

THE HAND THAT SAILS THE CRADLE

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Exodus 1:8-2:10; Hebrews 11:1-2, 23-29

“...she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river.”

Exodus 2:3b

It happened last month. You may have heard about it in the news. A woman named Corey Widen, who lives in Willmette, Illinois — an affluent suburb of Chicago — heard a knock at her door. It was a police officer.

The officer came calling because an anonymous tipster — someone else who lived in the neighborhood — had notified the Department that Corey’s daughter, Dorothy, was being neglected. Turns out, the neighbor had seen 8-year-old Dorothy walking the family dog around the block. Corey was home at the time, and knew exactly what her daughter was doing, but the neighbor assumed that any child that young, walking outside her home alone, was at risk of being abducted.

Nothing came of the incident — the police quickly concluded there was nothing to worry about, and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services case file was quickly closed — but the case got national media attention. It does seem to be a benchmark of how high our national anxiety about the safety

of children has risen.¹

Corey Widen, some are now saying, is the victim of “mommy-shaming.” She let her 8-year-old walk around the block unsupervised. It happens to be a parenting decision that she — and a great many others — thinks perfectly reasonable. But her anonymous neighbor thought otherwise.

Parenting is like that. It’s a whole series of decisions about how much independence to give to children, as they grow.

In light of all that, the parenting story we heard a short while ago, from Exodus chapter 2, is likely to elicit gasps of horror.

The mother in question is named Jochebed. The parenting decision she makes — placing her baby boy, Moses, in a basket lined with pitch and floating him out on the River Nile — is incredibly risky. But for her, it’s a decision born of true desperation.

The Hebrew people are suffering as slaves to Pharaoh, mixing mud and straw to make bricks for his imperial buildings. It’s a life of misery, made all the

¹Kate Thayer, “Wilmette mom investigated for letting 8-year-old walk dog around the block. ‘For something like this to happen to me, there’s something really wrong,’” *Chicago Tribune*, August 23, 2018.

more difficult by a paranoid monarch. Pharaoh had come to fear his expanding slave population: what it would mean for his reign, should all those Hebrew slaves ever rise up in rebellion?

Pharaoh figures he's got to cull the ranks of his slaves, and his solution to this problem is as elegantly simple — and as evil — as the Nazis' "Final Solution." He orders that every male child born to an Israelite mother is to be murdered. This genocide is the horror that leads Jochebed to make her desperate decision.

But she wasn't the only one to resist the imperial edict. Before we get to the story of baby Moses in his basket, there's a story of couple of Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who find their own way to undermine Pharaoh's evil plan.

As midwives, Shiphrah and Puah are under royal orders to carry out the murders. Pharaoh's told them to check the sex of each new baby they deliver. If it's a girl, let her live. If it's a boy, kill him on the spot.

This puts the two midwives in a terrible dilemma. Do they perform this brutal betrayal of their own people — not to mention every principle of midwifery they've ever learned? Or do they defy the mighty Pharaoh — absolute ruler and god on earth — and probably forfeit their own lives?

They choose, instead, to do something quietly subversive. They just keep on delivering male babies, and when Pharaoh calls them to account, they tell a little

lie: “O mighty Pharaoh, lord and master, we tried to obey your command. But you don’t know how it is with our Hebrew women. We haven’t had any births to attend to, because our sisters are so strong! When they are pregnant, out working in your fields, they just stop for a moment and birth their babies themselves, right there, then go back to work!”

Pharaoh’s not the sharpest knife in the drawer, so he believes them. It never occurs to him to ask why such a hearty race would need midwives at all! But, he accepts their explanation at face value. Through this act of subversion, the future of the Hebrew people is secured — for a while.

Pharaoh gives up, eventually, on his plan of using Hebrew midwives as his executioners, and turns instead to his own people. “Seize any Israelite boy you see,” he commands his soldiers, “and cast him into the Nile.”

This is when Jochebed enters the picture.

She’s recently given birth to a baby boy, so she knows it won’t be long before some Egyptian discovers her infant son, tears him from her arms, and murders him.

So, she decides to put him into the Nile herself — but not in that way. Jochebed takes a basket, coats it with bitumen and pitch to make it waterproof, and gently lays her baby boy inside. Then she takes the basket down to the riverbank

and leaves it floating there, half-hidden in the reeds.

Jochebed does leave her baby there, but she doesn't abandon him. She posts her daughter Miriam as a sentry, hidden in the reeds nearby, to keep an eye on her baby brother.

Jochebed has chosen her stretch of riverbank with the utmost care. The place she hides the basket in the reeds happens to be the very spot where Pharaoh's daughter comes down to bathe, along with her ladies-in-waiting — and she knows it won't be long before they show up again.

So, what do these noble ladies happen to see, as they step into the river? A basket: how strange! Lifting the lid, they discover something stranger yet: a baby inside!

Jochebed must have known Pharaoh's daughter was a soft touch. She figures the princess will consider the baby a gift of the river gods, and she'll want to take care of it.

As soon as Miriam sees Pharaoh's daughter cradling baby Moses in her arms, she sets off part two of the plan. Miriam comes splashing out of her hiding place. She stops and stares. She lets her jaw drop in astonishment at this rare sight. She remarks on what a strange thing it is that Pharaoh's daughter should find a baby in a basket in the reeds. "Oh, Your Highness," she goes on, helpfully, "you'll

need a wet nurse to feed your baby. And I know just the person. It's my mother, Jochebed, who has just lost her baby!"

