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Exodus 2

Last week, as we began our journey through the Book of Exodus, I asked that we hear and remember and emulate the midwives who refused to do Pharaoh's bidding when asked to kill the baby boys of the Israelites. Shiprah and Puah were "interrupters." Interrupters of empire and domination and powers that oppress.

The second chapter of Exodus also opens with women—three of them, thwarting the intention of Pharaoh. Following the course of the midwives, they pursue their own civil disobedience. The mother of Moses hides him for three months and then looks for a way to save him from the fate of drowning as commanded by Pharaoh. The princess, the Pharaoh's daughter, finds Moses, and she also defies her father, choosing to bring Moses into the palace rather than inflict the fate of drowning upon him. And then there's the clever older sister of Moses who assists both her mother and the princess in their resistance to Pharaoh. Her quick-wittedness makes it possible for Moses' mother to take Moses home again to nurse him, giving her precious more years to be his mother before she has to bring him to the palace.

It is the courage of these three women, following in the footsteps of Shiprah and Puah, that is the foundation for the liberation story that is to come—the great Exodus from Egypt.

Once Moses is a young man, we see that he has inherited the determination to fight against injustice from these women in his life. And yet, he appears to not have learned the non-violent and civil aspects to their disobedience. But before we judge Moses too harshly for the killing of the Egyptian, we must remember that this foreshadows the deaths that God, Yahweh, will inflict upon Egypt in the attempt to liberate Israel. The Bible is never free of challenging stories.

But despite this one episode of violence, we see that Moses has a heart for justice. In addition to coming to the rescue of the Israelite slave who was beaten by the taskmaster, he attempts to settle a dispute and interrupt the violence between two Hebrew slaves. And once he is forced to flee Egypt, he comes to the defense of Midianite women, thus making a statement that his sense of justice is not just for Israel but extends to his foreign neighbors as well.

Because we already know the story of Moses, we know that he is destined for something even bigger than these experiences. But it is these experiences that are shaping him to become the great liberator of the Hebrew scriptures.

But before God calls to him from the Burning Bush, a story we will hear next week, God, who has been mostly absent thus far, needs to be brought into the story. There is a brief mention of God dealing well with the midwives, but Yahweh doesn't fully enter this

story until the cries of the Israelites rise up. In the last verses of Chapter Two, the Exodus writer tells us,

“After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out. Their cry for help rose up to God from their slavery. ²⁴ God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ²⁵ God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.” (Exodus 2:23-25)

We are not told why, but something about the king’s death changes the context. It becomes a pivotal moment. It creates space for the slaves to protest and for God to hear them and to act.

And God does hear. The cries of the Israelites stirs the creator of heaven and earth who had already made a covenant, a promise of blessing, to the fathers and mothers of Israel. God takes notice. And now the opposition to the empire will go beyond human resistance. It will now have the force of the power of God. God will now be directly involved in the rescue and salvation of God’s people.

This Exodus story points us to the truth that pain brought to voice in public speech has power. That God hears that pain and that God chooses to ally with those seeking justice.

We have born witness to these cries for justice...in the Civil Rights Movement of the past and in the Black Lives Matter movement of today. We hear these cries coming from our young people pushing us to respond to the climate crisis. We hear the cry for justice coming from our LGBTQ brothers and sisters seeking full inclusion and welcome and protection under the law. And now, many, many women are raising their voices in fear and protest about the recent Supreme Court decision and how it will impact their lives, their health, and their freedom.

Sometimes these cries are silenced; they do not always prevail right away. But our faith attests to the claim that these cries for justice can never be defeated because they evoke Yahweh. Breaking the silence with cries for justice means, in the words of Walter Brueggemann, that we become “allied with the transformative, emancipatory power of the creator God,” and what emerges is a “new historical possibility that characteristically subverts old settlements of power and certitude.” (Brueggemann, “Delivered Out of Empire,” Chapter 2)

This idea of the power of voices being lifted to God in protest and seeking justice, reminded me of a recent interview with Amanda Gorman, poet and activist, on NPR. Among other things, she talked about the power of poetry to equalize, to connect and to engage. She spoke about her new collection of poems, *Call Us What We Carry*, and the truth that we are all vessels of hurt and hope at the same time.

I find that Gorman’s poetry is a powerful example of the cry for justice being raised and evoking a response. Here’s a small excerpt from “Fury and Faith.”

You will be told that now is not the time for change to begin;
told that we cannot win;
But the point of protest is not winning.
It's holding fast to the promise of freedom
Even when fast victory is not promised.

These words from Amanda Gorman come from her poem about continuing to fight for the liberation and equality of black lives in our country. Indeed, a cry for justice that God hears and responds to. But her words are universal to all cries for justice. In all of our righteous struggles, we must "hold fast to the promise of freedom, even when fast victory is not promised." Gorman is our proof that pain brought to voice in public speech has power.

And we see that power in our Exodus story today. We know that the Israelite cry for help that rose up to God is powerful, but it's also just the beginning. The protest has begun. Now we wait. What will God do? What will happen next?