

(19th Sunday after Pentecost - Baptism)

Building the Bridge Between Joseph and Moses

Last week, we explored the Joseph narrative, just touching briefly with a mention that towards the end of Genesis, Joseph is reconciled with his brothers. Joseph sends for his father, Jacob, and extended family to join him in Egypt. A huge family reunion occurs as Jacob and Joseph are reunited. Joseph and family remain in Egypt, prospering and growing in numbers.

And then in Genesis 50, Jacob dies. Joseph, who according to the narrative, lives to be 110 years old, and sees his great-grandchildren of his son, Ephraim, born in Egypt, follows dies. Before he does, he promises his brothers that God will remember the promise God made to Abraham, Issac, and their father, Jacob, to bring them into their own land. And that they are to carry his embalmed body (embalming was a common practice in Egypt) with them when they left.

There is one more death that occurs which is central to our story, though it only gets a brief mention. The Pharaoh who knew Joseph dies. A new Pharaoh rises up who does not know Joseph. Fearful of how the Hebrew immigrants are flourishing in numbers, overtaking the Egyptian population, this new Pharaoh deals with them harshly, oppressing them, and finally giving orders to kill all the new born male children by throwing them into the Nile to drown.

Here begins the story of Moses. To protect her newborn son, his mother hides him in a small basket made of papyrus, setting him adrift in the Nile. Pharaoh's daughter discovers this nameless baby, draws him out of the water, promises to protect him and raise him as her own. She names him Moses or Moshe (pull or draw out of the water). To assist her, she needs a wet nurse, so with the help of a Hebrew midwife, Moses mother is brought in to nurse him. Pharaoh's daughter raises him as her own son in the house of Pharaoh.

As you may recall, Moses eventually sees an Egyptian dealing harshly with a Hebrew worker, and steps in, killing the Egyptian. Fearing for his life, knowing that Pharaoh was going to kill him, he flees to the land of Midian, there he meets his wife, tends to the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro. One day, as we know, while tending those flocks, Moses sees a strange sight, a bush that is burning but not being consumed.

Enter God, who speaks to Moses from the burning bush, sending him back to Egypt to confront Pharaoh, demanding that he let "my people go!"

He goes, confronts Pharaoh, who refuses, plagues descend on the Egyptians, followed by the angel of death, who in violent act of revenge, visits the Egyptian households, claims the lives of all first born male children. All Hebrew households had put lamb's blood over their doors to keep the angel of death away. Pharaoh lets them go, off they go, out of Egypt, until they hit the wall of water, which we mistakenly translate in the King James to mean the Red Sea, but it is actually in Hebrew, the Sea of Reeds, a lesser known body of water, but still, an obstacle to cross.

So here we are, with the Egyptians behind us, and this great body of water blocking our way forward.

Now this is an interesting thing, there is no historical or archeological evidence to support the Israelites ever being in Egypt. Nor is there any evidence of Moses (or Joseph for that matter existing). The only place it is mentioned is in this story.

But what a story it is! We as Presbyterians, are not literalists of the Bible. That doesn't mean this story doesn't, if you will pardon the pun, hold water for us.

The story of Moses and the Exodus is an Epic story, one that has great meaning to people of faith. Jesus, like his Jewish family, remembered this story every year when they celebrated Passover. Christians remember and retell it each time we celebrate communion.

In this story, of exile, oppression, suffering, death, and deliverance through exodus, we can see our own life stories unfolding.

And this morning, it is appropriate we tell this “water” story, as we too join Matt, Megan and their daughter, Lydia Grace in the waters of baptism.

With that, we turn our attention to the story of Moses and the Exodus.

Rev. Scott Marrese-Wheeler
September 30, 2018
Baptism: A Journey Through the Waters

Exodus 3:7-13, 13: 17-21, 14:5-31

We are as much a “People of the Water” as we are a “People of the Book,” the book being the Bible.

Water stories dominate our sacred faith story from the first chapter of Genesis when “the Spirit of God hovered over face of the waters” in the creation story to the twenty-second chapter of Revelation when God he shows to John the Elder in a dream the healing water of the “river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb.”

It is in the waters of the Jordan River that Jesus is baptized. He turns water into wine. He walks on water, calming the storm. Out on the waters he encourages Peter to step out of the boat. He calms the turbulent waters of a storm that threatens to sink the boat filled with the disciples and where Jesus is napping. Jesus climbs in a boat to teach on the waters to the people on the shore.

