

“Good Trouble”
Rev. Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 23, 2020

Introduction

This week we celebrated the 100th Anniversary of the ratification of the 19th amendment which guaranteed the right of (white) women to vote. The passage of the 19th Amendment was in large part the result of women who weren't afraid of getting into what Congressman John Lewis liked to call “good trouble.” One of our lectionary passages this week tells the story of strong women getting into good trouble. And I thought it would be a good one to talk about today.

Scripture Reading: Exodus 1:8-2:10

⁸Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰Come, 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.” ¹¹Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. ¹²But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. ¹³The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, ¹⁴and 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.

¹⁵The 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.” ¹⁷But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ¹⁸So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” ¹⁹The 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.” ²⁰So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. ²¹And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. ²²Then 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.”

²Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. ²The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. ³When 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. ⁴His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

⁵The 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. ⁶When 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. ⁷Then 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?” ⁸Pharaoh's daughter said to her, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child's mother. ⁹Pharaoh'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. ¹⁰When 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.”

“Good Trouble”

Just about everybody who went to Sunday School when they were little remembers hearing the story of little baby Moses floating in a basket among the bulrushes and how he was found by Pharaoh's daughter, who took him as her own child and raised him. But this is more than the cool origin story of an Old Testament hero, it's a powerful story of strong women getting into good trouble for the sake of the Kingdom.

People often forget that Moses was placed in that basket and set adrift on that river, as a desperate means of escaping a cruel royal edict that all Hebrew boys should be killed. As the book of Exodus begins, we learn many generations have come and gone since Joseph's day (he of the many-colored coat and the Andrew Lloyd-Webber musical). Joseph had been a star in Egypt, back in the day. But the new Pharaoh doesn't know his story. And now, the descendants of Joseph are feared as a growing foreign population within Egypt.

Pharaoh's xenophobia leads him to take drastic measures to make sure these immigrants; these foreigners don't take over. So, he orders the midwives who assist the Hebrew women with childbirth, to take every newborn boy and throw him in the river. But the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah see Pharaoh's command for what it is – unjust and evil – and they refuse to enforce it. Instead they choose good trouble for the sake of God's Kingdom. When Pharaoh demands to know why they have disobeyed his royal command, they make up an excuse: The Hebrew women are just too tough! By the time we get there they've already had their babies! That, of course, is a lie. They know that what Pharaoh is trying to do is wrong and they won't allow themselves to become a part of the machinery of injustice.

When Moses is born, his mother hides him until she can't anymore. Then she puts him in a papyrus basket, waterproofs it with bitumen and pitch, and sets it gently in the still waters on the edge of the Nile. She obeys the letter of the law while circumventing its intent. She does not throw the baby into the Nile, she places him there gently. The Hebrew word the author uses to describe the basket is found in only one other place in the Old Testament. It is the same word used earlier in Genesis to describe another boat: Noah's Ark.¹ And so he floats there in his ark, but he is not alone. His sister, Miriam is stationed nearby to stand watch over him.

When the daughter of Pharaoh comes down to the river to bathe, she finds the basket. Now, traditionally Pharaoh's daughter is depicted as being sort of clueless. "Look a baby! I think I'll keep him." But I think she's smarter than that. I think she knows exactly what's going on and that what she's about to do is an act of defiance. Think about it. Who would find a child in that place at that time and not know exactly where it came from and why it was there? As daughter of Pharaoh, she couldn't have been ignorant of her father's proclamation. She had to have known that Hebrew babies had been ordered killed. As Exodus 1:22 says, when the midwives proved unreliable in carrying out his order, Pharaoh commanded "*all his people*" to throw every Hebrew baby boy they found into the Nile. That was a public pronouncement. Pharaoh's daughter had to have known, yet she defied her father's edict because she knew it was wrong. Here, from within the household of Pharaoh, is another strong woman getting into good trouble for the sake of God's Kingdom.

