

Not Conformed but Transformed

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Texts: Romans 12:1-8; Exodus 1:1-2:8

Today we begin to read one of the world's most famous stories, a story that is foundational for both Christians and Jews, the Exodus story. It is the story of a people, oppressed by the Pharaoh but remembered by God, led out of slavery by a man who doubted his own abilities but trusted God.

The Exodus story is a great story. And there has actually been a lot of work done in recent years around the Exodus story in particular to learn whether there is any historical validity to it. Indeed, there is a new book, that will be published on September 12, by an eminent Jewish historian, Richard Elliot Friedman, called simply *The Exodus: How It Happened and Why It Matters*. I was so curious about this book that I wrote to the publisher, HarperOne, and asked if there were any way I could see the book before its publication date because we are beginning Exodus today, and the publication date is more than two weeks from now. And imagine my delight when he sent me a galley copy of the book! So I've been reading this book, along with another new book on Exodus published in February of this year by Rabbi David Zaslow called *Reimagining Exodus: A Story of Freedom*. Both books are fascinating, and will inform some of what I'm going to be sharing with you over the this and next 7 sermons I'll be preaching.

Friedman focuses on three questions: (1) Did it happen? Or as Friedman put it, "is the exodus from Egypt history—or a story?" (2) Why did this ancient people become monotheists, people who believed that there is only one God? And (3) who or what events gave rise to the idea that we should love others as ourselves? So – history, theology, and ethics. I hope we'll learn some of the answers to these questions as we proceed with Exodus—and we should note that these are questions that are important to each of us: (1) History: what is my story? What are the facts of my life? What are the important events? (2) Theology: what is the meaning of my life and how does it connect with the meaning in the world? (3) Ethics: what is right and wrong – how do I decide what to do?

So, let's begin the story and see what happens. The first question anyone might have is how did the Hebrew people end up in Egypt anyway? You may remember that two weeks ago, we were hearing the beginning of the story of Joseph, one of the ancient Hebrew patriarchs. He was one of the twelve sons of Jacob, and he was his father's favorite. His brothers resented the way his father favored him and decided to kill him, but at the last minute they changed their minds and instead sold him to traders. Eventually, Joseph ended up in Egypt, and after a series of twists and turns in his life, including time as a household slave, and a term in prison, he ended up as an important aide to the Pharaoh, with the particular duties of managing the nation's food supply during a famine which had come. His brothers and father eventually made their way to Egypt, seeking grain because of the famine, and upon being reunited with Joseph (another story in the journey), they

settled in Egypt. The story continues with the beginning of Exodus.... So now let us read today's passage. And as you listen, listen for some of the names of the people.

Exodus 1:1-2:10

1 These are the names of the Israelites who came to Egypt with Jacob along with their households: **2** Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, **3** Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, **4** Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. **5** The total number in Jacob's family was seventy. Joseph was already in Egypt. **6** Eventually, Joseph, his brothers, and everyone in his generation died. **7** But the Israelites were fertile and became populous. They multiplied and grew dramatically, filling the whole land.

8 Now a new king came to power in Egypt who didn't know Joseph. **9** He said to his people, "The Israelite people are now larger in number and stronger than we are. **10** Come on, let's be smart and deal with them. Otherwise, they will only grow in number. And if war breaks out, they will join our enemies, fight against us, and then escape from the land." **11** As a result, the Egyptians put foremen of forced work gangs over the Israelites to harass them with hard work. They had to build storage cities named Pithom and Rameses for Pharaoh. **12** But the more they were oppressed, the more they grew and spread, so much so that the Egyptians started to look at the Israelites with disgust and dread. **13** So the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites. **14** They made their lives miserable with hard labor, making mortar and bricks, doing field work, and by forcing them to do all kinds of other cruel work.

15 The king of Egypt spoke to two Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah: **16** "When you are helping the Hebrew women give birth and you see the baby being born, if it's a boy, kill him. But if it's a girl, you can let her live." **17** Now the two midwives respected God so they didn't obey the Egyptian king's order. Instead, they let the baby boys live.

18 So the king of Egypt called the two midwives and said to them, "Why are you doing this? Why are you letting the baby boys live?"

