

“The Power of One”

Exodus 1:8-2:10

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Today our attention turns toward one of the most disturbing passages in scripture. It is a story which describes Moses' birth and the first three months of his life.

I cannot imagine what it was like to live in these perilous times. To say the least, there was no shortage of fear, worry, grief and even anger. Listen as I describe the details with you.

Jacob was the third Patriarch of Israel, following Abraham and Isaac. He lived in Hebron in the land of Canaan approximately 1900 years before Jesus.

Seventeen years before Jacob died, he and his family moved to Egypt to survive the deadly consequences of a famine. They did this because Egypt had an abundance of grain in storage, and Jacob's favorite son, Joseph, was living in Egypt at that time. Perhaps you recall the story of Joseph and the coat of many colors, which played a significant role in this family's unplanned journey and lengthy stay in Egypt.

Jacob had twelve sons, but Joseph had a special place in his heart. Even though Joseph was Jacob's eleventh son, he was the first one born to Rachel.

Joseph's jealous brothers became angry with him one day and sold him to a group of Ishmaelites who were on their way to Egypt. When the Ishmaelites arrived in Egypt, they sold Joseph to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard.

Joseph found favor with Pharaoh and was elevated to second in command. Years later some of Jacob's sons went to Egypt during a famine to buy grain. Joseph recognized them as the brothers who sold him to the Ishmaelites. He forgave them for what they had done and made it possible for all his family to move to Egypt so they could survive the famine which was wreaking havoc upon their homeland.

As long as Pharaoh was alive, Joseph's family was treated like royalty. They were considered honored guests and good neighbors, and as a result they flourished.

When Pharaoh died, everything changed. The new king of Egypt did not know Joseph, and he did not include him in his inner circle.

He also treated Jacob's family differently than the former Pharaoh had. Instead of treating the Israelites with dignity and respect, the new Pharaoh turned them into slaves. Previous privileges granted to Jacob's family were revoked, and they were put to work building supply cities.

While the new Pharaoh was happy to have this cheap labor, he grew increasingly concerned about the growing number of Israelites. He lived in constant fear of them aligning with one of Egypt's enemies to overthrow him.

To keep this from happening, Pharaoh took extreme measures to curb the population of the Israelites in Egypt. First, he ordered the midwives to destroy all the male babies born to the Israelite women. When the midwives refused to do this, he gave every Egyptian the right to throw male babies born to the Hebrews into the Nile.

It was during this period of unspeakable horror Moses was born. Immediately, his life was in danger.

Moses' mother did a good job hiding him for three months, but she realized any day he would be discovered and killed. To save his life, she crafted a small basket which could float and placed him in it. She carefully situated the basket among the reeds where Pharaoh's daughter often went to bathe.

When Pharaoh's daughter heard the baby crying and saw him, her heart melted. She realized it was a Hebrew child, but refused to have him drowned. Instead, she took pity on this baby and decided to raise him as her own.

Moses' mother was brought to Pharaoh's daughter and was allowed to nurse her child and take care of him. As a result, Moses' life was spared, which made it possible for him years later to become the leader who mobilized and liberated the Israelites from bondage in Egypt.

How does this story speak to us today? Good and evil coexist in this world. They always have and always will.

I cannot think of anything more horrific than drowning innocent babies. This is barbaric and inhumane. No wonder our text uses the word "ruthless" twice. The author wanted to make sure his readers understood the level of evil being described.

At the same time, we read in this story about extraordinary women who defied Pharaoh's order and refused to let evil have the final say in their lives. The compassion and courage they exhibited lift our spirits and give us hope.

I suspect all of us long for the day when evil will vanish and justice will prevail. We dream about a time when there will be "no more death or mourning or crying or pain" as John wrote when he was on the Isle of Patmos and penned the book of Revelation.

So does God. God abhors evil, and its impact on all people. This is why God has commissioned all of us to pursue justice and peace by refusing to let evil go unchecked or have the final word in our world.

What can we do, though? The same thing which happened to Moses' generation is happening today. Our world is filled with violence, abuse, war, hunger, disease, injustice and indifference. People are at each others' throats and even slitting others' throats.

What can one person do? Can you and I really make a difference?

The Pharaohs of the world want us to believe we can't make a difference. They want us to throw the towel in and walk away. As people of faith, we cannot, and we must not do this. To me, this is the purpose of this story.

This story has been preserved to remind us that one person can make a difference. The thread which runs throughout the entire story is that individuals made decisions which, when pieced together, changed the outcome of one person's life and one nation's future.

