

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Psalm 124

Matthew 16:13-20

New life in the midst of death

Sermon preached by Chris Booth

I think that what we have read in our reading from Exodus is a story of new life flourishing in the midst of death. It starts off by setting the scene: the people of Israel are living in Egypt, but a king has risen to power who does not remember Joseph. He doesn't remember Joseph, the Israelite slave who became one of the most powerful people in Egypt, who brought his people into Egypt so they could survive the famine and find a homeland. This king doesn't remember Joseph. And yet he rules using Joseph's methods. Joseph was a shrewd ruler, buying up all the grain on behalf of the king, because he knew that a famine was coming. When the people came asking for grain Joseph made them sell their land so they could eat, then made them sell themselves into slavery. If we've just read straight from Genesis into Exodus, it's hard not to hear that this new king is doing the same kind of thing. When he notices the Israelites, another nation living among the Egyptians, he feels afraid, and so he enslaves them – and puts them to work building storage cities for storing up wealth.

The king is worried that these foreign people living among the Egyptians cannot be trusted – that they might rise up and join Egypt's enemies in the event of a war. And he becomes more and more afraid, because enslaving them and putting them to work at hard labour has not made him feel any more safe. In fact he now feels like there are even more of them and they've spread to every corner of the country. Everywhere he looks he sees a potential threat. And so he feels he has to treat them more harshly, forcing them to work harder and harder.

It seems the king feels particularly threatened by Israelite men, and so he goes to Shiphrah and Puah, who serve as midwives to the Israelite women, and he tells them to kill all of the Israelite boys as soon as they are born – commanding them to participate in genocide against their own people. The thinking would be not just that there would eventually be no young Israelite men for the king to be afraid of, but also that this would mean young Israelite women would need to find Egyptian men to start families with, and this would dilute Israelite identity. This is the same kind of thinking that informed policies of removing Indigenous children from their families in these lands that we now call Australia. An attempt to erase culture and identity.

The king does not appear to be afraid of women, or suspect that women might conspire against him... He may be the most powerful man in the land... but he knows nothing about childbirth... Perhaps he's never been present at the birth of a child. And so Shiphrah and Puah are able to take advantage of this power that they have, the knowledge of bringing life into the world. And so they disobey his orders, they are able to make something up, and he has no idea, he can't question it because he knows nothing about birth. And they manage to do it in a way that messes with the fears and prejudices that are swirling around in his head, the fears about Israelites being stronger than Egyptians – able to give birth in a flash, before a midwife can even get there. The king may think he has the power to kill, but Shiphrah and Puah are more shrewd in their protection of new life. And it seems that God is pleased with them. God blesses them in their trickery, in their conspiracy to protect the lives of children.

This doesn't stop the forces of death. The king sees that the Israelites are continuing to multiply and grow stronger. And he demands that all the little Israelite boys be thrown into the river, the great river that flows down from the mountains of Ethiopia and Uganda, through Sudan, to irrigate and fertilise Egypt. This river nourishes the earth and makes life possible, but the king wants to use it to kill. Once again we are told a story of Israelite women's resistance against genocide. The mother of one of these little boys keeps her child hidden – I don't know how – until he's three months old. And then, at three months, she knows she can't hide him any longer. So she comes up with a plan that will allow her to keep her baby. She makes a basket for him made out of papyrus, makes it waterproof, basically turns it into a little boat or an ark. And she takes him down to the river in the basket, right near where the king's daughter is bathing, and places the basket in the water, leaving him there in the river. She's done what the king has said. Obviously, when the baby notices his mum is gone, he starts bawling, the king's daughter hears the cries and comes and finds him. The child, Moses, is adopted into the royal family, but raised by his own mother, who ends up receiving a parenting payment to raise him. Moses ends up being raised in such a way that he knows both worlds, the world of the Israelites and the world of the Egyptians, and this prepares him to lead his people out of slavery, into freedom.

Is there somewhere that you can think of, where you have witnessed new life flourishing in the midst of death?

In the gospel reading we heard about Jesus asking the disciples who they think he is. All of their initial answers are things they've heard others saying, suggesting that he is someone who has somehow overcome death. Some say that he is John the Baptist, who they remember being executed by the king. Some say that he is Elijah, an ancient prophet who never died, but was whisked away to heaven. Some say that he is Jeremiah, or another long-dead prophet. All of these speculations point to Christ's death and resurrection later in the story – as though the crowds are anticipating it without realising. And Simon Peter says that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. We aren't told here what kind of Messiah though.

What kind of Messiah is Jesus? Jesus is the kind of Messiah who comes to us and joins us in a world where human life is fragile and resilient. We have heard this at the beginning of Matthew's gospel. Like baby Moses, baby Jesus also risks being killed in a genocide by a paranoid king. His family flee and find refuge in Egypt, where they can raise him safely. In this story Egypt is a hospitable place, sheltering the baby Jesus and his family from harm.

In our church, and I actually believe in all the churches, there is a lot of fear about death and decline of churches. That's a real concern, and I think we need to be present to the grief of dying. But in the midst of that, I think we also need to be present and attentive to where new life may be growing. Jesus reassures us that the gates of death will not stand against the church. As we continue our worship today and throughout the week, let's be present to the grief of death, and alert to the signs of new life springing up in the midst of death.
