to the way in which our assets as individuals can be (should be) used for the good of the community and, in turn, the community’s assets are used for the good of the people, to bless the people. Good leaders, gracious leaders bless other people.

\*And so, I will leave you with this blessing, written by Jan Richardson:

Believe me when I say  
there is nothing  
this blessing would not do  
to protect you  
to save you  
to encompass you.  
This blessing  
would stand between you  
and every danger,  
every evil,  
every harm  
and hurt.  
This blessing  
would dare  
to wade with you  
into the waters that come  
bearing life.  
It would make  
a way for you  
through the waters that come  
threatening death.  
I cannot explain  
how fierce  
this blessing feels  
about you

but I can tell you  
it has more than pledged  
itself to you;  
it would lay down  
its life for you  
and not once  
look back in regret  
nor go in sorrow  
for what it has chosen  
to give.

And you—  
so deeply blessed,  
so utterly encompassed—  
what will you save  
in turn?

Not because  
it is owed  
but because  
you cannot imagine  
failing to pass along  
this grace  
that casts its circle  
so wide,  
this love  
that flows  
so deep  
through this perilous  
and precious life.

Be a blessing, dear ones. Amen.