



The Fingerprints of God

Exodus 1:8-2:10

August 21, 2005

POOR PHARAOH!

Poor Pharaoh...everything he does backfires on him. He puts the Israelites under forced labor, but they have a baby boom. He orders the midwives to kill the male babies as soon as they are born, but two pushes and the babies are out before the midwives can get there (so they say). And then Pharaoh orders everybody in the kingdom to throw every boy born to the Hebrews into the Nile, but all that accomplishes is the rescue of none other than Moses.

Poor Pharaoh...he is a study in paranoia and the law of unintended consequences. He is paranoid of these foreigners. "Look," he says, "the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we." (Exodus 1:9) His domestic policy issues from that anxiety. When that policy produces more Hebrews instead of less, Pharaoh gets all the more anxious, and his policies get all the more irrational. Eventually he grows so anxious that he turns the Nile River, the source of life for his kingdom, into a watery grave of death for little baby boys. Imagine little bodies floating down the very river that Egypt worshipped as the great Source of life.

There are still places in the world where such genocide is so not hard to imagine: Rwanda, Liberia, Darfur. Somewhere in the world there is always some anxious, paranoid tyrant who believes that he can stay in power by nullifying God's power of life on a people. Pharaoh was part of that tyrant line.

But the more Pharaoh brought destruction and chaos, the more God brought life. By the end of this passage, if you've been keeping score, it is Pharaoh 0, God 3. By the end of the passage, God's fingerprints are all over Pharaoh.

Poor Pharaoh. He doesn't even get his name in the story.

YAY MIDWIVES

But the midwives get their names in the story. More than three thousand years later, we read about how two women named Shiprah and Puah outwitted the anonymous leader of the greatest nation on earth.

When Pharaoh heard that his second policy initiative had backfired, he called the midwives on the carpet: “Why haven’t you been killing the boy babies like I told you?” Shiprah and Puah just shrugged, “Well, by the time we get there, the baby is born and both mother and baby are out in the fields making bricks.” *(Quote from Robert Gnuse)*

Apparently Pharaoh took their word for this! Why? Maybe because he knew nothing about birthing babies. All he seemed to know was the power of death. But the midwives knew about the power of life. The midwives did not fear the death-power of Pharaoh; they feared God, they revered the life-power of God. They knew life would find a way. The power of God in Hebrew wombs was indifferent to Egyptian law, and Pharaoh was powerless to stop it. “Death is decreed; birth nevertheless happens.” *(Walter Brueggemann, New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary on Exodus)*

So, poor Pharaoh what’s-his-name, and yay, Shiprah and Puah. Not only do the two women get their names in the Book, they also get babies of their own, by the grace of the life-giving God.

HOW ‘BOUT THOSE WOMEN?!

And how about all the other women that got involved after the midwives? Moses’ mother technically obeys the Pharaoh’s policy and puts Moses in the Nile (but in that waterproof basket). Then none other than Pharaoh’s daughter takes Moses out of the Nile. Then Moses’ sister peeks out through the bulrushes and says, “Ma’am, if you’ll be needing a nurse, I just happen to know someone who’s available!”

All three of these women join in on this great female conspiracy for life. They all commit civil disobedience, even the daughter of Pharaoh himself. They all are conspirators with God for life.

My question is, “What did they know and when did they know it?” What princess would knowingly bathe in a river among the bodies of dead babies, unless she secretly hoped that she might save a baby? And, did Moses’ mother know that, and did she bring her baby to the water at a time when she knew the princess was waiting? What did they know and when did they know it? We just don’t know.

Poor Pharaoh, he just didn’t know. He was outwitted by midwives. He was surrounded by women conspirators, from the Hebrew ghettos to his family palace. He was overruled by the life-giving power of God. Eventually he was paying the college tuition for his adopted Hebrew grandson whom he had tried to kill. Poor Pharaoh, he didn’t know.

But God knew. God worked through all these female co-conspirators to preserve the life of baby Moses, in order to preserve the life of a whole people.

THE FINGERPRINTS OF GOD

Can you see the fingerprints of God on all this? You may have to look closely. God is hardly mentioned in the story. There are times in the story when God seems very far away. Where is God, for example, when babies are floating down the Nile? Where is God when purposeful, systemic evil is carried out by one group upon another? *(Adapted from Priscilla Pope-Levison)*

In the case of the Hebrews, God made them fruitful and they multiplied. God put the power of creation upon them. God was at work in the Hebrew nurseries. God's fingerprints were on their baby boom.

Where was God? God raised up unlikely individuals to confound and thwart Pharaoh: the crafty midwives, the creative mother and daughter, the rebellious daughter of Pharaoh. They all chose to comply with God's desires rather than ungodly rules. They worked with God for the powerless rather than aid the Pharaoh. They put themselves at risk. God's fingerprints were on each of them.

Where was God? God was intervening in the nick of time. God was transforming a mob of slaves into a royal priesthood. God's fingerprints were on them all.

If you can learn to spot the fingerprints of God in the Bible, you can spot the fingerprints of God in your own time. It is hard sometimes. Death and chaos are still unleashed by tyrants and groups desperate to keep power. The dead bodies of babies and adults still float down the rivers of our own time, too. So it's understandable when people ask, "Where is God?" But if you look close, you can see God's fingerprints.

Here is a clue: if you want to find where God is working, look where mercy is!! Wherever you see mercy at work, there you will see the fingerprint of God. God is a God of mercy who hears the suffering. God will remember the cry of the suffering, and act on it, and is mightier than any evil that might oppose God. That was one of the themes of Exodus.

That also was one of the themes of a recent summer gathering of Baptists from all over the world. Over ten thousand Baptists came together in England as the Baptist World Alliance. They heard Rick Warren, a California pastor and the author of The Purpose-Driven Life, challenge them all to work with God to relieve the suffering and hunger and need of millions of people on the face of the earth. Warren is but one of a growing number of evangelical Christians who are realizing that if we love the Bible, then we must love the people the Bible loves, people in need, "the least of these." If we really want to be godly, then we have a lot of catching up to do with the God who set the poor Hebrews free. I pray that this will be the next revival of the evangelical church. But this time, instead of a revival of words, I pray it will be a revival of deeds of mercy. As we do the work of mercy, people will notice the fingerprints of God.

There is another theme in Exodus and another clue to where to find God at work in this world. God worked through and sometimes in spite of Pharaoh and his misguided policies and his flawed Egyptian institutions.

Thank God He still does! God still makes his mark even through imperfect people, EVEN through imperfect systems and organizations. You will still find God's merciful touch in the most unlikely places. If God can work through the stubbornness of Pharaoh, God can certainly work through "your imperfect church, your run-down school, your inefficient government..." It is nothing God has not done before. So keep looking...for the merciful fingerprints of God.

If you can learn to spot the fingerprints of God in the Bible, and in your own time, you can spot the fingerprints of God on your own life. Are there times in your life when you feel you've been set adrift just to float away on a deadly river? Are there times when you wonder where God is for you? Again, look where mercy is. Look and see the fingerprints of God on you, the touch of God's mercy. Let the hands of God bear you up. Like Moses' mother, who let go of the basket down the river and trusted that baby to God's care, let go of whatever you need to let go into God's care. Let God touch you, and put the print of his grace on you.

-- Douglas E. Murray