

Choosing what is right

Exodus 1.8-2.10

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Life is a sequence of making choices. All day, we make choices, big ones, small ones. Our life offers us a bewildering field of options, and the choices we make, really matter.

Even small choices matter, because they lead to other possibilities, and new situations.

But it would drive us crazy if we think too much about this. I remember a girl in my secondary school who was a bit strange, she told me she had decided that for all options in life she wanted to make conscious decisions. As an example she mentioned that if she would turn on the light, she wanted to be intentional about pushing that button.

I thought she was crazy and sadly, I was proven more right than I could then imagine.

Yes, we make choices all time, but we must also depend on our routine in doing things. And we must trust that God in his goodness takes care of our life.

He plays a role in the choices we make. His providence makes our lives good. We make our choices, and in many of those, God is at work.

We see some of this in the story of baby Moses.

1. Pharaoh - the evil genius

Egypt had a Pharaoh who had not known Joseph. He was not aware of the great and positive role that Joseph had played in rescuing Egypt from famine.

So he did not have any feeling of gratitude to the family of Joseph and to the nation that had begun to develop.

The only thing this Pharaoh saw, was that the number of those foreign immigrants was growing, and he was afraid. Now this is a topic of all times, isn't it?

A tempting political strategy: solidify power by singling out a relatively weak minority or outsider group and calling them an enemy. Fear of others can be a powerful source of unity.

Those foreigners may do us evil in the future, so let us pre-emptively punish them, Pharaoh thought.



His first method was to make them work ridiculously hard as slaves. But they continued to increase in numbers.

Then he asked the midwives to make sure the newborn boys from Israel would die at childbirth.

When that did not work, he told all Egyptians to kill the boys, throw them in the Nile. Possibly as a religious service to Hapi, the popular god of the Nile. 'Let us honour Hapi and feed him the Israelite boys.'

This was pure evil of Egypt's leader. It was murderous, oppressive, and it was an insult to history: Israel had been so good to Egypt.

What pharaoh did was pure evil. Israel, and later the Church, saw in pharaoh always a symbol of the devil himself.

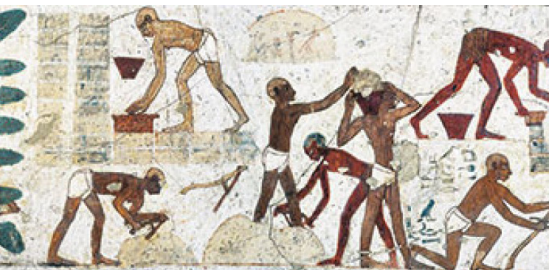
The evil one oppresses the people and ties them to sin. Moses is an image of Jesus, who liberates people, who leads them out of bondage.

Pharaoh reminds me also of King Herod, who killed the children in Bethlehem, to avoid that the Saviour would live.

Life can be so strange. Church Father John Chrysostom said:

Pharaoh commanded the infants to be cast into the river. Unless the infants had been cast forth, Moses would not have been saved, he would not have been brought up in the palace.

When things go bad for us, that does not mean the end. God can use all circumstances for the benefit of his people.



We often grow more in times of problems than in easy times. It may not feel nice at the moment, but when God prunes us, we become stronger trees.

The goal of Pharaoh's strategy had been to diminish and weaken the Israelites. But there was another power at work in, with and through the Israelite people. God's blessing and sustaining activity.

God is not mentioned in this first chapter of Exodus - but He was at work among the Israelites in their suffering. And He made them into the nation they were to be.

2. Moses - God's chosen saviour

The people of Israel knew the stories; they knew the stories, long before the book of Exodus was put together.

They knew that God would use that small baby in the little ark for saving his people.

But the life of Moses started miserable. He was given away by his mother, given up for adoption. What does this do with a child?

We know that often children who are adopted end up with a problem with their identity. I assume the same thing happened to Moses.

He learned all the sciences of the pagan Egyptians. He could write in hieroglyphs. He dressed like an Egyptian.

I think it is reasonable to assume that Moses, when he grew up in the Egyptian court, remembered his background very well.

He was nursed by his own mother. And while in our modern societies most mothers try to stop that nursing early on, in the old days, the child would enjoy the breast of his mother for two, three, four years. Moses knew his real mother.

And when he had to choose, he chose the culture of his mother, and the tribe of his father. He would be an Israelite.

So when he was taken to live in the house of pharaohs daughter, Moses must have suffered. His early life was miserable. He suffered for being brought up in a culture that was not his.

He had to carry his cross for saving his people. This was how God prepared him for his task.

Just as we cannot achieve much in life without paying a price for it. And if we desire to serve God and work in his kingdom, that price I can be high.

