

GOOD TROUBLE – NECESSARY TROUBLE
Exodus 1:8-2:10

As I was writing this sermon, the funeral of U.S. Representative John R. Lewis was on all the major TV networks. His tireless commitment to working for civil rights, equality and justice is his lasting legacy. The title of this sermon comes from his Commencement address at Bates College in 2016.

Lewis told the graduates that he grew up in the little town of Troy, Alabama, the son of sharecroppers. Jim Crow laws were in effect. That meant that society was segregated; everywhere you looked you could see it. There were segregated water fountains, lunch counters, rest rooms, waiting rooms, seating on buses and in movie theaters. He was just a boy, but he wanted to know why. Why did the Black folks have to sit up in the balcony in the movie theater, sit in the back of the bus, and eat outside? Many of us remember those days – and segregation was not just in the South – and not just back in the day either.

John Lewis' mother told him, "That's the way it is. Don't get in the way. Don't get in trouble." But Lewis told the graduating class, that he felt a moral obligation to do just the opposite. He said, "I was inspired to get in trouble – to

get in the way.” Then he looked out over his audience and said, “You must find a way to get in the way – to get in good trouble – necessary trouble.”

Today’s Scripture reading is about 5 women...count them...5 women, who felt a moral obligation to get in the way – to get into good trouble – necessary trouble. And by so doing, they literally saved the Hebrew people. With one exception, these women were not rich or powerful. Yet they were all faithful, defiant, shrewd, resourceful, loving and compassionate. They didn’t know it at the time, but the fate of the Israelite nation was in their humble hands – not the hands of the powerful Egyptian Pharaoh. God was at work in these 5 women, so let’s take a closer look at how they got in the way – how they got into good trouble – necessary trouble.

The first chapter of Exodus sets the stage. A little context helps here: Joseph (of the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat fame), had been sold into slavery in Egypt by his jealous brothers. Though a slave himself, and a non-Egyptian, Joseph was blessed by God – to the point where he rose to power as Pharaoh’s right-hand man. Meanwhile, there was a famine back home that forced the Israelite people to look to Egypt for help. Joseph stepped in and his power and position meant that the Israelites could survive, thrive, and coexist in Egyptian

society. All was well for a time. But then, there was a change in leadership. A new King came to power – one who did not know a thing about Joseph or how he had ensured the welfare of all of Egypt in a time of famine and distress. As Dennis Olsen, Professor of OT at Princeton Seminary describes it, “Israel's status quickly deteriorated from welcomed guests to feared aliens and oppressed slaves.”

Let's let the biblical text speak: **Exodus 1:8-14**

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹ He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰ Come, 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.”

¹¹ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. ¹² But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. ¹³ The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, ¹⁴ and 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.

As my sainted Grandmother used to say, “It doesn’t take a tree full of owls to figure out what is going on here.” There is no hint in the biblical narrative that the Israelites were anything but good, faithful residents of the empire. Yet the delusional Pharaoh imagines that the growing yet small Israelite minority is more numerous and more powerful than his own citizens. He resolves to stop their population growth. So, he imposes slavery, forced labor and oppression. To this Pharaoh adds a conspiracy theory - if there were a war, the Israelites just *might*

join our enemies and fight with *them* against *us*. Note the “us and them” language. Some things never change. Despite their brutal enslavement and Pharaoh’s fear campaign, the Israelite people thrive. Pharaoh’s xenophobia convinces him that something more drastic had to be done to take care of these undesirable outsiders. Here is what happens next.

Exodus 1:15-22

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

There is no way to sugarcoat this. According to Pharaoh, the only good Hebrew baby boy is a dead Hebrew baby boy (ironically, the girls pose no threat). Yet as we will see, it is females who will be the downfall of Pharaoh’s reign by their subtle yet consistently defiant actions. So, who are these women? The first 2 are the midwives, Shifrah and Puah. What we know about them is that they are dedicated to ushering in life; preserving life; turning childbirth from a frightening

and painful ordeal into a blessed and joyful event. In short, they are life-givers, not death dealers. And more importantly, they fear God over Pharaoh; and that is why they refuse to follow royal orders that amount to genocide. It all sounds so matter of fact, as we sit here today. But the courage, grit and determination that it took to defy the Pharaoh is amazing. Put yourself in these women's shoes and imagine this scene.

