

Exodus 1:8 – 2:10
August 24, 2008

South Plains
21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

kind of start in this world can live with the confidence and hope of faith.

The Lord Loves a Baby

As the stories about biblical heroes and heroines were making their way from campfire tales to written documents, the Holy Spirit insisted that babies not be overlooked. We see Jacob emerging from the womb. Samson and Samuel are both dedicated to the Lord's service even before they are born. Luke wants us to know that the conception and birth of Jesus marked him as the "Son of the Most High" from the very beginning. The Lord loves a baby.

Those stories speak to the importance of the baptism of babies. Regardless of when a person confesses their faith, we have good reason to believe that God is at work in our lives long before we are born. Parents, friends and extended family, as well as the environment that is prepared for a newborn all play a role in shaping human life. When a child is born to Christian parents, we believe that is the best evidence we can have of God's intention to claim that child as God's own. There is nothing magic about what has happened to Stephen Christian Taylor this morning when he was baptized. But, there is something profoundly mysterious and wonderful about the providential care that surrounds him, assuring him that the people in his life are doing all we can do so that he will grow up knowing the love of God as well as he knows his own name. A child with that

The story of Moses in the bulrushes is one of most familiar and beloved Bible stories because it is the story shows the care we want for all our children. Moses grows up pampered in the palace of Pharaoh and educated for service. He enjoys a privileged life that fits him for service, privileges that are ironically provided by the same ruler who wants him dead.

But, it is not just the external circumstances of his early life, as romantic as they were, that makes Moses a special child. The first few months of Moses' life illustrate the intractable moral order of the universe. As with the story of Joseph, God's name is barely mentioned. We know this is God's story because we know the context, and because the heroines demonstrate the kind of morality and initiative God wants for followers of Jesus Christ.

This is a tale of five heroines and a villain. The villain is Pharaoh, a new Pharaoh who does not know Joseph. The tribe of Jacob has been fruitful and has multiplied according to God's plan for creation and God's promise to Abraham. The fulfillment of that promise is what frightens Pharaoh. He enslaves the Hebrew people and tries to work them to death. When the Hebrews fail to die out, Pharaoh resorts to outright violence. He tells two midwives to quietly kill every male born to Hebrew women. But the midwives resisted because they feared

God more than they feared Pharaoh. They told Pharaoh that his strategy was not working because Hebrew women were so strong that children were born before the midwives could carry out his plan. They are the first two heroines celebrated in Exodus. Finally, this cruel king ordered that every Jewish boy should be thrown into the Nile River and drowned. Pharaoh was campaigning for the title "king of death," and he was frustrated at every turn.

The moral order of God's creation may not always reward the good and punish the evil, but here it blocks evil and uses the compassion and cleverness of two unpretentious women to put a hold on the unrighteousness of Pharaoh.

In this entire story, God is using the everyday goodness of ordinary people for a great purpose. Even the mean and cruel injustice of a powerful ruler is going to contribute to the salvation of the people of God. Whatever Pharaoh does, God turns it to the divine goals. Shiprah and Puah, those midwives with wonderful names, are not crusaders. They are bit players in the drama who decisively tilt the game in favor of life over death.

Then there is the mother of Moses and his sister whose cleverness tricks the family of Pharaoh into nurturing the very child who will confound and finally defeat the might of Egypt. The weak and vulnerable, those considered least in the kingdom of Pharaoh, are

quietly overcoming the world for the kingdom of God. Their leverage is not power nor is it position, but simply the love of a mother determined to save her son and the boldness of a sister who says to the princess of Egypt, "Wouldn't you like me to find a wet nurse to take care of this anonymous little baby you've pulled from the river?" In a few minutes, the value assigned to Moses' life by the Egyptians changes from worthless to priceless. And, the value that God places on this little child is confirmed not only by his family's love, but by the naïve commitment of the royal family.

The story of Moses in the bulrushes makes a nice parable for the hopes we have for Stephen and for every child of God. It is also a parable of the responsibilities of the people of God, the church that promises "to guide and nurture [our children] by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging them to know and follow Christ and to be faithful members of his church." That's the promise we make at every baptism. Let me suggest three ways we can keep that promise.

First, the church will sometimes take the part of the older sister. Exodus 2:4 says, "His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him." We cannot program every experience for our children. Parents take their children to the playground and stand back to watch how they will interact with other kids. One of the great privileges of a church family is watching other people's children. A few years ago I was vacationing on the Outer Banks and we ran into a family we had known from

church. We had watched their daughter experience all the temptations and pitfalls of adolescence. Suddenly, there she was, grown up and working as school teacher, helping teenagers to get through the same struggles she knew so well.

Your role and my role as friends of every child in this congregation is to watch at a distance, like Moses' sister, because the time may well come when we can step forward and help, just as this sister did. It may be a word, a pat on the back or a hand up. Lena Clausell, a tall Texas woman, was the Sunday School teacher for our son when Peter was three years old. One Sunday morning she came to us beaming with news. "Did you know that Peter has perfect rhythm? He was keeping time to the music we were playing in class this morning." That's only one example of the positive influence Lena had on countless Presbyterians by offering a word of encouragement in the name of Jesus Christ. South Plains needs Sunday School teachers to watch Stephen and older children so that you can help them grow up in God's sight just as Moses' sister helped him.

Another way we can fulfill the promise we make at every baptism is illustrated by Shiprah and Puah, those midwives. The church is a key midwife in the labor that births a better world. When churches provide emergency assistance to families, they identify needs that government can address. Hampton Sydney and Mary Baldwin are two nearby colleges started by Presbyterians who saw a need and filled it. Midwifery involves a

willingness to get dirty, even bloody and to take the risk of coaching and pushing on behalf of righteousness.

Finally, the story of the early months in Moses' life tells us that the struggle for justice and fairness is worth every bit of energy we have because we serve and just and holy God. Most parents just know instinctively that the work for their kids' welfare is worthwhile. Some of the rest of us have to re-learn that truth over and over. We get tired of Sunday School and youth ministry. We get discouraged when kids don't turn out the way we want. We may be tempted to suppose that the Pharaoh's of the drug culture and the materialism of Egypt will just overwhelm our efforts to do the right thing.

Don't believe it. Remember how the toy gyroscope always rights itself. God has created this world with a moral gyroscope that makes good ultimately more powerful than evil, that rewards the smallest bit of ethical courage by using it to bring another life closer to the ideal of Jesus' life, and that will bring to fulfillment the promises we make to nurture young lives.

The Lord loves a baby. We are called to be patient, dependable, and courageous lovers beginning with those God baptizes and continuing to the ends of the earth.