Following Christ has a painful aspect. As Christians we are never truly at home in the culture we live in.

No gain without pain. No glory without cross. God uses our hardship for loosening us from our wrong appetites, and to teach us. The real loss in life is if we do not learn and grow from our problems and sorrows.

The only way for Moses to become God's man, God's hero, was to go through these big hurdles in life.

And in our story today, he is not that hero yet. Today the real hero's are the others in the story.

3. Five faithful women

The leading characters in our story are killer Pharaoh and saviour Moses. But this saviour of the people will only 80 years later take up his staff.

But today, the heroes are five women. The father of Moses is just mentioned in passing, even underlining that the men play no role here.

The Israelites, sitting around their campfires later, must have chuckled while listening to these foundational stories of their tribes.



Pharaoh wanted the boys to die. Girls were not his problem, he thought. So look at the irony. His plans are subverted by the mother of Moses, his sister, two midwives, and even by his own daughter. All women.

The first heroes are the midwives.

They are called Hebrew midwives, but it is just as possible to understand this to mean: midwives servicing the Hebrews, and that they were actually Egyptians.

They refused to break their code of honour as midwives. They existed to bring babies into the world, not to kill them. A good rule for medical doctors today.

What these midwives did, was an act of civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance for the sake of justice; they refused to obey Pharaoh's deathly command.

They broke the law for the sake of justice and life. Yes, we are law-abiding citizens. But there is a higher law of God.

We also read of the mother of Moses. Maybe she was not brave, but she simply followed her motherly instinct to protect her son. And God rewarded her for being that good mother.

She was also shrewd. She conceived of a plan. She made a little box, to put her son in, literally, a little ark.

She knew where the daughter of Pharaoh would go for a bath, between the reeds of the Nile, and there she put her son in that ark. Hoping for Pharaoh's daughter to find him and have pity on her son.

Imagine how painful this must have been for that mother. To give her son up for adaption, so that he would have a chance of survival.

Sister Mariam was patient and she waited at that bathing place to see what would happen. She knew the habit of pharaohs daughter to have a bath in the river.

The occasion was possibly a religious solemnity which the royal family opened by bathing in the sacred stream. Peculiar sacredness was attached to those portions of the Nile which flowed near the temples.

The water there was fenced off as a protection from the crocodiles; and doubtless the princess had an enclosure reserved for her own use, and this was common knowledge - also for the mother and sister of Moses.

And what's amazing is that this strategy works!

Pharaoh's daughter was probably the bravest. Hebrew boys had to be killed in the Nile, but she adopted a Hebrew boy by taking him out of the Nile. As if it were her own son - while her father Pharaoh wanted those boys killed.

She gave him a good Egyptian name, Moses, taken out of the water.

What this Egyptian woman did, was an act of resistance against the power of evil, even her own father. She chose life over death.

Around their camp fires, centuries later, the Israelites must have laughed about this story, each time when they heard it again. Women!

They knew the story, they knew what was coming but the message was always so wonderful and funny at the same time. God took care of his people. God defeated the plans of pharaoh.

By whom? By two, possibly Egyptian, midwives. By a Hebrew mother and her daughter. By an Egyptian woman from the royal family.

The heroes are a powerful cross-cultural and intergenerational alliance of five women.

Conclusion

Feminist theologians will of-course point to this subversion of patriarchy. Look at these powerful women.

Stories like this in the bible are like a Trojan horse in that patriarchal society. You enjoy the story, but it also has consequences for your world view.

Who saved the people of Israel from Egypt? Moses? Sure. But what about those Hebrew women who played their role? Even some Egyptian midwives played a role. And a wealthy women in Pharaoh's court.

Moses was saved; the child whom the Egyptians should have put to death is raised to great dignity, he receives the best education and thereby he is groomed for his future mission to save his people.

God's providence is at work through all people involved. As it works in your life. But we see, for rolling out his plans, God uses people. Normal people.

The salvation of Moses and by Moses did not just not happen by itself. It was because each of the people involved made the right choices.

And they knew nothing of God's future plans. They acted in their own time, based on their own knowledge of right and wrong.

As we have to play our own role by making our right choices. That is the challenge these five women hold before us.

Whose side are we on? Do we side with the pharaonic powers in this world? That may feel secure.

Or do we side with weak people, victims of the system. People who suffer.

We must make such choices every day. Whom do I serve. Who has my allegiance. Who are my people. What is right and wrong?

You are regularly confronted with such choices to make.

Make your choices as a Christian, as a follower of Jesus Christ. That means usually that we have to side with the losers, the victims, the people who need help. And by doing so, you really choose the side of God and his plans.

+Amen.