

## Same old story?

Exodus 1:8—2:10; Psalm 124

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There's the world of the story, there's the world (the history) from which the story comes, and there's the world in which the story is told. They can be very different, but when they meet, our awareness can add layers of understanding.

Let's start with the story of a near mythical figure, he of the brooding countenance, one on whom his people rely for safety, for extraordinary leadership even though he is no god and has no superpowers by himself, though he does accomplish great things. No, not Moses. We'll get to him later. I'm thinking of Batman.

The world in which he was created and the world in which we saw him this summer are very different places. The Bat-Man was created as a comic book character in 1939. It was the end of the Great Depression, and ominous forces were at work on America's horizon. People had been beaten down so long by failed fortunes, poverty, joblessness, and drought. There was surely the perception of needing rescue. Perhaps there's something in the image of the millionaire industrialist coming to the aid of the downtrodden in a time when American industry began to lift the economy out of the muck. But the way the story gets told in this summer's film *The Dark Knight* reflects a post-9/11 world, even though 9/11 is never referred to. The Joker has perhaps always been a symbol of the chaos of violence in Batman legend, but he's even more so here. He has conflicting backstories, so we're not completely sure where his terrorism comes from. And he's a rogue, unaligned with the usual suspects and uncontrolled by them, reflecting the stateless violence of groups like Al Qaeda. The film retells (or makes up) a legend from ancient Rome—where in times of crisis, one person was given license to act outside and above the law in order to ensure the very survival of civilization. Guantanamo, anyone? Rendition of suspects to places where they can be tortured in order to get information? The film both defends the necessity of a defender working outside the law and also recognizes the danger of it. Seeing this in the context of post-9/11 America helps us see the story in greater relief.

Now, Moses and the Exodus.

The Book of Exodus supposedly retells events from the 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE, when the Hebrews were an oppressed people in Egypt, though as with all biblical stories the exact history is less important than the meaning it evokes. Pharaoh—whichever pharaoh it was—is building up his power by constructing great cities with slave labor. There *is* probably a historical reference here, though some scholars say there's simply no evidence that the Israelites ever lived in Egypt. But if biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann is right, the story took its present form during a time of exile several hundred years later. Imagine hearing the story of Exodus, of Moses leading his people to freedom and their own land, as a Jew in Babylon or some other imperial city, far from your ancestral home, a pawn in a world of forces beyond your control. Or imagine, for that matter, hearing the story as an enslaved African in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. Or image hearing it from Martin Luther King as he railed against the injustices of the 1950s and '60s and spoke of getting to the Promised Land.

You may or may not know that the story we heard today, of the birth of Moses, is also in the Qur'an. It appears twice, both times in sections from the early years when Muhammad and his small band of followers were a persecuted minority in the great city of Mecca, before their own exodus to Medina, where they first thrived as an Islamic community.

For millennia, in various times, places, and circumstances, this story and the whole broad narrative of the Exodus have assured oppressed people of God's power, presence, and purpose.

You can see why this early story from Exodus has gotten paired with the 124<sup>th</sup> psalm, which also speaks of deliverance from danger. My guess is that the psalm is being read in churches all along the Gulf Coast this weekend. It's one of the suggested readings for the day, and this week while Hurricane Fay batters the Florida panhandle, people will observe the third anniversary of Katrina's swamping of New Orleans.

If it had not been the LORD who was on our side ...  
then the flood would have swept us away,  
the torrent would have gone over us;  
then over us would have gone the raging waters...

There's surely something both powerful and bitter about hearing those words in New Orleans this morning. Yes, the setting in which you hear a story makes a big difference.

If the story of the saving of baby Moses means nothing to us, perhaps we live too easily in Pharaoh's world. The broad story of Exodus speaks of a God actively involved in freeing people from oppression. It speaks of a God whose will is justice and whose representation on earth is in rightly ordered community. It speaks of a God who is not captive to any political system. But in this particular episode, it is not God who acts, but some very human characters.

*We* hear this story on the cusp of a campaign season. We might all be looking for a Moses to lead us out of this dangerous and worrisome world we're in, a world where torture is accepted, where we've become a meaner and more oppressive nation, where both major candidates agree that we're worse off (if not simply worse) than we were four years ago. But to hear it as a story about Moses would be not really to hear it at all.

