



A Sermon for The Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost
August 27, 2023



Moses in the bulrushes, by James Tissot

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New Life Episcopal Church, Uniontown, OH

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Exodus 1:8-2:10, Romans 12:1-8

Call the Midwife!

We have been following the story of the Jewish people this summer. Just last week, we completed the story of Joseph, the last of the Patriarch stories, and thus reached a major turning point. Genesis is over. Now the narratives look forward to THE defining moment of the Jewish story, the Exodus. It will take us three weeks to get to this story: two weeks of preparation to get acquainted with the hero, Moses, and then the big Getaway itself, which we will reach on Sept. 10, the day of our picnic! (*Food for the Road* seems like a good theme for that day!)

For Jews, these stories are formative to their identity. They all know these stories, and especially the Getaway (better known as Passover) which they rehearse every year, so there is no chance they will forget it.

Christians inherited the whole Jewish tradition, reinterpreted much of it, and looked beyond, to the coming of Jesus Christ and the redemption of the whole world. Christians call this long narrative *Salvation History*. It is really important that we know these Old Testament stories, because they are the foundation of *our* faith.

As frequently happens in Bible stories, unusual birth stories often herald the appearance of a very important character. We saw this with the patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all had barren wives who required some intervention to continue the patriarchal lineage. We may assume that the Jewish people had some tough times in the past, when their survival was not guaranteed, and the stories of conception difficulties are one way to relate that close call.

Now we get to Moses, and the birth narrative is even scarier. We have here the first recorded incidence of Jewish genocide. We know this malicious hatred was alive and well all the way through the 20th century

with horrifying results in the Holocaust. But maybe we didn't realize that it started so long ago.

The story of Moses is often placed historically in the 13th century before Christ, during the reign of Pharaoh Ramses II. There's no real historical proof of this, but the story as related in Exodus makes a lot of sense. First, the narrator tells us that even though Joseph was a commanding figure in Egypt, and under his aegis most of the Jews moved from Canaan to Egypt to avoid starvation, still something changed. In time, perhaps 400 years maybe? the Pharaohs had forgotten about Joseph and found the proliferation of the Jews in Egypt to be problematic. Too many Jews! The pharaoh tried to enlist the help of Jewish midwives to get rid of the male Jewish babies during the birth process. That did not work, because the midwives had no intention of killing off babies. (Remember the TV series "Call the Midwife"? There were episodes, notably related during the Thalidomide tragedy of the 1960s, when midwives were urged to abandon the unfortunate malformed babies and let them die. That didn't work either, since our heroic midwives were mostly nuns and highly empathic professionals.) So the pharaoh's order to call the midwives to genocide didn't work. Instead, it took bloody violence, loosing the Egyptian troops on the babies and killing them or throwing them into the Nile River to drown. The policy probably killed many Jewish children, but one escaped. His mother and sister were very clever.

Moses' mother placed Baby Moses in a basket and set it in the river. It washed ashore near the royal palace where Pharaoh's daughter came upon it, opened the basket, and couldn't resist the cute baby boy. Moses' sister Miriam had followed the basket's journey, and cleverly came out of hiding at just the right moment, telling Pharaoh's daughter that she, Miriam, could find a wet nurse to take care of the baby until weaning time, say, three years. Pharaoh's daughter accepted the offer. Miriam was, of course, referring to her own mother, who then got paid for taking care of her own biological son for three years. Very clever! This story explains how Moses came to be raised in Pharaoh's court, and that he did not know about his own heritage as a Jew until much later. In historical terms, this story also tells us that the Jews had a close call, barely surviving the genocide of the 13th century BC, and many times since.

This year in our gospel cycle we are hearing predominantly from St. Matthew's accounts. Matthew has been called the most Jewish of the gospel writers because he makes many references to Jewish tradition and often doesn't bother to translate them, assuming his Jewish audience knew what he was talking about. He modeled the figure of Jesus on the ultimate Jew – Moses. Matthew is the only gospel writer to recount the story of Herod's slaughter of the innocents, when Herod was trying to kill baby boys to find Baby Jesus. Matthew certainly knew the story of Pharaoh likewise closing a dragnet on baby Jewish boys, and Moses' narrow escape. In Matthew, Jesus is often on a mountaintop, much like Moses was, in receiving the Commandments from God. Just think about Jesus preaching the Sermon on the Mount, about Jesus going up the mountain for the Transfiguration, about Jesus summoning his followers to a mountain in Galilee to give them the great commission. Matthew used all these mountain experiences of Jesus, reflecting the life of Moses as model.

We need our heroes – we need the model of Moses, of Jesus. More recently, we need the model of Martin Luther King Jr, whose impassioned preaching at the March on Washington, 60 years ago tomorrow, referred to American mountaintops, from which freedom would ring. We need our inspiration from those who dare to encounter God and tell us about it.

We also need immediate models of grace. St Paul wrote to the Romans about our own gifts. He said, "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given us." Then Paul, names several gifts, ending with *Compassion*, shown in *Cheerfulness*.

We can't all be Moses, we can't all be Jesus or Martin Luther King Jr, but by gosh, we can be New Life parish, where enormous compassion and cheerfulness is shown, making a difference in the lives of others. Yesterday's Country Hoedown Event was such a beautiful example. Norm and I just couldn't stay away – we had to see it in action. Your compassionate cheerfulness was at work, feeding and entertaining your guests, providing dance music, meeting their every need with love. It blew me away. For me, you are the heroes today.