

**Choosing Life**  
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

**Exodus 1:8-2:10**

Our lesson for today comes to us from the book of Exodus chapter 1, the very start of **the** formative narrative of the Jewish people. Its a familiar story that describes the enslavement of the Hebrew tribes in Egypt, their liberation, their journey into the wilderness, and their covenant with God—*I will be your God and you will be my beloved*. Out of a wounded remnant, the birth of a people, and a whole new vision of human flourishing, one that we still struggle to claim to this day. Today's story is a little, seldom told preamble to that larger drama and it features: one evil king and 2 women who save a nation from his violent racism. (I'm not much of an Old Testament preacher, but who could resist that?)

This little preamble too often gets overlooked in our rush to get to the juicy Moses story that comes next—baby in basket, journey on the waters, rescue by the daughter of the evil king etc. But it all begins like this: *now, a new king arose*. And this new king, the story tells us, *did not know* many things. He did not know that Joseph and his people had once helped save Egypt from famine and destruction. He did not remember that diversity had once saved the nation. What he did know is that Joseph's descendents had prospered and multiplied, and this made the new king, who did not know many things, afraid. He feared the flourishing of people he saw as different. It is an old story; this version goes back some 15 centuries or so.

So, the king set out to oppress the Hebrew people, and encouraged all the other Egyptians to *became ruthless and make the Hebrew lives bitter*. Then, he decides on a little gendered genocide; so, he summons the two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, and orders them to kill all the male babies that they birth. Not the best plan, as Shiphrah and Puah, being lovers of God and protectors of life (by profession not to mention faith) ignore the king's command. So, he summons them again and demands to know why. The midwives, cleverly exploiting the king's own prejudice, reply: "why, you know those Hebrew women, they're different. They give birth more easily and more quickly than we can even get to them." And so, we are told, the people, including those midwives, prosper even in the face of ongoing oppression. And thanks to those midwives, that, too, is about to be transformed. "The story of the Exodus," writes poet and pastor Jan Richardson, "begins in the hearts of ... the midwives Shiphrah and Puah... without them, no Moses, no Exodus, no freedom."

Evil kings, it turns out, are a dime a dozen, something the Hebrew scriptures warn against again and again. And violent hatred is as old as humanity itself. Its hard for us to see sometimes from our place of affluence and security, but violence, injustice, and oppression are pretty much the norm in human history. My touchstone in this, my life-long obsession you might say, is 1940s Europe, as my poor beleaguered husband will tell you, having been forced to watch with me pretty much every Nazi movie ever. I mean: it just doesn't get darker, more frightening, more evil than that. As an undergraduate history student, my study and research focused intently on why and how? **How** could these things happen in a so-called civilized ("Christian!") world?

Many years later, in seminary, I sat with all those great 20<sup>th</sup> century theological minds, almost all of whom emerged from that same cauldron of suffering, to ask—where? Where was God? And, more to point for me, **where** were God's people?

And the answer that I come back to, again and again, is that both were right there in the midst of the worst of worst, where people kept choosing life, in spite of everything. A couple of years ago, Jeff and I visited Amsterdam, and while everyone else was lining up to see Van Gogh, we made a pilgrimage to the Dutch Resistance Museum, one of the most powerful exhibits I have ever seen. It all begins with a short video that tells three simple, gut-wrenching stories to illustrate this simple claim—in the face of evil, injustice, and oppression, there are only three possible responses: ignore, collaborate, resist. That's it. Each is a choice; to not respond is to choose. And the film sends its viewers into the museum and then home again with one question: what would, what will you choose? Three choices, only one leads to life.

And here's the thing: resistance take many forms. Too often, in our ego driven, social media obsessed culture we equate resistance with confrontation, which has its place, to be sure. The most powerful image out of Charlottesville, for me, was the clergy of every shape, size, color and tradition, standing arm in arm in a line of silent steadfast opposition to the forces of hatred and white supremacy. Still, those who demonstrated openly in Nazi Europe, were the very first to go. And yet, resistance was everywhere. Anne Frank didn't march, but she sure did resist, by choosing to believe in goodness in the face of unimaginable darkness. And those two years her family managed to hide out, along with Anne's famous diary, would have been impossible without the help of a team of people on the outside, who kept her family fed and connected to the world. Sometimes resistance is just a cup soup and a consoling word. Always its about choosing life, hope and joy in spite of all the evidence.

Anne embodies this as she writes: "In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again." Anne's words, her choice to resist cynicism and despair, continue to give life, and transform the world we live in. South African hero Nelson Mandela once wrote: "On Robben Island (where he was imprisoned for 17 harsh years) ... we.... read Anne Frank's Diary... and derived much encouragement from it. It kept our spirits high and reinforced our confidence in the invincibility of the cause of freedom and justice." Mandela, in his turn, consciously resisted hatred by refusing to hate in return.

Very often, resistance means just paying attention, and doing the next before us that needs doing, maybe with just a little greater intention and love. For Anne, that meant following her felt sense of call to be a writer. For the midwives, it meant to just keep doing their job, which just happens to be *literally* the nurturing, protection and empowering of new life, companioning the journey of transformation, for both mother and child. In a way, this is what that whole Exodus narrative is really all about; the clues are all right there, beginning with the Hebrew word for Egypt which is explicitly associated with the labor of birthing. Then: that difficult passage from bondage through

suffering toward freedom; the parting of the sea; the wilderness of transition; the wisdom of knowing when to let go and when to push on; and in all of it, reminders to trust in the power of life, the Giver of life, in spite of all the evidence.

For Valerie Kaur, a young Sikh activist, resistance comes in the form of storytelling, which the Connections students and I had the phenomenal privilege of experiencing at last year's college conference. She begins by explaining that the very first victim of 9/11's explosion of Islamophobia, an evil still so much in evidence today, was a man Valerie called uncle. His brown skin and turban confused angry people who did not know many things, and they took his life. In that moment, Valerie knew that her next thing was to be a witness. She has been on road ever since telling the story of her uncle, her people and her life, which now includes the harrowing experience of birthing and mothering a brown boy in America today. In her talk she asks this: "What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?... What if this is our nation's greatest transition? What does the midwife tell us to do? Breathe. And then? Push."

Of course none of us may live to see how this one all comes out; Anne Frank sure didn't, she knew she wouldn't, and it didn't stop her. In fact, birthing requires an awful lot of letting go, and expectations may be the first things we need to surrender. What we can claim instead is the intention to labor together at birthing hope. We can remind each other, often, that there is something bigger going on, there is a larger Wisdom at work, and she is calling us to listen, encouraging us to breathe and push and do that next thing before us with love. As priest and professor Margaret Guenther writes, "the Lord is my midwife, I shall be kept safe." Together we can affirm the words of Desmond Tutu, writing in the midst of the evil that was apartheid South Africa-- "goodness is stronger than evil. Love is stronger than hate. Light is stronger than darkness. Life is stronger than death." May this be our hope, our prayer, and our song. Amen

Hymn: Canticle of the Turning (Mary's Song)