And then there's Miriam, Moses' older sister who offers to find the baby a nurse. The simple explanation is that having had no child herself, it would have been impossible for Pharaoh's daughter to breastfeed. But it is unlikely that a woman of such high estate would have been breastfeeding her own child anyway. Now, I am pretty sure there are proper channels for the house of Pharaoh to find servants. And I'm just as positive that Pharaoh's daughter went outside those proper channels to keep her father from getting wind of what she was doing. Of course, the nurse Miriam brings back is Moses' own mother.

These were bold, courageous women and they weren't afraid of good trouble. The child Moses went on to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt and cause Pharaoh trouble of another kind. But there is great irony in the fact that Pharaoh had seen only the boys as a threat, yet it was the *girls* he should have been looking out for. This story sets up as an origin story for Moses, but in truth, it shows how seemingly inconsequential people choosing to do the right thing at the right time can make a tremendous difference in the world.

I've been thinking a lot about the movement toward justice and equity in our country right now. As those who have struggled with inequality and prejudice because of their race, their gender, their sexuality, their country of origin, as those people have stopped being silent, as they've raised their voices and said "no more," there have been other voices who have criticized their protests as an affront to law and order. And every time I hear that, I can't help remembering people like Miriam and Moses' mother, and Shiphrah and Puah and the daughter of Pharaoh who saw injustice and got into good trouble to change it. I can't help thinking of Jesus who got into good trouble overturning the tables of the money changers, and calling out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, and healing on the sabbath and eating and spending time with sinners and tax collectors and people who were labeled "unclean."

Part of our Christian tradition is to stand up for justice and equity and to get into good trouble for the sake of God's Kingdom. It's what our nation's founding fathers and mothers did when they protested against the unjust and tyrannical rule of King George III and started a revolution to make this a free, and just nation.

It's what women did when they protested legally sanctioned inequality and advocated for the right to vote 100 years ago. It's what African-Americans did when they protested racism and legally sanctioned inequality and advocated for equal rights during the Civil Rights movement of the 60's. It's what the LGBTQ community did when they protested legally sanctioned discrimination and advocated for marriage equality just a few short years ago. And it's what's happening now as people of every race and creed come together to raise their voices for equality and justice for all of God's children, no matter where they are from, what they look like, or who they love.

Shortly before his death last month, John Lewis wrote a letter that was published in the New York Times on the day of his funeral. In that letter he wrote this:

*"When you see something that is not right, you must say something. You must do something. Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part to help build what we called the Beloved Community, a nation and world society at peace with itself. Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in ... good trouble, necessary trouble."*²

This from a man who was arrested 40 times during the Civil Rights Movement of the 60's and another 5 times after being elected to Congress. All for getting into good trouble, necessary trouble, for the sake of God's Kingdom.³

Now, I'm not telling you to go out and get arrested or to defy authority just for its own sake. But we are called to pay attention and to speak out and to act against injustice, especially when it is institutionalized in our system of laws. The words of our pledge of allegiance call this country "One nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." If we really believe those words to be true, then our system of government and laws must reflect that truth and we have to work to ensure that they do. We have been given that responsibility and we have to accept it. And that means paying attention, being informed, voting, even in small local elections we sometimes think don't matter. We have to communicate with our representatives and let them know what we think and when injustice is being done, we have to raise our voices in protest.

Several thousand years ago, five inconsequential, powerless women defied the law and made a difference. Their actions had an impact on the world that is still being felt today. We bear their legacy. Now, you don't have to defy the law like they did. You don't have to rebel. But you might. And that's okay, because part of our heritage, part of our call, is the willingness to get into good trouble, necessary trouble, for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Propp, William Henry. *Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday, 1999. 149. Print. Anchor Bible Commentary.

² Lewis, John. "John Lewis: Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation." N.Y. Times, 31 July 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/opinion/john-lewis-civil-rights-america.html.

³ 2020 Democratic National Convention. "Congressman John Lewis Tribute." 2:10, YouTube, 20 Aug. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=3chnb9-KSG0.