"Go fetch her," says the princess. And with that, Jochebed is reassigned to the royal palace, to secretly nurse her very own son.

The Jewish people have always delighted in telling this story, because it is so deliciously subversive. Oppressed people everywhere, faced with life-and-death situations, must fashion and follow their own desperate plans to survive. Jochebed is the ultimate survivor. Because she is, so will her son Moses be. And Moses will not only survive, but he'll grow up as playmate to Rameses II, the Pharaoh's son and heir. This means Moses will be uniquely situated, one day in the distant future, to lead his people to freedom.

Jochebed couldn't know that, of course. She just wanted to keep her baby boy alive. But the Lord had much larger plans: for the salvation of not only one little boy, but an entire people.

And so, Jochebed — who, on the face of it, looks to be the worst mom ever — is, in fact, the best of all possible mothers. Not only does she save her son's life, but she finds a way to stay close to him as he grows into manhood: close enough, no doubt, to find quiet moments to remind him, over and over, of who he really is: subtly whispering words of subversion into his ear.

In the Bible, Moses gets all the credit for saying “Let my people go,” and leading the Israelites to freedom. But we shouldn’t forget the crucial role his mother played, in setting him on that path.

For the past couple weeks, on Facebook, I’ve seen a whole lot of first-day-of-school photos, posted by friends. Maybe you have, too. It’s that time of year.

They’re all pretty much the same, those pictures: boys and girls, dressed in their crisp new back-to-school clothes, every hair in place, new backpacks at their feet, smiling obligingly and holding up a sign that says, “First day of third grade,” or something similar.

One back-to-school photo I saw made me laugh out loud. It was taken from the front porch of somebody’s house. It showed a teenage girl, her back to the camera, walking briskly down the front walk — totally ignoring her mother who was trying to take her picture. “First day of twelfth grade,” said her mother’s caption. (How appropriate.)

At any age, parenting is a work in progress. Garrison Keillor had some cogent observations on this theme a few years back, as he wrote these words:

“Children grow up, and your influence over them declines precipitously. You begat them because you pictured yourself as a wise and beloved patriarch, but instead you become the warden of San Question. Your offspring yell at you and bang their tin cups as you

walk through the cellblock. You try to enforce a few rules, and they ignore you. They become painted women in tiny shorts and tank tops and lascivious boys dancing in dim basements to bands with names like Stark Raving Idiots and Degenerate Thrombosis.

Either they will slide into a life of crime and addiction, or awaken in time to get into medical school and become pediatricians. One or the other. Either they'll wind up in the Big House, sullen, chain-smoking, heavily tattooed, or they'll be making the rounds in a starched white smock, placing a stethoscope against the chests of tiny infants. And you, Mom and Pop, will have had mighty little influence on the outcome.”²

Mark that final line well: you “will have had mighty little influence on the outcome.” There’s a deep truth there, that happens to be one of the most baffling paradoxes of parenthood. As much as we who are parents would like to believe we mold our children’s lives into the perfect product of our hopes and dreams, there comes a time for pushing that basket out into the river-current and watching — with a nerve-chilling feeling of near-helplessness — where wind and wave will take it.

None of us want to hear this, of course, during the years when we may have children at home. If life has placed us in that position, there’s a part of us that strives for perfectionism. We desperately want to believe that it’s our efforts, as

²Garrison Keillor, *The Old Scout* column on the Prairie Home Companion website, “Why a Man Should Turn 64,” August 8, 2006.

parents, that make all the difference. We want to believe that the choice of the right t-ball team can actually be life-changing, that the years of dance lessons will one day yield a *prima ballerina*, that forbidding our teenage daughter to go out with that surly kid who can't seem to put a sentence together will have some impact on her decision — quite possibly, our advice may have the opposite outcome than the one we intend..

Children, almost from the day they're born, slowly morph into the image of that twelfth-grader walking down the front path, her back turned to her mother. It's the way of things — the way God intended them to be. It's the job of parents, along the way, to provide a combination of protection and freedom — with the ratio between those two priorities constantly evolving. It's the job of the young, eventually, to bust out of that protective cocoon and go their own way. The best of parents — at least, the most realistic — learn, like the mother with her funny Facebook post, to celebrate even the photo of the kid walking out of the house.

In the meantime it's our job, in the church, to provide parents with spiritual resources to aid that process — which is why the ministry of our Christian Education programs, that start up again this time of year, is so important. From baptism to confirmation and beyond, we're fulfilling an age-old pattern, living out a plan God has designed.

Jochebed wasn't the only desperate mother in the Bible to lay her newborn down to rest in a strange and troubling place. In the New Testament we hear how a young woman by the name of Mary gave birth to a baby boy and laid him in a manger — a feeding-trough for livestock.

It wasn't the most hygienic of settings. Nor was the barn-roof above her head the best possible shelter Mary could have imagined. Had there been such a thing as DYFS — the Division of Youth and Family Services — in first-century Judea, they would surely have sent a social worker around to open up a file.

That straw-filled manger was what Mary had. It would have to do. She and Joseph made the best of it, trusting God to make things right in the end, for their baby boy.

God, of course — once again — did just that: for him, and for the people he would grow up to save.

Our next hymn is, admittedly, a bit out of season. But let's sing this carol anyway: in celebration of the God whose plan is sometimes baffling, but always for our benefit!

("Gentle Mary Laid Her Child," PH #27)

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