Reuben persuaded his brothers not to kill Joseph, which made it possible for Joseph to end up in Egypt.

Joseph decided not to roll in pity and waste his life away, but make the most of a bad situation, which enabled him to rise to second in command in Egypt.

The Pharaoh in charge of Egypt at the time of Joseph's arrival saw his potential and befriended him.

Joseph chose to forgive his brothers and invited them to live with him in Egypt during a deadly famine, which saved their lives.

When the new king of Egypt turned against the Israelites and ordered the midwives to destroy all the male babies, the midwives refused to follow Pharaoh's orders.

Moses' mother took a chance by placing her three-month-old baby in a basket filled only with tears and prayers.

Pharaoh's daughter listened to her heart and provided a safe haven for a baby marked for death.

Everywhere you look in this story, you see the difference one person made in confronting evil and changing the course of history. Why can't you and I do this now? I believe we can. How?

First of all, take your faith seriously. To love God is to love the world as God loves this world and to make a commitment to do your part to make the world a better place for all people to live.

This is what these compassionate and courageous women did when they rescued Moses. It is what the prophets did as they nurtured and nourished the Israelites' faith. It is what Jesus did during his public ministry. It is what we must do as people of faith.

Take your faith seriously by embracing the values of the prophets and adopting the lifestyle of Jesus. Value giving over getting, serving over being served, sacrifice over self-indulgence, truth over deception, justice over injustice, generosity over greed, humility over arrogance, forgiveness over revenge, healing over hurting and peace over war.

In all of your dealings with others, be honest, trustworthy, reliable, dependable, fair, compassionate, forgiving, humble and unselfish. Live by the Golden Rule and treat all people with dignity and respect.

Be good neighbors by building bridges of understanding, goodwill and reconciliation instead of walls of suspicion and hate. Open your heart to those in need and be ready on a moment's notice to lend a helping hand to anyone who is struggling. Speak for those whose voice is ignored by those in authority and demand their concerns be considered like everyone else's.

This, in my opinion, is what it means to take your faith seriously. Anything less will not put a dent in the evil running rampant throughout our world.

Offer God everything you are and everything you have to be used by Him to make the world better. This includes your time, talents, resources, influence and voice. Forget about building your kingdom. Focus on building God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, and you will discover a level of joy, satisfaction and fulfillment you never knew existed.

Call out the people who are bullying, abusing, exploiting and hurting others like Pharaoh did the Israelites. Expose their selfish motives and evil deeds. Demand better from them and hold them accountable if they refuse to change.

This was what Moses did to Pharaoh years after he was rescued by these women, and it is what Jesus did to the most powerful leaders of his time. Neither one was timid but bold and courageous, as we must be.

Identify the Moses in your life who needs your help this week. Don't let the bad news in our country and around the world overwhelm or paralyze you. You may not be able to rescue every person in harm's way the next seven days, but you can make a difference in someone around you whose life is in peril.

It may be a family member, a schoolmate, a coworker, a friend, a neighbor or even a stranger God sends your way. Be ready. Don't make excuses. Listen to your heart. Do what you can, and allow God to connect it with what others will do.

Celebrate every victory, large or small. Thank God for using you to be an advocate and to make a difference in someone's life when he or she needed you the most.

Don't give in to discouragement. The battle with the forces of evil will be long and hard. You will grow weary in well doing, but never give up. Too many people are depending upon you to be faithful just as Moses depended upon those brave women who saved his life.

Rely upon God to empower and guide you. Standing up to bullies like Pharaoh is never easy. Rescuing those whose lives are in danger will drain you. Ask Moses' mother and Pharaoh's daughter. Ask Moses.

As I pondered the impact this story must have had upon Moses, it dawned on me. One reason God chose Moses to confront Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of Egypt years later was because of what happened to him at his birth. After all, Moses tried to talk God out of selecting him for this formidable task.

Why was God so insistent, and why did Moses finally relent and submit to God's will? I believe it was because of what happened to him the first three months of his life.

I am confident this story was told many times in Moses' presence. Only by the grace of God and the courage of these women did he survive. Surely, this gave Moses an acute concern for justice, a compassion for those who were oppressed and the zeal to do for his people what had been done for him shortly after he was born.

What experience from your past does God want to use to inspire and motivate you? How is God speaking to you through that event to shape your faith and future? I hope you are listening, and I know the people around you do, too.