

A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 24, 2008, dedicated to the new members and especially to Elaine Clay-McGloughlin on her baptismal day, and always to the glory of God!

“Basket Case”

Psalm 124; Exodus 1:8, 2:10

Psalm 124

124:1 *If it had not been the LORD who was on our side – let Israel now say –*

124:2 *if it had not been the LORD who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us,*

124:3 *then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us;*

124:4 *then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us;*

124:5 *then over us would have gone the raging waters.*

124:6 *Blessed be the LORD, who has not given us as prey to their teeth.*

124:7 *We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers;
the snare is broken, and we have escaped.*

124:8 *Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.*

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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“A new king arose out of Egypt who did not know Joseph,” Exodus 1:8 begins. With this announcement, the

writer of Exodus tells us that the Israelites are about to face cataclysmic change. The new dynasty under Ramses II (1290-1224 BCE) is either ignorant of or indifferent to the extraordinary service that Joseph rendered Egypt and the crown. The external keys to the kingdom are gone. The locks have been changed on the palace gates for Joseph's people. The luxury of food, money, homes, and the resources that make for a good living are gone.

This new king is not a good king for the Hebrew people. And one thing is certain as we read Exodus 1:8-2:10, God's plan to save God's people has a very fragile beginning.

As in the story of Jesus' birth in the opening chapters of Matthew's Gospel, the story of Moses as God's "not-yet-revealed" instrument of intervention in human history hangs on a very thin thread of hope. Imagine this: everything in God's plan of salvation rides in the hands of two midwives, in the frail little ark that we call a basket in the reeds along the shoreline of the greatest river in the world, and depends upon the hoped for appearance of the Pharaoh's daughter and her supposed longing for a baby! This is what I call a frail beginning. (Drawn from B.S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* commentary, Westminster Press, 1974, p. 24).

When the king doesn't know God or God's people, the link to future salvation is mighty weak. *How many of you would underwrite your family business with such a flimsy business plan?* It is enough to make us wonder if God runs the operations of the world solely on faith!

Contrast God's vulnerability with the power of the world, which seems so impressive and invulnerable. Because God's

salvation always appears as a threat, the world can unleash its power against this frail beginning. Pharaoh, (aka the new king) devises a plan to destroy the Hebrew people, first by brutal forced labor and then by ordering the Hebrew midwives to kill all their baby boys.

But, it takes more than brutal labor and bureaucratic edicts to kill the people of God – especially when they have already started forging internal keys to replace the external keys destroyed by the new king. The Hebrew people cash in on the mercy of the midwives, the courage of Moses' mom, and the humility of Pharaoh's daughter (who stands with and protects the marginalized). These internal keys of mercy, courage and humility give life and hope to God's people. They become the real keys to the kingdom of God.

There are so many questions in this text. How is Moses' mother able to hide him for three months when all the other baby boys are being executed at birth? How does Moses' sister (Miriam, we presume) get into the Pharaoh's court and get up close to Pharaoh's daughter? How is it that Pharaoh's daughter doesn't suspect the woman who becomes the baby's instant nurse is not, indeed, the baby's mother? And why? Why does the daughter of Pharaoh come down to the Nile to bathe when her servants could bring her water and she could bathe anywhere but the dirty Nile River?

Beyond all these questions, the story of Exodus teaches us that these women save the world (if we didn't know that already)! Hebrew and Egyptian women defy the power of Pharaoh. Daughters of Israel and daughters of Egypt team up to save God's people. God uses them as instruments of God's grace and salvation so that by the end of the story,

Pharaoh and his powerful army are sinking in water in the Sea of Reeds!

If you live life as one who, like Pharaoh, “does not know” – does not know Joseph, does not know justice, does not know faith, or does not know God – you will not prosper in this world. Similarly, if you do not know that, in God’s plans, great things come from frail beginnings, you will always think that power prevails over truth. And this is not true.

Today, Psalm 124 reminds us that faithful living makes us vulnerable. Evil is powerful and we are challenged mightily in the face of evil. But, God is more powerful than evil. And faith is profound and decisive in overcoming the serious conflicts of life. *“If it had not been that the Lord was on our side,”* the Psalmist begins, *“then the enemy would have swallowed us, the flood swept us away.”* Blessed be God who saves us from the anger of our enemy, the torrents of raging waters and the snare of the fowler.

In the narrative of Exodus and the poetry of Psalms, we learn that our God will deliver us from threat, danger and destruction. With God at the center of life, all things are possible. Faith is the capacity to read, discern, and live under threat, always in solidarity with God. We, of all people, should believe this.

As we stand in the text of Pharaoh’s hatefulness, perhaps we need to remember who we are. We are the people of promise. We are the heirs of Joseph. We come from “Jacob, the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah” (Matthew 1:16).

May it never be said of us and of our lineage that “*there arose a people of faith who did not know Jesus.*” If we become *basket cases* in the face of danger and threats, remember our God will find a way – seemingly out of no way to save His people. Amen.

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