



“Open the Basket”

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 books and story Bibles. I have to say in 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.

We’re in Egypt, the world superpower in those days, and the Hebrews are slaves of the Egyptians. This is a tricky thing for Pharaoh because there are many of them and their population is growing. So, Pharaoh targets the boys. Every Hebrew male baby is to be killed on sight. He orders his fellow Egyptians to throw them into the Nile River.

Only boys are targeted. Only males are a potential threat. Only males matter.

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 and makes a snug little ark for her three-month-old son. It’s an act of defiance as much as anything. Such a fragile vessel can’t save a child for long.

The daughter of Pharaoh finds this basket. She knows what she is supposed to do. She 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 give the basket a little push and send it down the river for someone else to deal with.

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.

Haitians in Springfield are now being fitted with electronic ankle monitors.

Last year, over 22,000 unaccompanied children were detained trying to enter the United States.

Just telling the truth is huge. Saying it out loud. Letting it reverberate in the air.

Perhaps the willingness of Pharaoh's daughter to speak the truth gives Moses' sister the courage to come out of her hiding place. She is smart and resourceful. 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.

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 actual mother for a few years and tell everyone it is just fine because the whole thing is being authorized by Pharaoh's daughter. But they do it, and they get away with it, these three women. Remember, Pharaoh has decided that women don't matter. They are not a threat. They do not have agency. Hmm.

And when Moses is maybe three years old, the daughter of Pharaoh takes him into the palace and she raises him there, with her father down the hall; and who knows what he thinks about this whole arrangement.¹

Why does Pharaoh's daughter do it? Is it an act of rebellion – sticking it to her father? Or is it something deeper – a refusal to participate in that which she knows to be wrong. 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.

¹ IBID.

It's a remarkable story that I think has some connection to our lives and what is going on in our world.

Earlier I said that last year, over 22,000 children came to the United States without a parent. Unaccompanied minors cross the U.S. southern border primarily to escape systemic violence and extreme poverty. Sending your kid off on such a journey may be the 21st century equivalent of putting your child in a papyrus basket.

For a minute, let's picture one of those kids. One child carrying what they can. One child separated from their parents. One child entering an unfamiliar place, surrounded by unfamiliar adults, alone and afraid. And did I mention that about one out of every four of these children who crossed the border alone last year was twelve years old or younger? Think about how bad things must be in their home country for a parent to send them on such a journey. What would it take to create a world where no parent makes such an agonizing decision?

Exodus invites us to ask such questions. It tells us about Pharaoh's policy against an entire people.

But then the story gets very small.

One mother.
One sister.
One basket.
One baby.

Maybe the Bible tells the story this way because enormous human tragedies can overwhelm us. But when we see one child in a basket, suddenly the statistics have a face.

This story doesn't give us a plan of action. But it gives us a starting place. Open the basket. Tell the truth about what you see. Sometimes, that is the most helpful thing we can do.

This is one of the Hebrew's children.

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 resourcefulness and tenacity of his mother, 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.

You may be thinking there is nothing I can do. I don't have any power. No one listens to me. That didn't stop the three women in today's story.

Amen.