

**Exodus 1:8-14 [15-2:10]; 3:1-15 (God's Reluctant Prophet)**  
**18<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost - Orange Shirt Day**

This week's passage begins with a crisis of identity for the descendants of Jacob, Israel, who migrated to Egypt with his family, including his son Joseph, to escape famine in the closing chapters of Genesis, where we read: *"a new king came to power in Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph or what he had done."* No longer known to the Pharaoh as a favoured people, the Hebrews become enslaved to him. The crisis sets the stage for understanding the identities not only of individuals in the book of Exodus, but also of the people of Israel and of God's very self.

Once again, we enter the greatest story in Judaism: the Exodus from Egypt. Immediately, there is the ever-present danger of looking under every rock, digging in the sand, and dredging the Nile for a scrap or two of some sort of historical proof of these legends. We are not reading historical facts here. This is narrative theology, the crucial truth about a people, wrapped up in a delightful and unforgettable story. And because some Hebrew author told and wrote it, it is cast in hilarity and barbed with less than subtle attacks on those who are not Hebrews - namely the Egyptians, who are nothing more than oppressors of the chosen ones, and at the same time, nothing less than fools.

The tale's basic problem appears in the rising of a new king over Egypt who did not know Joseph. It is more than obvious that no Egyptian, or no one who knew anything about Egypt, would write that particular sentence. Pharaoh might be called many things, even terrible things that some of his subjects probably called him - but never would he be called a king. Other nations had kings; kings were common, a dime a dozen. But there was only one son of the sun god Ra, and he was to be called Pharaoh, "great house" in the Egyptian language. So, a new pharaoh appears, and his prime characteristic is that he knew nothing of Joseph, the saviour of Egypt, as the book of Genesis had made clear.

And because this so-called "new king" did not know Joseph, *the previous pharaoh's right hand man*, he looks at these Hebrews with very different eyes. No longer does he see the heirs of the mighty Joseph, whose shrewd policies had saved Egypt in the midst of the country's terrible famine, whose family had come to live among the Egyptians in peace and to farm in the lovely land of Goshen. Now the new pharaoh sees only one thing about these Hebrews: there are just so many of them! "He said to his people, 'Look, the people of Israel now outnumber us and are stronger than we are. We must make a plan to keep them from growing even more. If we don't, and if war breaks out, they will join our enemies and fight against us. Then they will escape from the country.'"

The pharaoh's fears are historically so absurd that any search for history here is completely ludicrous. A pharaoh fearful of a gaggle of slaves? A pharaoh who actually thinks that those slaves are more potent, or stronger, than the great armies of the Egyptians? Not only is the fear ridiculous, there is hidden irony in the fear. The word translated "join" is in fact the very word from which "Joseph" is derived. Pharaoh may not know Joseph, but the "increase or addition", in short the "Josephing" of the Israelites, is precisely the origin of his fear. For Pharaoh, the Israelites are like rabbits; they are masters at multiplication. All of pharaoh's "wise" actions that follow are driven by that fact; the chief thing about these slaves is that they just keep growing more and more numerous.

So, pharaoh tries a series of three "wise" plans to shut off their multiplication skills. First, he suggests a very long day in the brick-making and pyramid-building places, so long that the last thing on their minds when they get home is multiplication. That is, *"They appointed brutal slave drivers over them, hoping to wear them down with crushing labour, but the more the Egyptians oppressed them, the more the Israelites multiplied and spread, and the more alarmed the Egyptians became."* It sounded like a very good plan, a most wise plan, but it did not work.

So pharaoh goes back to the drawing board. If sixteen hours of

making bricks does not divert their attention from multiplication, then how about twenty? *“So the Egyptians worked the people of Israel without mercy. They made their lives bitter, forcing them to mix mortar and make bricks and do all the work in the fields. They were ruthless in all their demands.”* This describes in detail the ruthlessness and brutality of the desperate Egyptians. But, plan two is also a failure.

