

# Hidden in the Reeds

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**Third Presbyterian Church**  
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**Exodus 1:8-2:10**

How many times have you watched *The Sound of Music*? I can't count how many times I have, and still I never tire of it. There is one particular scene in the musical that is my absolute favorite. Maybe it's yours, too. It's the scene after Maria and Captain Von Trapp have returned from their honeymoon. They've devised a plan to flee their native Austria so the captain can avoid his summons to serve in the navy of the Third Reich.

Remember the singing family's wildly popular performance at the music festival? Instead of making their way back onstage for an encore, the family slips out to hide in the abbey where Maria once aspired to be a nun. But they're spotted and outed by Liesl's boyfriend Rolf, and Nazi officers climb into their car to chase after the Von Trapps. But their car won't start. They are furious and frustrated that they've been thwarted and the family escapes.

Meanwhile, two meek and mild nuns sheepishly bring themselves to the Mother Abbess. Said one, "Reverend Mother, I have sinned." "I, too," said the second. And they look at each other, and pull out from their robes the distributor and coil that kept the Nazi officers from chasing the family. In the words of the ordination questions of the Presbyterian church, found in our church constitution, these two nuns serve with "energy, intelligence, imagination, and love."

There is no shortage of energy, intelligence, imagination, and love in today's Old Testament text that features five women. When I read through all of the lectionary texts for today to choose the one I would preach on, and I had the rare opportunity to focus on a story with not one, not two, not three, not four, but five women playing leading roles – well, that was too hard for this woman to resist! Think of it – it's as if it's Oscar night, the nominees for best male actor in a leading role are nowhere to be found, and all five nominees for best actress in a leading role come from the same film! It's a rare thing indeed. #oscarsofemale!

I would like to lift up these five women today - women struggling to preserve life in the midst of death-dealing destruction; women calling on their abundance of creativity to defy a murderous campaign of genocide; women whose wildly imaginative resourcefulness aligns with God's saving work throughout history. Women who serve with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.

We begin with the first two nominees for best actress in a leading role: Shiphrah and Puah, midwives to the Hebrew women living as foreigners in Egypt. Remember the Hebrews had fled there during Joseph's time to escape the famine in their own land. Since then, they have grown and thrived as a people – evidence of God's fulfilled promise.

Yet as things often go when a new regime comes to power, the conditions under which immigrants are initially invited often change. The new Pharaoh obsesses over them. He sees them as a threat. So those who were once welcomed are now exploited. Those who came seeking relief now buckle under the weight of back-breaking labor. Those who arrived of their own free will now find themselves indefinitely detained. And the Pharaoh orders the two midwives to kill all Hebrew baby boys as they are delivered.

However, Shiphrah and Puah willfully defy the Pharaoh's order. They know their call is to bring life, not death. And these women are up to the challenge. They are agents of creation, not destruction. They risk their own lives to let the baby boys live. They refuse to cave to what is convenient or even commanded; they honor their holy call to bring and preserve life.

And these women are clever. When Pharaoh confronts them for their disobedience, they work themselves out of a pickle: 'There's nothing we can do. Those Hebrew women are so strong, they've already given birth by the time we get there.' You can almost see the Pharaoh throw up his hands in frustration and turn around and stomp off. The midwives employ "energy, intelligence, imagination, and love" to preserve the life of their people and carry on God's promise.

Yet Pharaoh is stubborn. If the midwives won't do his dirty work, surely his own Egyptian people will. He now enlists all of them to rid the land of Hebrew baby boys by throwing them into the Nile. It would only be a matter of time before the Israelite people would be eliminated forever.

Enter the next actress in a leading role - an unnamed Hebrew woman who gives birth to a baby boy. She looks at him, and sees that he is "good." Yes, although our NRSV translation obscures it, the text in its original Hebrew echoes God's reaction to all that God created in the Genesis story. The woman looked at her son that she had borne, and saw that he was good.

She could only hide him for three months before he gets too big and too vocal and too squirmy that his life would be at risk. What happens next is full of irony and must have been divine inspiration. She puts him in a basket - in the Hebrew, literally an ark. Another direct echo of God's creative, saving, life-giving work in the story of Noah and the flood.

