

Unraveled: When Plans for Our Family Unravel

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Exodus 1:22 - 2:10

Introduction

We often think that the path to amazing movements begins with the big, flashy signs that God is working among the people and that unGodly power will not have the last word. Some of us want a big sign, something unmistakable. We'd like some fire and lightning, crashing waves; a Cecil B. DeMille kind of moment would be nice. If not that, we'll take events like Jesus walking on the water (although like the disciples, we're likely to miss the point) or even a good parable that tells about how God does things.

Sometimes it happens like that, but I think more often God happens work through ordinary events as in today's story. God's intervention to save the people of Israel following Yahweh or Elohim starts with the simple issue of a baby being born. This baby wasn't so unusual. A Levite (name unknown) took a wife (name unknown) and she had a baby. In ordinary times, this would have been a time of celebration. The child would have been celebrated, the parents congratulated, and the community enfolding the child.

Except today that doesn't quite happen that way, does it. My little cousin just had her first child, a baby boy, just a couple of weeks ago, and while her husband was permitted to be there, the rest of the family has to satisfy itself with photos, videos, and visits through patio doors. All are safe, but remote to stay safe.

The child born in Egypt, on the other hand, as other male children of his time, was at dire risk. Generations after Joseph and his family settled in Egypt, the people have grown to be a large part of the population, and come under the tax system known as corvee labor – which means that they are required to do work for the king as a system of taxation. The new Pharaoh, the King of all Egypt, whom we are told “did not know Joseph” was getting worried about this large emigrant population in his midst. So the Pharaoh institutes some new rules that don't appear to have been long in the making. He thinks to himself that if the population gradually lessened, it would be a good thing. So, he orders the midwives of the Hebrews to kill all of the boys of the Hebrews when they are born. Shortsighted and against how God wants people treated? Sure, but the security of the nation was at stake – these were unusual times. Sometimes you have to

take shortcuts.

A Conspiracy is Formed

What we don't know is how this affected the parents – although I'm sure we can guess. Can you imagine how you'd feel if you knew that some powers, perhaps even the government, was actively trying to kill your children? In my last church, I did – we had several refugee families from El Salvador and Guatemala who had fled the violence of their areas and taken the dangerous trip, some more than once, to reach the US border and receive protection and opportunity here in America. Those children were not unmarked by those experiences – nor were the parents, who were perhaps even more protective of their children after the traumas that they had experienced.

Most of us will not have those experiences, but we do know what it means for a family to unravel – children who make unwise choices, parents who succumb to stresses in inappropriate ways, or an economy that seems to tank just at the wrong point – something some in our congregation are experiencing today. High schoolers having their graduation experiences cancelled, college students who've rebounded back to their parent's houses and in their old bedrooms, new parents trying to find their way without the usual family support. Add in the usual things – addictions going out of the control, family stress turning to domestic violence, unemployment of the usual sort – and it can feel like life forward has created unimaginable obstacles.

Those Hebrew parents saw the same thing, and if they had faced Pharaoh and all his power as individual families, well, it would have been unimaginable obstacles. But that was not what they did – these Hebrew people gathered together and found allies within the Egyptian power system that together challenged an oppressive system. For example, those in the immediate situation, the Hebrew midwives such as Shiphrah and Puah, are not about to go along with this. And so a conspiracy against the plan of the authorities begins.

At a conference that I attended a number of years ago, we did a bible study on this passage, and this is what one of our participants noted: that the midwives knew that the new rules were awful, and that they could not go along with it. They play on the fact that the Egyptian pharaoh didn't know much about them and tell him a big whopper of a story – about babies getting born too soon. which he buys, hook, line and sinker. The oppressed always know more about their oppressor than vice versa, even today.

But the Pharaoh is stubborn, and ups the ante. He declares, because of the large slave population, that all male children should be thrown into the river, so that the people would not grow stronger and overtake the Egyptians. So it came to be, that, if found, the child called Moses would be killed.

The Conspiracy Breaks Out

The community activity against this policy begins. The mother of Moses puts the baby in the basket and plops him into the river in a basket. Now, let us ask ourselves, was this just any point in the river? Probably not. My guess is that the compassion of Pharaoh's daughter was well known, through the network of the Hebrew slaves, and Moses' mother and his sister Miriam planned to put the baby in the river at just the point where it would be discovered, just at the time the daughter came down to the river to bathe. I wouldn't be surprised if we found out that the servant who reclaimed the baby from the water knew it was going to be there. And now Pharaoh gets bamboozled by his daughter, who finds the baby, knows pretty much for certain (given the current policy of her father) that this baby is a Hebrew, but decides that this is the baby that she can save. So, she decides to adopt Moses to protect his life.

And who nurses the baby? None other than his mother, helpfully provided by Miriam, his sister, who pipes up at just the right moment, with no questions asked of her by the Pharaoh's daughter. She probably knew who Miriam was too, but by not asking, she could claim that she didn't know. So, in a turn of irony not lost on the people hearing this story, Pharaoh ends up paying for the food, shelter, health care and education of a Hebrew boy who will turn out to be the leader of the very people that uprising against him.

Working Against Power

We have some lessons here for our faith, and for us as connected people of God. First, in this unraveling, we are going to need to stay connected to each other. One of my first pastor mentors always said, "Let us hang together lest we hang separately." (He probably was quoting someone else). A lot of our family unravelings things require of us not only rely on ourselves – we probably need more insight, more expertise, and faith than we ourselves can bring – and that's ok.

Second, we can be each other allies in making our way. Each family is different, the challenges vary. Some of our families have been through things that others are dealing with now. I'll never forget a worship service where we celebrated the adoption of a couple of children. The new parents asked all in the congregation who had adopted children, or who were adopted themselves, to come forward. A cloud of witnesses to the power of adoption came forward and surrounded this new family with their witness of what love had done. It makes me wonder how we might connect families experiencing similar things?

Third, God may only be implicitly present in these times. In the story of the birth of Moses, we might ask, "But what about God? Didn't God save the baby Moses? Wasn't it God who heard the cries of the slaves and worked for their freedom?" As one

commentator on this passage noted, “God seems to be out of town!”¹ It is the remembered God, the God who Shiprah and Puah feared, it is the compassion of Pharaoh’s daughter and the network of relationships in community that help to trounce the campaign for the security of the nation, which turns out to be anything but.

God in the Ordinary

We sometimes think that in order to get in touch with God we need to make some kind of journey, or do something amazing and out of the ordinary. I believe that there are times when God does make this call of us, but that a more important challenge for our lives is to find meaning right here and now in the lives we already have.

Friends, as we go through this hard time, we can connect and share with each other so that we are not left alone to handle unraveled times. May it be so. Amen.

1 Barry J. Robinson “Saving Moses” <www.spirit-net.ca/sermons/a-or21-keeping.html>