Now the “wise” pharaoh gets more personal in his wild need to stop the growth of these weird slaves. He calls two midwives, women without families of their own who help other women in the birthing process, to come to the throne room of the mighty pharaoh. “Hebrew midwives”, the grammatical construction in the Hebrew text obscures whether “Hebrew” refers to the midwives’ ethnicity or that of the women they serve. The names Shiphrah and Puah mean “beautiful” and “splendid”, and so they may be generic, folkloristic designations for the women. Shiphrah and Puah could be Hebrews, Egyptians, or members of another group that goes unmentioned.

Shiphrah and Puah appear, and gazing up at the tremendous figure, raised high above them in power, they listen to his wise command. *“When you help the Hebrew women as they give birth, watch as they deliver. If the baby is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.”* The plan, if one stops and thinks for a moment, is really quite foolish!

After all, who gives birth? You really ought to kill the girls, O Pharaoh.

But the midwives, we are told, “fear God” and do no killing at all, and, after some time has passed, the census figures for Israelites continue to rise. Pharaoh thinks his command has not been carried out and once again summons the midwives. *“Why have you done this and allowed the boys to live?”* Even though that is not the problem, pharaoh sticks to the foolishness of his plan. The midwives calmly reply, *“The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women. They are more vigorous and have their babies so quickly that we cannot get there in time.”* Not only do the midwives demean pharaoh’s own women, but they tell him a whopper of a lie. Certainly not all Hebrew women give birth without help! But, pharaoh swallows the lie, hook, line, and sinker, and, collapsing on a pile of soft rugs, he screams out a terrible command. *“Throw every newborn Hebrew boy into the Nile River. But you may let the girls live.”*

This pharaoh is several bricks short of a load; he is not the sharpest knife in the drawer. In short, he is a tyrant of very little intellect. Although he does get one thing right - a boy is in fact thrown into the Nile, but hardly to die. Rather, that child will grow up in pharaoh’s own house, being nursed by that boy’s own mother who is paid for that motherly task by pharaoh’s own daughter! If anyone thinks that

these Egyptians are ever going to get the best of these Israelites, this Hebrew author wants us to know for certain that that will never happen.

The game is over in the top half of the first inning, precisely because Israel is the chosen people of God. Pharaoh, who was thought to deal “wisely”, instead has shown himself the fool, destined to be beaten by his adopted grandson, destined to lose those rabbit-like Israelites to a wilderness, a sacred mountain, and a land of promise. But as is seen later on in the story, these Israelites will, themselves, all too often become too much like old pharaoh, bent less on becoming the people of God and more on worrying about those who are not like them. It is always easier to play the tyrant than it is to be God’s people. Tyrants are a dime a dozen, while people of God ...? Well, they are rare, it seems, all too rare.

This reading skips parts of the story and continues to provide us with the first and finest example of the prophetic commissioning scene, the form of biblical literature that narrates God’s call to the prophets. It also shows us the calling of the first and best of all the Israelite prophets, the great leader of the Exodus. Moses calls himself “an alien residing in a foreign land”. But he is a man who has never really been at home anywhere. Raised by his Hebrew mother, he was adopted by Pharaohs daughter and given an Egyptian name,

Moses, which means “*drawn from the water*” or “*son*” in some translations.

Although he tries to intervene to help his kinfolk, the Hebrews, he ends up murdering an Egyptian and being rejected by his own. He flees Egypt and the mess he had created there, only to be identified as an Egyptian by the women he meets at the well. From the adopted son of royalty, Moses is now shepherding flocks, working for his father-in-law.

While tending his flocks in the wilderness, a burning bush attracts Moses’ attention. The bush isn’t consumed; it just keeps burning. Moses asks his first question: “*Why isn’t this bush burning up?*” It is his curiosity that brings him into his first encounter with God.

This is the situation when God “comes down”. When we say that God meets us where we are, the implication is that we are not always where we should be, but that God adapts and accommodates us nonetheless. Moses is not necessarily where he should be either, but the sight of the burning bush and God’s call will bring him out of obscurity and isolation - rescued yet again? And Moses is sent back to Egypt to lead the Israelite flock.