Messengers of Pharaoh speak with you and say that you must appear at the royal court. This is a special honor...an audience with the most powerful leader of the whole world...and you are not rich, famous, or influential. What could he possibly want with you, you wonder? Then you hear what he wants, and suddenly all the pieces drop into place. You know why you are there; you hear the command to deal death, not usher in life. This goes against all that you stand for. But Pharaoh is your leader – he even claims to be a god - and he believes that the Hebrews are a national security risk. If allowed to live, these Hebrew boys will grow up to be Hebrew warriors, enemies, and murderers threatening the Egyptian way of life. Surely you must see this.

Your stomach knots, your heart sinks. You believe in God as the only legitimate giver of life and death – not Pharaoh. But you are only one person.

What can *you* do?

We know what Shifrah and Puah did. What they did was dangerous, defiant and definitely could get them in deep trouble. But they chose good trouble – necessary trouble. They made up a story about how Hebrew women are so strong and quick in labor, that midwives can't get there fast enough to kill these baby boys. Gotta love that! Points for originality – and Pharaoh bought it! But not to let that stop him, Pharaoh goes to the nuclear option: he orders **ALL** his people to search out Hebrew baby boys and to throw them in the Nile River!

Now the action shifts to 2 more Pharaoh-resisters, Moses' mother and his big sister, Miriam.

Exodus 2:1-4

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

Presumably Shifrah and Puah delivered the boy baby, pronounce him “a fine baby,” and his mother is left with a life or death decision. Will she kill her infant son? Her choice is civil disobedience. However, she technically follows Pharaoh’s order to throw her baby into the Nile. She just does it by putting baby Moses in the Nile – in a waterproof wicker basket – with his sister as his watchdog. Brilliant! Defiance at its best. But babies cry, and here is the familiar story of what happens next.

Exodus 2:5-10

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

Moses’ sister, Miriam, is the 4th female to decide that good trouble – necessary trouble was the right kind of trouble to get into. She was just a young girl herself, but she courageously confronts Pharaoh’s daughter – the offspring of the tyrannical bully that was systematically killing her people. This made no sense,

but she did it anyway. She could see that Pharaoh's daughter had pity on her baby brother, and so Miriam used her quick wit and resourcefulness. "You will need a wet nurse," she said. "And I know just the person!" Problem solved and with it a reward. Moses' mother will be paid to nurse and care for her own child until he is weaned. And not only that, in the meantime he will enjoy the protection of the royal daughter.

And what are we to make of Pharaoh's daughter? Talk about choosing deep trouble! She becomes the 5th female to defy her father's death-dealing government decree. Can you even imagine it? She knew the orders her father had given; she had heard his arguments, threats, insinuations and vitriol aimed at the Hebrew people. She knew this baby was a Hebrew – and yet, her own compassion outweighed her fear. Scripture says she saw the baby, she heard his cries, she took pity, and she paid money for his nourishment and nurture. Her actions should remind us of God...who sees us, hears our cries, has mercy and compassion, and gives all for our salvation.

When these 5 women acted, they did not know who this baby would become. They did not know about God's plan for his future; they saved him because it was the **right, human, caring** and **compassionate** thing to do. Their

actions were not attention-getting miraculous feats, these were ordinary deeds made extraordinary by God's grace. Think about it – they assisted a birth, waterproofed a basket, kept watch on a baby brother, offered a helpful solution to a problem. None of these women would have expected that their stories would be told thousands of years later. And yet, their actions, decisions and choices changed the world.

Because this child lives, he will grow up to confront the very Pharaoh that ordered his death. Because this child lives, God will use him to lead the Israelites out of slavery, through the Red Sea, and into freedom beyond. Because this child lives, he will receive the 10 Commandments and oversee the formation of the people of God. This child, of course, was Moses.

Friends, the truth is that *our* actions, decisions and choices also have consequences for ourselves and others – consequences that have the potential to make a real difference in the world – for good or for evil. Choosing the good is not always easy; it can get you into trouble. But it's good trouble – necessary trouble. I close with John Lewis' words: "I was inspired to get in trouble – to get in the way. You must find a way to get in the way – to get in good trouble –

necessary trouble. *You have a moral obligation – a mission, a mandate – to go out and to seek justice for all. You can do it. You must do it.”*

May each of us find a way. Amen.