

## **“Obstetrics—Hebrew Style”**

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

24 August 2014—Sermon Text: Exodus 1:8—2:10

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“Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety” (Benjamin Franklin).

In the Bible we often find rhetorical arguments called “from the lesser to the greater.” Here are several examples from Luke’s Gospel:

[22] He said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. [23] For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. [24] Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! [25] And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? [26] If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? [27] Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. [28] But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith (Luke 12:22, 28)!

Similarly “the lesser to the greater argument” we read in the Exodus text.

Our story involves what happened to Jacob’s descendants after moving to Egypt and sojourning there. Egypt sets the stage for Yahweh’s redemptive action on behalf of the Israelites. This story has emerged for some groups’ proto-typical call for steadfastness for those unjustly oppressed. For about 430 years Israel first prospered in Goshen and then life morphed into slavery. Something ominous began for these chosen people ghettoized in Egypt. Hear our lesson:

8 Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. 9 He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. 10 Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” 11 Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. 12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. 13 The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, 14 and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

15 The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 16 “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on

the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” 17 But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. 18 So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” 19 The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” 20 So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. 21 And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. 22 Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.”

2:1 Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. 2 The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. 3 When she could hide him no longer 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. 4 His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

5 The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. 6 When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. “This must be one of the Hebrews’ children,” she said. 7 Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?” 8 Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother. 9 Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it. 10 When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, “because,” she said, “I drew him out of the water” (Exodus 1:8–2:10).

In this story, we are introduced to the two most powerful men in Exodus. The first one is Pharaoh, who controls the destiny of individuals and nations. He is among the most powerful people in the entire Bible—named explicitly in 15 distinct books of scripture. The second powerful man in this story needs little introduction to those who know scripture—it is Moses. Moses is both law-giver and liberator of Israel. Moses is the first great prophet of Hebrew scripture and the one with whom Yahweh converses on a regular basis. In fact Deuteronomy 34 praises Moses by noting:

[10] Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face.  
[11] He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, [12] and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel (Dt 34:10-12).

Despite of the power of Pharaoh and Moses, there is an interesting and subtle thread that runs throughout this story. In a way, it is part of the Bible's rhetorical strategy which lifts up "the lesser to the greater argument." We know, after all, that Pharaoh and Moses are powerful in the extreme, but did you notice the pivotal role of the women in this story. Without Puah and Shiphrah, without Jochebed (Moses' mother) and Miriam (Moses' sister), without Pharaoh's daughter and her servant girls—there would have been no Moses. And with no Moses, then we also have no law and no liberation from the Egyptian oppression about which Exodus is chiefly linked.

The Hebrew people had an attention-grabbing way to deal with adversaries—they told funny stories about how foolish their oppressors were. It is a way by which Israel got to cheer for the underdog and it is just as effective now as it was then.

In the *Back to the Future* films, for example, we always root for the character played by Michael J. Fox against the big bully "Biff" in all his guises. Moses' mother gets to care for her little infant boy—and gets paid to boot. Then, later, Pharaoh gets an even bigger surprise. All along he was worried about the infant Hebrew boys and men who would be his undoing. Little does he realize his fatal mistake—he turns his back on the Hebrew women and his own daughter. He feared for his life the Hebrew men, but in the end it was a bunch of nameless women who do the 'ol boy in.

"The lesser to the greater argument" definitely operates in the biblical world and you can be sure God may still be working that way today! Here is but one example:

Jesus once fed five thousand people with a young boy's five barley loaves

and two fish. These were very paltry assets to throw a feast of that scale. In Jesus day barley bread was easy to come by as it was so cheap—certainly not bread from Central Market or gourmet fish—probably more like crappie. And who provided these resources for Jesus not a man, but a young boy. Yet our Lord takes these few resources, offers thanks, and swells them so there is enough to feed those seated on that mountainside.

So whether it happens to be a bunch of overlooked women or some loaves and fishes, When God is in play, then we always have a situation which looks to be “from the lesser” and yet it becomes “the greater.”

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