19 The two midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because Hebrew women aren't like Egyptian women. They're much stronger and give birth before any midwives can get to them." **20** So God treated the midwives well, and the people kept on multiplying and became very strong. **21** And because the midwives respected God, God gave them households of their own.

22 Then Pharaoh gave an order to all his people: "Throw every baby boy born to the Hebrews into the Nile River, but you can let all the girls live."

2 Now a man from Levi's household married a Levite woman. **2** The woman became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She saw that the baby was healthy and beautiful, so she hid him for three months. **3** When she couldn't hide him any longer, she took a reed basket and sealed it up with black tar. She put the child in the basket and set the basket among the reeds at the riverbank. **4** The baby's older sister stood watch nearby to see what would happen to him.

5 Pharaoh's daughter came down to bathe in the river, while her women servants walked along beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds, and she sent one of her servants to bring it to her. **6** When she opened it, she saw the child. The boy was crying, and she felt sorry for him. She said, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children."

7 Then the baby's sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Would you like me to go and find one of the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?"

⁸ Pharaoh's daughter agreed, "Yes, do that." 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'll pay you for your work." So the woman took the child and nursed it. ¹⁰ After the child had grown up, she brought him back to Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I pulled him out^[a] of the water."

So did you notice the names? The sons of Jacob are named. Later, these will become the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. And the two midwives are named. And eventually Moses is named. But that's all – the people we might expect to be named aren't. The pharaoh goes unnamed. And the parents of Moses also. We know that they are from the tribe of Levi, but we don't know their names. This is very interesting because in the ancient world even more than now a person's identity came from their family, specifically their parents.

It's interesting that the pharaoh isn't named because he is the most important person in the Egypt—and this tells us something important about this story. If we didn't know anything about the Bible, or the Exodus story, we would get a clue from this story. This story doesn't conform to the usual rules of storytelling. And that tells us to expect surprises. And the midwives are named. This is upside down – the pharaoh, king of Egypt but two slave women are. They are named Shiphrah and Puah. We only see them in this very beginning of the story. Already in this beginning story, there are twists and turns. The baby is born. He is a boy. He should be killed, but he isn't – Shiphrah means "brightness" and Puah means "brilliance" – both names have to do with light. Light reveals things. They are brave, and they are resisting the power of the Egyptian empire. One thing that is revealed in this story is that small acts of resistance make a difference, and that anonymous people are important in God's story. And that is still true.

Our other reading this morning was a short section of Paul's letter to the church in Rome, and I want to focus on verse 2: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good, and acceptable, and perfect."

Already our story is about not conforming and being transformed. The story doesn't conform to expectations; Shiphrah and Puah don't conform to pharaoh's orders. And so the baby is transformed from a slave child to the son of an Egyptian princess. He has an Egyptian name, Moses. And we already know that the descendants of Jacob's sons will be transformed from foreign slaves to become the nation of Israel in the Promised Land. But we are far from that right now. The story will unfold in the weeks to come.

Do not be conformed, but be transformed. Don't let the world tell you who you are and how to be you. Listen to God, in the quiet depths of your mind, let God shape you into your truest self. Following this verse leads us into uncharted territory – as the Hebrew people will be led in a couple of weeks. And indeed, this is the journey of discipleship – to let go of certainty, control, and conformity, and embrace ongoing transformation. It's a journey that we are on our whole lives long.

As we consider the whole Exodus story – from slavery in Egypt to settling as a free people in the Promised Land – can we find some parallels in our own lives?

What are the unnamed powers that keep us enslaved? Fear? Anger? Insecurity? Unforgiveness? Uncertainty? Grief? Where are the places where we are lost in the wilderness – not able to discern a path forward?

The Hebrew people underwent a long journey of development as they traveled from slavery to the Promised Land – they were fearful, they complained and fought, they missed the past, they built idols, they rebelled. And they grew in trust. They grew ready for a new beginning. Maybe as we travel along with them over the next two months, we can find some points of connection. And maybe we can deepen our connection with God, as indeed the Hebrew people did in the course of their journey.

The longest journey begins with a single step – and the first step is the willingness to engage the journey – shall we begin?

Amen.