But, even for God, the task of getting Moses back on track is no

simple matter. The typical commissioning scene involves the prophet's objection to God's commission. Moses tries five increasingly lame excuses as to why he of all people, should not go back to Egypt to effect the release of the Israelites from slavery. He questions himself, his God, his lack of tricks among the very trick-filled Egyptians, his supposed poor elocution, and finally, and most truthfully, he asks God to choose someone else, something he apparently has thought from the very minute the bush started talking. Here is no big-chested, grandly-haired, man of power, but a little weasel, conniving to get out of God's call.

After turning from the question of his own identity, Moses turns to the question of God's identity. Moses cheekily demands from the talking bush a name. *"When they ask me, 'What is his name?' What shall I say to them?"* It seems to be a very straightforward request - the name of God. But if anything may be said about God's reply, it is not at all straightforward. Moses ponders God's cryptic response, *"I am who I am"*, an explanation of Yahweh, God's personal name. The grammatical background of this name is notoriously slippery, and subject to any number of translations, including *"I will be what I will be"*, *"I will be who I am"*, and *"I am what I will be"*. The deity is reserving the right to identify God's self on God's own terms - *I can be whatever I can be.*



So far, from a revelation of the name from the bush, what Moses in reality gets from God is a flat refusal to reveal the divine name. Moses is to return to the Israelites in Egypt and tell them that “*I am*” has been revealed to him. There is finally no real content in such a “name”, and yet it may be all Moses and we can ever get. The name seems to indicate that God is known **not by a name, but through God’s actions for others.**

In this and every prophetic commissioning scene, God’s work is once again aligned and intertwined with human agency. Just as Moses saw the Egyptian beating a Hebrew, and Pharaoh’s daughter saw the child and heard him crying, so also has God *seen* the misery of the people and heard their cries, and has moved to action. Such seeing, knowing, and acting for others is part of the very identity of God. And much of Moses’ identity emerges from his own past, so God’s actions in the present emerge from God’s past commitments to the ancestors. The God of Exodus is one who remains faithful to the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But unlike human commitments that can waiver and fade, God’s identity will be constant. God will be known in God’s future faithfulness to Moses and the people - *I will be with you,*”, God promises.

As previously stated, this passage provides us with the first and

finest example of the prophetic commissioning scene, narrating God's call to the prophets. But who is it that God calls in this story? The biblical writers focus on the call to Moses. But, it is very hard to believe that was the one and only call in this story.

Think of the women in the Exodus story: this is one of those precious parts of the Bible, that shows the intelligence of women in what was then a very patriarchal world. The women were intelligent, quick thinking, compassionate, faithful, courageous. Their power lay in these things, not in the domination as it was with Pharaoh. They were absolutely instrumental to the survival of God's people, they were catalysts to what lay ahead.

Each of these women in their own ways served as the start of something greater. They didn't stand by or contribute to the Pharaoh's terrible misuse of power, they subverted it. They recognized that their "thoughts and prayers" were not enough, they could *do* something. They were catalysts in God's kingdom, doing God's work in seemingly small ways, in their everyday, as the start of something greater ... and that something greater was the freeing of the Israelite people from the Egyptians under the leadership of Moses. It is not at all hard to imagine that it was God who had called these women to their tasks, who inspired and guided them just as God inspired and guided Moses.

The work of these agents counteracts the psychology of hatred and fear that motivates Pharaoh. Their collective work is a gracious defiance because of the way it embraces life and blurs Pharaoh's attempts to draw lines of distinction between "us" and "them", between Egyptian and Hebrew, between dominating and dominated.

The world hasn't changed much since the time of the Pharaoh. We may not have a Pharaoh, but we have something just as evil. The Egyptian treatment of the slaves brings to mind the treatment and abuse of our Indigenous siblings: the children who were dragged away from their homes and taken to residential schools where they were abused in every way possible. It became a world of "us" and "them"; colonialists and Indigenous people. To cut down on the multiplication of the Indigenous population, many women were sterilized against their will.

Our midwives were the people who investigated and provided the history, the stories of our own years of genocide. Through the Truth and Reconciliation report, we are called to build up the body, to tell the story and to carry on the ministry of Jesus, and pray that such atrocities will never happen again.

