

## Sermon on Ex 2,1-10: Who rescues Moses?

Jane Sautter, St. Augustine's Church, Wiesbaden, 23/08/2020

In the midst of a crisis, where is God?

Does my life matter, in the great scheme of things?

Do either or both of those questions sound familiar to you? Perhaps you have wondered where God is in a crisis. Perhaps you've asked yourself whether your life is of much consequence. If so, I want to invite you to take a fresh look at a very old story - the second half of today's Old Testament reading. You'll find Ex 2,1-10 in your bulletin on p.4. A new storyline starts here with the words "Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman." - A child is born into a situation of deep crisis. The Hebrew people are subject to oppression and forced labour. A death threat hangs over the child's life from the very beginning. A vulnerable newborn pitted against the powers that be - Pharaoh and his regime. An absolutely hopeless situation, if you ask me.

Skip forward to the end of the reading and you'll discover: Against the odds, the child survives - and is named Moses. Ah, Moses. The one who later led the Hebrew people into liberty? Yes, that's the one. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Stay with me at the very beginning of his story. A powerless newborn in a nightmare situation. A key question is: Who rescues Moses?

Enter three nameless women. Let's take them one by one. First, the mother. A Hebrew woman living in dire oppression. She gets married and gives birth to her firstborn, a boy. Pharaoh has decided that all newborn male Hebrews shall be killed. I have no idea how the mother gets the courage to act in this situation, but act she does: She hides her beloved child. And when that is no longer possible - perhaps because the child is now too noisy - the mother takes all the precautions she can to save his life. She takes a box - translated in your bulletin as a "basket" - more on that later. She takes a box and carefully seals it so that it is watertight. She places her child in it. Instead of throwing the child into the Nile - as Pharaoh commanded - the mother practices civil disobedience: She puts the box amongst the reeds beside the river.

Next, there is a young Hebrew woman. She is usually referred to as the "sister", but actually, all we know from the Hebrew text is that (a) she is related to Moses - and (b) she is young. In the logic of the times, that means she is right at the bottom of the pecking order. From a distance, this young woman keeps an eye on the box among the reeds.

Enter Pharaoh's daughter. The other end of the social ladder. An insider at court. She knows that her powerful father has declared a death sentence on all male Hebrew infants. - Probably that day her mind is on other things entirely: She wants to take a dip in the river. And then, a surprise: She finds this box and discovers - a baby inside. She has no doubt that this is one of the Hebrews. - This moment of discovery is the height of danger for the child. Pharaoh's inner circle has found him. - It is a gut-wrenching sight, this abandoned baby, crying. And Pharaoh's daughter lets her heart be touched. That is a decisive turning point in the story: She is moved by compassion. [repeat] But what to do?

Here's where another surprise happens. It is the so-called "sister", the young Hebrew woman who makes all the crucial suggestions. Take a look at verse 7: "Shall I **go** and **get** you a nurse from the Hebrew women to **nurse** the child for you?" Go - get - nurse: three suggestions from the bottom of the social ladder. In verses 8 and 9 we see that Pharaoh's daughter takes up all three ideas. She issues orders and decides: **Go** - and **get** - a woman to **nurse** the child for me. In a

moving – and humorous – plot twist, the young woman fetches the baby’s mother – unbeknown to Pharaoh’s daughter. Amazingly, the family is reunited.

So, back to our question: Who rescues Moses? Three women of great courage. Three women practicing civil disobedience, cooperating with one another, despite their ethnic and national differences. We will never know their names. And yet without them, there would have been no rescue of the baby, no growth of Moses into a man, no rescue of the Hebrew people under the leadership of Moses. Behind Moses stands not one, but three great women. So, if you ask: Does my life matter, in the great scheme of things? All three of these women call out to you and me today saying: Yes, your life matters, in the great scheme of things! Your decisions and actions matter. In a time of crisis and in the face of injustice: Be brave – have compassion - make a suggestion – take action. You matter. Perhaps you have watched a colleague or a student at your school being bullied and marginalised. What could you suggest or do to help change the situation? Perhaps you have witnessed someone being subject to racism or another form of discrimination. Where would compassion lead you? The three women from Ex 2 stand ready to inspire us today.

