

Mo Blessings, Mo Problems Sermon Series

1 – A Basket Case - Exodus 2:1-10

June 1, 2025

Rev. Dr. Kory Wilcoxson

Today we start our summer sermon series looking at the life of Moses. I'm sure this is a story that's familiar to you. Next to Jesus, Moses is probably the most dramatized character in the Bible. From "The Ten Commandments" to the animated "Prince of Egypt," the tale of this castaway-turned-deliverer makes for compelling storytelling and even better special effects. But as often is the case, with no offense meant to Charlton Heston, the Moses we have met on the screen isn't quite the same Moses we meet in the pages of scripture. The Bible version is way more interesting.

During this series, we'll meet the real Moses, starting today with his enigmatic birth story. Here's where we are in the big picture: at the end of the book of Genesis, the entire nation of Israel has loaded up their U-Hauls and moved to Egypt to be with Joseph, the Israelite with the technicolor dreamcoat who helped save Egypt from a crippling drought. To thank Joseph for his service, Pharaoh invites Joseph's whole family to live in the lush Egyptian land of Goshen.

But that Pharaoh dies and a new one comes to power, and this new guy isn't too keen on these foreigners occupying such prime real estate. Not only that, but the Israelites have taken seriously the command to be fruitful and multiply, to the point that they are more numerous than the Egyptians. Pharaoh 2.0 fears a possible revolt from this underclass, so he enslaves the Israelites, making them build pyramids and sphinxes for the Egyptian empire.

That doesn't stop the Israelites from multiplying, so Pharaoh takes a more drastic step. He instructs the Hebrew midwives Shiprah and Puah to kill any boy born to an Israelite woman, because in Pharaoh's eyes, the boys were the threat. Ha! That's his first mistake! Doesn't he know it's really the women who run the church? The midwives outwit Pharaoh and tell him that the Israelite women are so strong, the babies are born before the midwives get there. And he believes them! By the way, the names Shiprah and Puah translate in English to "Swaddle" and "Coo," which I think would make a bonkers-good TV show. "These feisty midwives have nine months to solve the mystery and outwit the Pharaoh. Swaddle and Coo, now streaming on Netflix."

The Israelites continue to grow strong, so Pharaoh gets more extreme. He orders that every boy born to the Israelites should be drowned in the Nile river. So, that's where we start today, and I hope you can appreciate the irony and humor of the story I'm about to tell you. Upon hearing Pharaoh's murderous command, one young mother – we're not even given her name - decides to hide her baby for three months. That may be the biggest miracle in this whole story, because if you've ever tried to keep a baby quiet, you know they don't always cooperate for three minutes, much less three months. When she realizes he's getting too big to hide, she makes a small basket, places him in it, and sets him off floating down the Nile. Pharaoh wanted the babies drowned in the Nile, now this mother is trusting that same river to save her young boy. Pharaoh says throw the babies into the Nile; this mother gently, bravely places her baby onto it.

The boy floats along, with his sister watching from the banks, until he is discovered in the river by the daughter of the very same Pharaoh who commanded boys like him to be killed in the very same river. Rather than carry out her father's command, the daughter rescues the boy with the intent to claim him as her own. But her nobility has its limits. She's willing to save the baby,

but she wants not part of changing dirty diapers, so she commissions the boy's sister to find a nursemaid for him. The sister gets the boy's mother, who just moments before thought she'd never see her son again, and Pharaoh's daughter actually pays her to take care of the boy. Not long before this the mother was releasing her son to the fate of the river, and now she is being handed both the son she thought she'd lost and a wad of cash by the daughter of the guy who wants the son killed! Oh, catch take a second to catch your breath because that's just Looney Tunes.

Now, who would you say is the main character in this story? Who is the protagonist, the one who is responsible for moving the story along? You might say Moses' mom, who gets the ball rolling by putting her bundle of joy on the Nile. Or you might say it's Pharaoh's daughter, who makes the decision to spare the boy's life and ultimately adopts him as her own. You could even make a case for Moses' sister, who orchestrates the reunion of Moses and his mother. You could try to argue that it's Moses, but all he really does is float and look cute.

But there's one person that we would probably all agree is NOT a major player in this story, and that is God. God is not even mentioned in these 10 verses of chapter 2, which may lead you to wonder if God had anything to do with what happened to Moses. That's not unlike how we sometimes wonder if God is really present in our lives, as well. I know God has promised us to be with us always, but what about when God feels absent, when God seems nowhere to be found? Could God be at work behind the scenes here?