Moses is a model for our own unwillingness to perform the work of God, however much we claim to want to do it. And his excuses too

easily match our own, our self-questioning, our refusal to act for a God we cannot fully understand, our poor skills, our limited oral abilities, and our general hope that God will go elsewhere to find a servant. But, who will that servant be if it is not us?

God may not call us from a bush like he called Moses - maybe God needed a more dramatic way to get Moses' attention. We may not always be aware of God's call, but, when we are motivated to respond to our neighbour with love, compassion, faith, and justice, when we don't divide our world into "us" and "them", and those "who are not like us", we just may be answering God's still small voice that continues to call us, like the five, life-changing women - the midwives, Moses' mother and sister and the Pharaoh's daughter did. God comes to us where we are, and calls us to build up this body, which seeks to tell the story and carry on the ministry of Jesus, who was called "The One for Others."

**Amen.**

## **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

**PENTECOST 18    OCTOBER 1, 2023**

Gracious God, in love you created us, and in love day after day, you sustain us. So it is with confidence that we bring our prayers to You, knowing that You hear us, and will respond according to your will.

Holy God, God of love, You are the Creator of this land and all good things. We pray for the world around us, for the restoration and preservation of Mother Earth, Your beautiful Creation, and for all who are in need of Your healing presence and compassionate love. Lord have mercy.

Holy God, God of love, we pray for the many who continue to suffer and call out for help: for those without enough to eat in East Africa and elsewhere; for those caught up in violence and political uprisings; for those picking up the pieces of their homes and lives after natural disasters. Lord have mercy.

Holy God, God of love, we offer our prayers for the world around us. We pray for those who find themselves in bondage: those forced into slavery or prostitution, those oppressed by governments or economic systems, those enslaved by personal addictions. Lord have mercy.

Holy God, God of love, we pray for those who refuse to participate in violence or injustice, who courageously stand up for what they know is right, regardless of the personal consequences. Lord have mercy.

Holy God, God of love, we pray for those who oppress others, who are unable to break free from cycles of violence and anger, who no longer are able to value human life as precious or to empathize with their victims. Lord have mercy.

Holy God, God of love, Faithful God, we remember the many, many Indigenous children who did not return from residential school. Grant comfort in the midst of grief and trauma. We acknowledge the pain and shame of our history and the suffering of Indigenous peoples,

especially children. Renew our commitment to the journey of truth-telling, mourning and responsibility and guide us in the ways of healing and love. Lord have mercy.

Holy God, God of love, we thank you for the resiliency and strength of our Indigenous peoples and the survival of Indigenous cultures despite all the harm and injustices done. Teach us to respect and value the richness and diversity of all cultures. Help us to value and learn to be in right relationships with one another. Lord have mercy.

Holy God, God of love, we also pray for family and friends who are suffering: those struggling physically or emotionally, those working to overcome mental illness; those facing challenges at home or at work; those grieving the death of a loved one. (...) Lord have mercy.

Holy God, God of love, we pray for your church around the world, that it would be a living demonstration of your coming kingdom: offering hospitality to all, ready to help in times of need, showing love to friends and enemies alike, seeking to live in peace with all. Lord have mercy.

Holy God, God of love, we pray for our Bishops Susan and Kathy, for pastors, deacons, and lay leaders. Today we remember Spirit of Life Lutheran Church in Vancouver and Pastor Aneeta Saroop; North Thompson Ecumenical Shared Ministry in Barriere and Clearwater and Pastor Bruce Chalmers (Anglican) and the Anglican Diocese of Islands and Inlets and their Bishop Anna Greenwood-Lee. Lord have mercy.

Holy God, God of love, through the presence of your Holy Spirit, fill our hearts with love and acceptance in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, our rock, creating, redeeming and sanctifying. We praise you for your faithful love, and for the mercy you have shown toward us. Open our eyes to recognize your presence in our lives. Give us grace to hear your call, and courage to follow without hesitation, knowing that your way is the only way that leads to true life. In the name of Jesus, our Saviour and Lord,

**Amen**