Who rescues Moses? Three women. They are the unsung and yet visible heroines of this story. But where on earth is God while this Hebrew child is born into great danger and oppression? Let’s be honest: Nowhere to be seen. - Where is God in a crisis? One of our two questions from the beginning of the sermon. Where is God in a crisis? I am convinced: The person who wrote down this story has dropped hints all the way through Ex 2,1-10 - hints that there is more to this story than meets the eye. Stay with me here. There are three important clues I want to show you, that can help find an answer to the question: Where is God in this crisis?

Clue number 1. Take a look at the mother in verse 2, right after the birth. The translation we heard reads: “she saw that he was a fine baby”. Actually, it would be closer to the original Hebrew to translate this as “she saw that he was good.” That is exactly the same grammatical construction as the phrase that runs all through the creation story in Genesis 1. There, in the beginning, it is God who sees: “And God saw that it was good.” (cf. ex. Gen 1,12) Again and again we hear that sentence in the creation story: And God saw that it was good. So in Ex 2 we’re given a major hint: In the loving eyes of the mother looking at this vulnerable child, we can catch a first glimpse of God behind the scenes.

Clue number 2: A rescue from water and reeds. The mother carefully places the box with her child among the reeds on the banks of the river. Water and reeds. That is a theme that will run right through the exodus story. Later on in the book of Exodus, in chapters 14-15, the writer leaves no doubt as to who frees Israel from oppression in Egypt: It is God who rescues them. Having come safely through the Red Sea – actually better translated as the “Sea of Reeds” - a song of joy breaks out among the Hebrew people: “I will sing to the Lord. He is greatly honoured. [...] He has thrown Pharaoh's chariots and army into the sea. Pharaoh's best officers drowned in the Sea of Reeds.” (Ex 14,1.4) The Sea of Reeds. Rescued from water and reeds. God rescues the Hebrew people from water and reeds. There it is, the theme that is foreshadowed in our story about the beginning of Moses’ life: Could it be that God is acting in Ex 2 through the three women in order to rescue Moses from water and reeds – and from certain death?

Clue number 3: You won’t be surprised to hear that I have saved the best for last. Clue number 3. I mentioned a box earlier. A little strange, you may think, since there doesn’t seem to be a box in this reading. We need to zoom in on verses 3 and 5: It says there that the mother gets a papyrus basket for her child – and later on we read that Pharaoh’s daughter sees the basket. “Basket”. The

word used here in Hebrew is *tebah* – literally, a box or chest. *Tebah*. This is a word that is very rarely used in the Old Testament. In fact, there is only one other story in which this word features: the Noah story. Noah and his *tebah* – a kind of houseboat, the ark. The Noah story is told in Gen 6-9. There, a new start for humanity is based on the instructions God gives to Noah: He is told to build a *tebah*, and to make it water-tight. I am convinced: The writer of Ex 2 chooses the word *tebah* to convey the message that God's saving power is working behind the scenes in the rescue of Moses, just as in the Noah story. God saves an individual in both stories – and through him a people, humankind.

Let's look back at the two major questions I mentioned at the start of this sermon: Where is God in a crisis? For most of us, God is invisible. And that is one of the most painful parts of a crisis. Yes, God is invisible. But is God also absent? People through the ages have experienced God's saving power at work. And the writer of Exodus 2 has woven clue after clue into the story of Moses' beginnings to show: God's saving presence behind the scenes.

Front and centre stage in this story stand the three women. Three people whose names have not made it into our history books. Three women of courage – a surprising alliance that manages to achieve the unlikely: A vulnerable child survives. I am convinced: It is through these women that God acts to rescue Moses. So: Does my life matter, in the great scheme of things? It most certainly does. Your life matters, mine does too. If you think about a crisis, the three women are a reminder to ask: Where is your action needed, your courage, your suggestion, your compassion? Amazingly, our everyday decisions and actions – yours and mine – are of consequence as God's kingdom comes. What we do and say matters – and at the same time we are not alone in a crisis: God is here, powerful to save. God is looking for co-conspirators in the coming of the kingdom.