

“Was Moses the Greatest Man
in the Old Testament?”
(or, “Do You Think That God
Can Use YOU in Some Way?”)
Exodus 1:8 – 2:10
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Oakland Avenue PCUSA
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Exodus 1:8 – 2:10 (NRSV):

- 1:8** Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.
9 He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we.
10 Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.”
11 Therefore, they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They build supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh.
12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.
13 The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites,
14 and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.
15 The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah,
16 “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.”
17 But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.
18 So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?”
19 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.”
20 So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong.
21 And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.
22 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.”
- 2:1** Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman.
2 The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months.
3 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.
4 His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.
5 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.
6 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.
7 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?”

8 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother.

9 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.

10 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."

Birth is one of the most beautiful and miraculous experiences of life. Of the four children whom my wife Sally has birthed, I have been present for two of them, David and Anna. Our first two children, Mary Leslie and John, were born in hospitals where the father was not allowed to be present in the delivery room. I was present for the births of both David and Anna. And I bear witness to the fact that birth is one of the miracles of life. And I encourage every pregnant couple to make sure that the husband is a part of the birthing experience.

Even though one of our children, Mary Leslie, died in infancy, I personally have seldom been involved in a birth experience that was clouded in uncertainty or sorrow. When I was a Pastor in Florida, I did have a church secretary whose baby died before birth and who struggled mightily with all that was involved in that trauma. Anticipating a birth in such difficult circumstances is a very hard and difficult experience.

Or, what if you lived in a country where there was not sufficient food and clean water and health care, and most of the children faced the slow death of starvation, never making it through childhood? Anticipating a birth in those trying circumstances is a very hard and difficult experience.

Or, what if you lived in China where the government has limited couples to one child, and it is common to allow girl babies to die just in order to try again to have a boy baby? Can you imagine the horror of those circumstances?

Or, what if the government had said that any boy babies born would be put to death and any girl babies would be allowed to live? Can you imagine anticipating a birth in those circumstances?

That was the situation which faced the Hebrew slaves named **Amram** and **Jochebed** (cf. Numbers 26:59) during the reign of **Pharaoh Ramses II**, the great king of the 19th dynasty of Egypt. *Can you imagine the frustration of wanting a son, yet praying for a daughter, and being horrified to discover that the child born is a son!*

Pharaoh Ramses II was the Pharaoh "*who knew not Joseph*" and who became alarmed that the Israelites were becoming too numerous. There was always the possibility that should Egypt be at war with a neighboring nation, the Children of Israel might side with the enemy! So, in order to keep that from happening, Pharaoh Ramses II ordered the enslavement of the children of Israel.

And yet the children of Israel continued to prosper, even after Pharaoh made their work more difficult. So, finally, the Pharaoh decreed that Egypt was going to practice birth control on the Israelites: any girl child born could live; any boy children born would die.

And Amram and Jochebed had a son!

If they named their newborn son, we are not told. But we are told that they hid him from the Egyptians. For three whole months they hid him. Those of us who lived through the Second World War, or those of us who have seen movies such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* or *The Hiding Place* will

have an idea of how difficult it is to hide any person for three months, much less a little, new-born baby! And I am sure that Nazi Germany's searching out and persecuting the Jews was no less thorough and no less horrible than that done by the Egyptians under the king "*who knew not Joseph.*"

It was rather ingenious that Amram and Jochebed came up with the idea of hiding their baby in the weeds along the riverside. Would you have thought of that?

It is at this point that **Miriam** enters the story. She is the older sister of the baby. She was called upon to sit and watch. How often you and I are called upon simply to sit and watch! Many times there is not a thing that you and I can do about what is happening to someone whom you know and love.

What a difficult job it is to sit and watch. The substitute quarterback knows the feeling. The vice president knows the feeling. The person related to an addictive personality knows the feeling. The friends of a couple who are going through a divorce know the feeling. The one sitting by a bedside waiting for a fever to break knows the feeling. And the Hebrew girl named Miriam knew the feeling.

In the providence of God, the daughter of Pharaoh comes down to the river to take a bath. She sees the basket floating in the weeds and she sends one of her servants to get it.

I have often wondered how "planned" or "staged" this incident was.

Is it not possible that, in the providence of God, Miriam was familiar with the usual bathing place of Pharaoh's daughter, and Miriam engineered the chance happening of the discovery of the basket made of bulrushes? *Did you ever think of that?*

What does it mean for God's Holy Spirit to be at work in the world today if it does not mean that the Holy Spirit works through individuals such as Miriam and you and I?

I do not yet know how in 1957 I came to go to Davidson College after I was a Gainesville High School Red Elephant. I do not think that I knew a Davidson student or graduate. I do know that what started the consideration of the school was that I received in the mail one day a catalogue from Davidson College. But WHO put me on the mailing list I do not know. One thing that I do know is that my Davidson experience was one of the most influencing and freeing and learning episodes of my life! But I do not know who my Miriam was.

Have you ever had a Miriam in your life?

Or, have you considered that God may want YOU to BE a Miriam to another person?

Being a Miriam may involve having patience and waiting. Or, being a Miriam may involve pushing the basket in the direction of Pharaoh's daughter.

That pushing of the basket may be nothing more than taking a plate of cookies to someone who is lonely and shut-in. Or, it may involve driving someone somewhere because they have had to give up driving a car for some reason. Or, it may involve taking a stand on some political issue of importance to persons less fortunate than you are, or advocating stronger penalties for child abuse, or speaking out on needed reform in jails and prisons, or sending money through our denomination to help suffering children in Sudan.

One of my best preacher friends, Thomas Duncan Walker of Nashville, Tennessee, reminded me that John Calvin once said that we are to read the New Testament in light of the Old Testament, and vice versa. The writer of Exodus reminds us that the birth of the nation Israel is inextricably bound up with the birth of Moses. In like manner, the gospel-writer Matthew reminds us that the birth of the Christian church is absolutely inseparable from the birth of the baby Jesus. For Matthew, Moses' birth served as a prototype of the birth of the Messiah, Jesus. That is why the birth of Moses is important and must be remembered by Christians as well as Jews. [Tom Walker quoted this in a sermon on July 5, 1987, at the Franklin (Tennessee) PCUSA from Brevard Childs' The Book of Exodus.]

The Old Testament story of the birth of Moses continues to provide the basic context for the hope of the world. Jesus, born in a stable.....amidst poverty, suffering, and political repression, came to fulfill the promise to Israel contained in the Old Testament. **Is that not absolutely marvelous?** The story told by Matthew of Jesus' birth is a reaffirmation of Moses' birth story in Exodus. And both stories bear witness to the providential love of God overcoming the evil intentions of the rulers of the world.

Do YOU think that the little baby **Moses** grew up to be the greatest man in the Old Testament? Many people would argue that. And is it not intriguing to wonder about the importance that **Miriam** had in bringing the whole thing to possibility?

So, what do you think? I hope that you will mull over this story during the coming week. Maybe you will think of a way that God wants to use YOU!