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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Exodus 1:22-2:10

24 July 2022

Summer of Stories: Miriam and Moses

*Opening greeting and prayer:*

Please join me in prayer: God of hope and faithful presence, help us discern your Holy Spirit's leading, not only through our story this morning but also through the rest of our time together in worship. Empower us to think creatively in response to injustice as the Hebrew midwives did under the Egyptian empire. Give us vision for how your kingdom, your renewed family might be changing the world even in the smallest circumstances. In Jesus name. Amen.

*Message*

Summer of stories 2022 – children of the Bible. We began our series with Cain and Abel, the first siblings in the biblical narrative. Cain's jealousy drives him to murder his brother, but God does not do the same to Cain. More violence is not going to stem the violence that has already plagued the first family, so God protects Cain from any possible retribution but does not allow him to inherit the family farm. Instead, Cain is destined to wander in the land of wandering. Two weeks ago, we explored the childhood stories of Ishmael and Isaac, both challenging and thought-provoking... and both seemingly approved by the very god who had called their father Abraham from his home to a new land. Both Isaac and Ishmael are nearly lost, but God sees to their futures, providing ways forward for the promise made to Abraham. These early stories about children in God's plan, though, leave us with many questions, often difficult to answer and

even more challenging to make sense of. Who is this God who journeys alongside these dysfunctional and broken families even from the very beginning? Was all that happened part of God's plan for the ancient mothers and fathers of Israel? Or maybe these stories are more of a witness to how God is present even in the most dismal circumstances?

Many generations have passed since Isaac and Abraham's journey to the mountain of Moriah. Stories of Isaac's sons, Jacob and Esau, as well as stories of Isaac's grandchildren lead us to Egypt. One of Jacob's sons, Joseph, is sold by his brothers to Ishmaelite or Midianite traders traveling nearby, who then sell Joseph in Egypt. In an ironic twist, Joseph's cruel brothers' intentions of getting rid of their youngest brother become the very salvation of the family when a famine forces Jacob's family to leave their homeland to settle in Egypt. Not only does Joseph save his family from famine in their regional home, but he also saves the Egyptian people, becoming Pharaoh's second-in-command and sustaining the food stores of the empire even as the famine reaches into Egypt. Again, we find that even in the midst of evil, cruel, and sinful intention, God seems to be working and making ways forward so that God's intention can be fulfilled even as humans try to have their way at every turn. The book of Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew scriptures or Old Testament ends with Joseph's death.

Our story today comes in the early parts of Exodus, the second book of the Hebrew scriptures. The descendants of Jacob and his sons have multiplied and become a large community in Egypt. They are sometimes called the "Hebrews" and other times the "Israelites" in Exodus. A king or Pharaoh has come to the throne of the Egyptian empire, and his experience and rule know little of how the Israelite people's ancestor Joseph saved the Egyptians long ago. His fear of how large the Israelite community creates anxiety for him as he wonders if the Israelites might join their enemies and rise up against their Egyptian neighbors. In his fear, he

decides to enslave the Israelites and use them to build cities for the empire. Even in their enslavement, the Hebrew community continues to grow which is then met by even more ruthless policy from the king who decides that all Israelite baby boys must be thrown in the Nile when they are born. “Hebrew” comes to be the reminder to the Israelite community of their enslavement, used by their foreign neighbors almost as a derogatory reminder of their low status.

As the king or Pharaoh’s cruelty continues to escalate, so does the resistance of women with the power to subvert his decrees and instructions. This story of the early years of Miriam and Moses is really a story of subversion, of civil disobedience in the face of abuse of power and authority. Moses comes into the world, saved by the Hebrew midwives’ disregard of Pharaoh’s orders. Moses’s mother hides him for the early weeks of his life until he is too big for her to do so anymore. Finally, she sets baby Moses in a basket among the reeds along the Nile. The Hebrew word for *basket* shares its roots with the word for *ark* used in the flood narrative in Genesis 6. We get the sense from this word that this basket is saving much more than Moses.

Even in placing the basket, Moses’s mother seems to know this part of the Nile River shore. It isn’t too long before Moses is found by Pharaoh’s own daughter, who realizes right away that this boy must be one of the Hebrew babies. She does the unexpected and saves Moses rather than throwing him into the river as her father has instructed. Miriam in her fervent watch over her little brother seems to immediately step up to the plate and offer her services to the princess, asking her if she needs a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby. The princess agrees, and Miriam goes to get her mother, who in an even more ironic twist, is paid to nurse Moses until he is big enough to join the princess and the royal family. The identity of one character is finally revealed in the last verse of our story. Moses or *Mosheh* is given his name by Pharaoh’s daughter because she drew or *mashah-ed* him from the water. Moses becomes a multi-ethnic young man

as his name is Egyptian, yet still connected to his heritage among his Israelite ancestors because it sounds like the Hebrew word for “draw,” *mashah*. Notice that no one else in the story has a name. We don’t even find out Miriam’s name until much later in the biblical narrative.

In the creative ingenuity of the powerless, a way is found for the Israelite community to once again flourish even in the midst of crushing labor and servitude to their Egyptian neighbors. Nameless women sacrifice their well-being and safety in the face of cruelty and evil. A wise mother and a clever sister create the environment for the growth of their family and the blessing of their community as they even get paid to take care of the newest addition to their family, and all at Pharaoh’s expense. We marvel at the ways that God continues to walk alongside the descendants of Abraham even as they become a nation in a land not their own.

We also realize in our story that absolute power as Pharaoh seems to wield it against those that are not his own people does not necessarily bring safety and security to his kingdom. By trying to force the Israelite community and even his fellow Egyptians to follow in his fear and anxiety, he creates the very conditions that he’s trying to prevent as even those closest to him no longer respect or listen to him. God’s image shines through every person, no matter how they are labeled or how they have been treated by the powerful. God’s image is honored, even in the humanity of the other, the disposable, the enemy, or the young. What I wonder is how Miriam told Moses this story later in their lives, after they had left Egypt and begun wandering in the wilderness, following the God of their ancestors as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Did they compare their childhood experiences: Moses grew up in Pharaoh’s household, while Miriam grew up in slavery? Did Miriam help save other Israelite babies with her mother? Did this particular method of hiding babies along the bank of the Nile become a common practice among Israelite mothers? Whatever the details may be after our story, we continue to see how

the God that we see in Jesus continues to walk alongside broken people in difficult circumstances, even the most difficult situations, and seems to bring the wisdom and discernment needed to subversively journey forward. Sometimes a person's very existence and continued flourishing is the witness that calls the powerful to account as Moses one day will.

*Closing prayer:*

Let us pray: God of subversive hope, may we discern where you are leading us and how you are walking beside us today. Please give us eyes to see and ears to hear the cries of those around us who have been disposed of or forgotten by our society, by our nation. Empower us with your spirit to think and act creatively as we respond to the cruelty and evil around us. Give us the strength to foster and nurture new life wherever you inspire it. In Jesus' name. Amen.