Let's see. In verse 2, when Moses is born, the Bible says, "When his mother saw he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months." Now, there's nothing unusual about that statement. Every mother thinks their baby is a fine baby, even if they look like a plucked chicken or a wrinkly raisin. And even she didn't think Moses looked particularly handsome, it's not like she was going to toss him out the window. No, what's interesting to note here is the Hebrew word for "fine" is "tob," a word which with the original readers would already be familiar. In the creation story, when God makes each thing, he pronounces it "tob," meaning "good." For example, "God made the plants and animals, and God saw that it was tob."

Why does this matter? Remember, the Israelites are now slaves in Egypt. They were originally promised, through Abraham, that they would inherit the Promised Land, but now they're stuck. Their story has hit a dead-end. So, the author connects the birth of Moses to the Creation Story as a way of showing that, through Moses, God is indeed active here, working through the circumstances to create something new. There is reason, in the midst of their oppression and slavery, for the Israelites to have hope, because God is with them, recreating. If that connection wasn't strong enough, Moses' mother puts him in a boat made with bitumen and pitch, the same materials used to make another boat, Noah's Ark. God also used that vessel to create a new beginning for God's people. By using these literary devices, the author is saying, "God is at work here, doing something new." God will use this Moses to bring new life and direction to this dead-end story.

But that will only happen if the people that Pharaoh has discounted are courageous enough to act. You realize that this story simply doesn't happen without the women in it deciding to do something. Isn't it delicious that the people who undo Pharaoh – Moses's mom, his sister, and Pharaoh's own daughter – are that ones Pharaoh didn't even recognize enough to fear? He wanted to kill all the Israelite boys, and yet it's the women who completely fool him. They all demonstrate amazing courage. Moses' sister risks her freedom to connect Moses back with his mother, and Pharaoh's daughter risks her father's wrath by going against his command. And Moses' mother is courageous enough to let go of her son and trust him to the open waters of

the Nile. Is there a harder thing to do as anyone who loves a child, to trust that God goes with our children when they get on the school bus or go off to camp or get behind the wheel of a car? It's not lost on me that I'm preaching this on the weekend my oldest daughter, Sydney, and her fiancée move to Columbus, Ohio. Moses' mom exhibits radical trust in God's presence and protection, and that trust gives her the courage to act, to let go.

It's her courage as much as God's providence that saves Moses. Even when her infant son is sentenced to die, she doesn't give up hope that God is with her, although it must not have felt like it at the time. No matter how dead-end the situation, we trust that God IS there. When Pharaoh makes his decree to have all the Hebrew boys killed, God doesn't throw up God's hands and say in exasperation, "Well thanks a lot, Pharaoh! Now what am I going to do?" God works through Pharaoh's inhuman decision and a mother's maternal instincts and a sister's protective actions and Pharaoh's daughter's desire for life over death to bring about good. God is always at work.

Here's the reality we all know too well: There will always be a Pharaoh out there. There will always be people who pursue power, who abuse authority, who take drastic steps to protect themselves from the will of the people. There's always going to be someone who seeks to enslave or oppress others, to silence voices of opposition. And, these leaders are always going to be susceptible to the subversive work of God's people, because Pharaoh is no match for God. Even when God may not feel present, we trust that God IS present, working through us to thwart the empires of this world and make God's kin-dom real here on earth.

That's what these women have to teach us today. With a mixture of fear and trust, Moses' mom let go of Moses and entrusted him to God's care. His sister kept a watchful eye on him, making sure that he was safe. Pharaoh's daughter took him in and protected him. They didn't just stand on the bank and pray for a miracle. They didn't sit idly by and say, "Oh well, God's surely abandoned us now." They act, trusting God will be with them. God gives them the courage they needed to stand up to Pharaoh, just as God has given us what we need to stand up to our own challenges.

I can't imagine the emotions Moses' mom went through as she put that little ark in the Nile river. We've all been in similar situations where we've had to let go, to give up, to change our dreams to fit a more sobering reality. It's not a fun place to be. But that doesn't mean God is absent. When the hatred of Pharaoh strikes in our world, our country, our community, we can wring our hands and say, "Gosh, what a tragedy." We can sit back and wait for God to do something. Or we can realize God is calling us to act, even if it only matters to one other person. We'll never do so perfectly, and that's OK. We'll learn next week about how much trouble Moses had in following God's lead. But let's remember the lesson this story has to offer us: God is with us, and what feels like a flood of adversity could be the waters carrying us into the new life God has for us. God is always at work, even when we can't feel God's presence. What feels like a casket may actually be a cradle.