Mom puts the baby safely tucked in the infant-sized ark, and floats it among the reeds in the Nile River. Instead of becoming a place of death, the Nile becomes the preserver of life. And the reeds in which the baby is hidden - they foreshadow God's future saving work when the Hebrew people escape slavery in Egypt. The Hebrew term for "reeds" is the same one used to describe the waters that would part and make their future escape possible. Another example of energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.

Enter our fourth actress in a leading role - Pharaoh's daughter, who sees the crying child floating in his basket. She imagines what his fate could be. She defies the deathly command of her father, and answers the call for life-giving compassion. Even she uses her energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.

Finally, there's the baby's sister, actress #5 - who clearly inherited her mother's cleverness. She's been watching from afar, and quickly imagines the life-giving opportunity unfolding before her as the Pharaoh's daughter discovers the baby boy. "I can find you a Hebrew woman who'll nurse and care for the child for you." Of course, she conveniently leaves out the small detail that the child's nurse would actually be his own mother. The Pharaoh's daughter likes the plan, and not only is the baby's life saved, God's saving work in history carries on yet again. This baby is Moses, the one who would lead God's people out of slavery toward the Promised Land. Yes, by now you can say it with me - the sister serves with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.

The tale is both personal and political - about the saving of individual lives and about resisting an empire that seeks to consolidate power and control wealth.

As with all of our sacred Scripture stories, the good news here comes about not just through the creativity of women, not just through the creativity of humanity. It comes through God's own creative ability to work even through those who would oppose God's life-giving will. Pharaoh's own actions will ultimately serve God's purposes.

It's what Terence Fretheim calls divine irony – God using “the weak, what is low and despised in the world, to shame the strong...God works through persons who have no obvious power...[and that] entails much risk and vulnerability for God.”<sup>1</sup>

There are non-scriptural examples as well. One that comes to mind is told in *The Zookeeper's Wife* – both the book and its film adaptation. It recounts the true story of Antonina Zabinski, who along with her husband saves 300 Warsaw Jews from extermination during World War II. The actions of war devastate their zoo and its animals, and the zoo is closed. Then Antonina and her husband devise a plan to turn it into a pig farm. They'll feed occupying troops, they said. But under that cover of seeming legitimacy, they secretly and successfully hide Jews in abandoned zoo cages. It, too, is a stunning, life-saving tale of their energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. It causes me to also wonder what God's creative spirit had to do with it.

One of the hopeful takeaways from this Exodus narrative is that there is a role for each of us in what God is doing in the world - whether you feel weak, or powerless, or oppressed – like the lowly midwives or baby Moses' mother and sister, or whether you occupy a position of favor or even power – like Pharaoh's daughter.

If you are on the outside, because you don't fit neatly into some predetermined box, or because of prejudice, or because of your economic or social location, God has a role for you. God has given you particular gifts of energy, intelligence, imagination, and love that the world desperately needs – gifts that could even subvert the forces that keep people oppressed.

And if you occupy a position of favor or power, because of your economic means, or your position at work or in the community, or simply because of who you were born to, God has a role for you, too. God has given you your own particular gifts of energy, intelligence, imagination, and love that the world also desperately needs. When it comes to making the world right and just, God is an equal-opportunity employer.

The issues in our own context resonate deeply with those of the Exodus text, notes Dennis Olson: “issues of race and politics, religion ... gender and power, the war on terror, debates over immigration policy, the inequities of our global economy, congregational mission and hospitality to the stranger, and all manner of suffering and bondage that threaten ...individuals and families ...”<sup>2</sup>

Sadly, it's common in many parts of the wider church to bemoan a perceived lack of resources to push back against such suffering, to carry on God's life-giving mission. Yet I'd like to challenge that perception. For a long time I've believed it's not resources we lack; it's imagination that we lack.

But I have to say, this amazing story of five women and a baby causes me to rethink even that assessment. For in light of both of today's texts, from Exodus and from Romans, it's not that we lack imagination; we don't. It's that we neglect to employ the energy, intelligence, imagination, and love that God has already given us. It's already there, hiding in plain sight, waiting to be used. Just think of the possibilities.

Amen.