Metaphorically, Jesus references water as life giving when he says in John 7, “**Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink**” and then follows up with the image of the Holy Spirit within us as being “the rivers of life.”

In the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, water is also referenced as life giving from God on a dry and thirst land and people.

And of course, as we just heard, water plays a major role in the Exodus story with the parting of the waters of the Sea of Reeds (Red Sea).

The writer of Isaiah references this with these famous words found in chapter 43:2: “**When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.**”

This morning, we remember all these words and the many other water stories as we ourselves enter into the waters of baptism with Matt and Megan and their daughter, Lydia Grace.

The amount of water used in baptizing a child or adult very much depends on the particular church. Some practice total emersion. Others, like the Presbyterian Church, do more of symbolic use of water, pouring or sprinkling water over the head of the infant, youth or adult being baptized.

As Fredrick Buechner said: “Which technique is used matters about as much as whether you pray kneeling or standing on your head.”

We do allow for both, and I have done one immersion. A young teenage girl, who had never been baptized, after a discussion about the meaning of baptism, asked to be immersed.

I like that she thought about baptism claim on her life.

Have you ever thought that theologically about baptism’s true claim on yours or your child’s life?

Most of us do not think about our baptisms that much. though some do.

One person who did was the late **Jeanie Wylie-Kellerman**, writer, activist, longtime editor of **The Witness** magazine and mother.

Some years ago, prior to her death, she spoke at a conference. The theme was "**The Politics of Baptism.**" I know, most of us have never thought about the Sacrament of Baptism as a political.

But when you really think about it from a Biblical point of view, it is. When we pass together with the person being baptized regardless of age or amount of water, we are renouncing the power of evil in the world and over our lives, while claiming and proclaiming the power of God's Kingdom in our lives and world. Each time we baptize, we affirm this claim.

To that point, Jeannie Wylie-Kellerman talked about her struggle with the decision to baptize her daughter, Lydia, when she was an infant: "**Water, words, community. Offering our child back to God. We would stand with Abraham at the sacrifice. We would give her to a God who models the cross. We would invite her to listen for a voice calling in the night, to vigil, to put herself at risk, to leave family and friends, to speak clearly a truth for which one can be executed. We would thereby invite her into the risks we have already elected and, by God's grace, still will elect to take with our own lives. In the act of baptism we would wash away the possibility that our concern for her might justify a diminishing of our own obedience to our Lord's perverse ethic of vulnerability and gain through loss.**"

(Baptism's True Claim, Chad Meyers, as quoted in Sojourners magazine, July 2006)

I must admit, that at the time of Sam's baptism, I had not wrestle with his baptism as she had with her daughter's. I doubt many of us ever have. And yet, maybe we should? It is after all, not just Matt and Megan who are making promises today.

In Baptism, we rise into our new life in Christ. But we must also remember baptism other claim that we are baptized into his suffering and death first.

This is what Jeanie Wylie-Kellerman and her husband wrestled with as parents who were giving their daughter over to God in baptism.

It is what we also are called to remember as a community of faith gathered around the baptismal font this morning with Lydia Grace and her parents and grandparents.

Friends, in baptism, we find our true identity, yes, as the beloved community – brothers and sisters of Christ, children of God, heirs of the covenant of grace.

But we also are commissioned and sent out into the world to live out our lives as Jesus lived out his sharing in the suffering love, confronting the powers that be, breaking down the theological, biblical, economic, and political walls of hostility that divide us and in doing, realizing that like Jesus, we too may suffer, even die for speaking God's truth.

Choosing to baptize our children should give us great pause. For in giving them over to God, we give them over to a life for which they too may suffer and die in many ways.

In her book, "*Searching For Sunday: Loving, Leaving and Finding the Church*," Rachel Held Evans says: "**In the ritual of baptism, our ancestors acted out the bizarre truth of the Christian identity: We are people who stand totally exposed before evil and death and declare them powerless against love.**"

As the Israelites passed through the waters, knowing that the powers of evil and death were behind them, represented by the Pharaoh and his army, as well as and all around them by those watery walls, they moved forward together into an unknown future, trusting God was with them.

Like them, we too walk into these waters, knowing that evil and death are all around us in this world, and yet, like the Israelites in the Exodus, we trust God's loving presence to lead us forward into God's promise new day!

Amen.