



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“In the Reeds”

Exodus 2:1-10

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This is a familiar story. An old story. We know it from movies like *The Ten Commandments* and *The Prince of Egypt*. We know this story from children’s times and story Bibles. I have to say in reading it and thinking about it this past week, I’m not sure I know this story at all. I’ve always seen it as a fun story, a straightforward story. But it’s not. The stakes are high. The pain and fear are real. This story involves a desperate mother, a resourceful sister, a disobedient daughter.

This story is set in the reeds. Preaching Professor Anna Carter Florence has preached from this vantage point and I am borrowing heavily from her excellent sermon.¹ She reminds us that the reeds are a watery, slippery, in-between sort of place. It is neither open water nor firm ground. In the reeds, it is muddy and murky and hard to find your footing, and it is difficult to know where the deep water begins and ends. Anything can happen down in the reeds.

Before we go deeper into our story, let’s remember the context. We’re in Egypt, the world superpower in those days, and the Hebrews are property of the Egyptians. This is a tricky thing for Pharaoh because there are some many of them and their population is growing. So Pharaoh comes up with a plan. He targets the boys. Every Hebrew male baby is to be killed on sight. He orders his fellow Egyptians to throw them into the Nile. The river – source of life for all who live in Egypt – is to be a place of death.

Back to today’s story. A Hebrew boy is born. This mother somehow hides his birth and somehow keeps him hidden for his first few months of life. But babies grow. And when she cannot hide him anymore, Moses’ mother takes a bunch of papyrus, lines it with the ancient equivalent of Kevlar, and makes a snug little ark for her three-month-old son. It’s an act of defiance as much as anything. And it is heartbreakingly limited. A Kevlar ark can’t save a child for long. He has one day, maybe two, perhaps three, before he will die of exposure. But anyone who finds him will get the mother’s message:

This is what we’ve come to, in Egypt.

Kevlar cradles.

It’s all I can do for my child.²

The daughter of Pharaoh finds the baby in the reeds. The Egyptian princess finds the Hebrew baby. You know what she is supposed to do. So does she. So does the sister. The daughter knows what her father’s law decrees. If this is a Hebrew male child, she is supposed to tip over the basket. At the very least, she is required by her father’s law to close the lid, give the ark a little push, and send it on down the river for someone else to deal with.³

¹ http://day1.org/7045-the_girls_in_the_reeds

² IBID

³ IBID

Instead, she opens the basket and peers into it.

This must be one of the Hebrews' children,

she says. She names the situation. Prior to that moment, has she really thought about her father's policy towards the Hebrews? I wonder if she is so busy enjoying the privileges of her life in the palace that she doesn't give much thought to the reality of these other people.

This must be one of the Hebrew's children,

she says. Sometimes, the truth is the most radical thing we can say.

That body, left for hours in the street.

Those thirty people, left in an unventilated truck in a Walmart parking lot.

That baby, left to die in a basket. Just telling the truth is huge.

Saying it out loud. Letting it reverberate in the air.

This must be one of the Hebrew's children, because no other mothers are reduced to this: making little arks to float in the Nile. Trying to save their babies from a flood of hate.⁴

When you are in the reeds, it is easier to see and speak the truth. Perhaps Pharaoh's daughter's willingness to speak the truth gives Moses' sister the courage to come out of her hiding place.

This must be one of the Hebrew's children,

she says, and then the sister gets an idea. She is smart and resourceful and Moses is fortunate to have such a sister. She says, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child *for you*?" Up until that moment, has Pharaoh's daughter considered taking the child as her own? Whose idea is this? Does it matter? These two devise a plan to save the life of the child before them. This whole interaction can only take place because these two leave the shoreline where things are known and fixed and Hebrews and Egyptians do not interact with one another. This conversation can only take place in the reeds.

"Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?"

"Yes," Pharaoh's daughter says.

She is all in.

It is about the craziest plan you can think of, to take baby Moses back to his Hebrew mother for a few years and tell everyone it is just fine because the whole thing is being authorized by Pharaoh's daughter. Really. But they do it, and they get away with it, and when Moses is maybe three years old, the daughter of Pharaoh takes him

⁴ IBID

into the palace and she raises him there, with her father down the hall; and who knows what he thinks about this whole arrangement. There is little Moses sitting in his booster seat at the royal table, riding his Toys-R-Us chariot through the throne room. The Bible never says anything about that part of the story.⁵

Why does Pharaoh's daughter do it? Is it an act of teenage rebellion – sticking it to her father? Or is it something deeper – a refusal to participate in that which she knows to be wrong, knows to be evil. What used to be just another public policy of her father's now has a human face – the face of an infant, the face of her son. When you spend time in the reeds, as murky and muddy as they are, new possibilities emerge.

It's a remarkable story that I think has some connection to our lives and what is going on in our nation. All week I have been thinking about what happened in Charlottesville and asking myself; are we in the reeds or are we on solid ground? Surely we can all agree, we can stand together, we can unite in condemning white supremacist groups and all that they stand for. Seventy-five years ago our nation fought and defeated the Nazis and discredited their racist ideology once and for all.

That's why last weekend so many people rallied around the social media moniker #thisisnotus. It was started and supported mostly by white people who did not want to be represented by those who rallied and committed acts of violence and murder in Charlottesville.

But here's the thing. I'm not sure the hashtag is true. Or maybe it's just incomplete. This is what *New Yorker* writer Jelani Cobb had to say about the hashtag.

I think the sentiment behind it is fine. But ...this is not us? Of course it is. You know, this is a country in which our bloodiest conflict centered on the right to own people, to sell people. We now have over 1,500 monuments and schools and roads named after the people who fought for the right to own people, to continue to own people. Maybe this is not all of who we are, certainly. But it is a vital ... stream in American history, and until we're willing to confront that, we don't really have much chance of ever getting past it.⁶

He's right. To say that what happened in Charlottesville has nothing to do with us frees us from responsibility, from engagement, from further action. Opponents of the hashtag are calling for a more honest, thorough, unvarnished look at how racism and white supremacy founded and shaped the United States. #thisisnotus doesn't tell the whole story. It's all more complicated than that. Perhaps #thisisalsohoweare would be more accurate. Oh, we are in the reeds, where things are muddy and murky, complicated and messy.

Which means this morning's story may be of help to us

This story encourages us to tell the truth. If we find ourselves in the reeds, and we don't know what to do next, we can start by telling the truth about what we see. Sometimes, that is the most helpful thing we can do.

This is one of the Hebrew's children.

This is what racism looks like.

⁵ IBID.

⁶ <http://www.npr.org/2017/08/14/543477439/new-yorker-writer-thisisnotus-downplays-history-of-racism-in-u-s>

This story also encourages us to do our part to help the Moses' of this world grow up. The odds of Moses making it out of childhood aren't good. His odds improve due to the watchfulness and wits of his sister and the compassion and courage of a daughter of privilege. As people of faith, we are invited to bet on the baby, not on Pharaoh, not on the empire. We don't just bet on the baby. We do something to improve the odds, one child at a time.

We can only do that work if we are willing to leave the safety of the shore where things are certain and fixed and nothing ever changes. We can only do that work in the reeds, where things are muddy and murky and the ground is anything but firm. Remember, anything can happen down in the reeds.

In the reeds, new alliances are made. New possibilities emerge. Lives are saved. God's liberating work begins. In the reeds we get closer to the day – it won't be any time soon – let's be honest, we won't ever get there but we can work towards it and get closer to it – I'm talking about that day when we look back at Charlottesville and say #thisisnotusanyomore

Amen.