I heard a remarkable comment the other day. Actually a friend told me *about* the comment, but I do hope it's true. I'm told that one of the candidates said that no matter who wins the presidency in the fall elections, we'll be OK. I leave it to you to decide who might have said it, but I do hope he did (though I'm sure it would've made a lot of politicians cringe). As we've seen over the past eight years, it *does* make a difference *who* gets elected; our history isn't preordained. But let's also remember that in this story from Exodus, it's not the great leader of an empire on whom everything turns. Not the one whose name is surely carved in stone in some musty tomb and recorded in history books—the king's name is so unimportant to this story that it isn't even mentioned—but five women, three of whom aren't named here, and the other two—Shiphrah and Puah—whose names have become answers in Bible trivia games. Five women—the daughter of a king and four women of an oppressed minority—who do what would otherwise be unhistorical and in so doing, end up thwarting a decree of mad cruelty and saving a world. It's the McCains and Obamas that the world may long remember, but the Chonas and Gerri Hayneses who are midwives to the world of exodus that great leaders inhabit.

Many of you know Chona. A Maya woman, she has visited here and prepared food in our church kitchen for fund-raisers to support her community's work in from San Lucas Tolimán, Guatemala. And Chona has told us her story when we've visited her village. She was in her 20s when her husband was disappeared during the worst of the violence of the Guatemalan civil war in the 1980s. Death squads of a military dictator killed with no less impunity than Pharaoh's army slaughtered the innocents in the days of Moses. Not long after Chona's husband was murdered, word came to the parish in San Lucas about two families in a town an hour or two away by car. The military had killed 11 children's parents in front of the kids. The children were in danger since they had witnessed the murders. Could the parish help? Chona, a mother herself, volunteered to go get the kids and bring them to the orphanage in San Lucas. But to do so, she'd have to bluff her way through military checkpoints, claiming the 11 children as her own. If she was caught in her lie she could be killed, and all 11 children with her. Imagine it. Eleven children, from two families, already terrified of men with guns, packed into a van with a woman they didn't know, passing through armed checkpoints on the road to a place they'd never been before, and having to hide their fear so they wouldn't endanger one another. Chona tells her own exodus story in more detail, but to me it recalls the story of Shiphrah and Puah, lying to Pharaoh in order to spare the lives of Hebrew children.

I read of Gerri Haynes in an article by David James Duncan in Orion magazine a few years ago. The article was called "When compassion becomes dissent."<sup>1</sup> Gerri reminds me of the daughter of Pharaoh, who recognized that the baby in the bulrushes was a Hebrew child, but saved him anyway. My guess is that without being told, Pharaoh's daughter saw more than coincidence in the fact that a Hebrew girl was waiting to see her pull the child from the river. She may well have known that this would be the child's sister and that the wet nurse she volunteered to find was actually the child's mother. The silent conspiracy of women trumped the death-dealing of an empire.

To get the full impact of Gerri Haynes' story you have to read all of Duncan's article, and I highly recommend it. I'll make a copy available with manuscripts of this sermon. (You can also find it at [http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/17/.](http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/17/)) Gerri Haynes is an American nurse. Duncan had interviewed her about conditions in Iraq after the first Gulf War, in a time (now crowded out of our collective memory by other sins) in which Iraqi children had died by the hundreds of thousands because we'd destroyed the infrastructures for clean water and deliveries of needed medicines.

... in May 2002, Gerri returned to Iraq yet again.

Before this recent trip—amid all the flag-waving and war-rumblings [that followed 9/11]—Gerri's oldest daughter tried to persuade her to stay home. Gerri didn't describe their discussion, but she did say that, after finally accepting Gerri's sense of mission, daughter offered mother an old-souled piece of advice. "If you do go," she said, "be completely present, wherever you go."

These words returned to Gerri in an Iraqi hospital virtually bereft of medicine and hope. While her group moved from bed to bed, Gerri approached a woman sitting next to her dying child. Gerri speaks no Arabic. The woman spoke no English. Trying to be "present" anyway, Gerri looked at the child, then at the woman, and placed her right hand over her own heart.

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<sup>1</sup> January/February 2003, pp. 18-25.

The Iraqi mother immediately placed her right hand over her own heart.

Gerri's eyes and the mother's eyes simultaneously filled with tears.

The hospital was crowded. Gerri's visitation time was short. She started to move to the next bed, but then remembered her daughter's words: "*Completely present...*" She and the mother were already crying, their hands over their hearts. There was nothing Gerri could do, despite all her medical training, for the child. "How much more present," she wondered, "is it possible to be?"

She stepped forward anyway. With no plan but vague allegiance to the commandment, "*Completely present,*" the nurse without medicine stepped toward the bed of the dying child and inconsolable mother. She then put both of her hands out, palms up.

The Iraqi mother fell into her arms.

"If only this experience were unique!" Gerri told me. "But I can't tell you, any longer, how many mothers I've now held this same way." ...

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God. And blessed are those who embrace those who live on the margins, those who are ignored or even targeted for destruction by the great, and in embracing them, claim them as their own.

A Moses can lead his people to freedom, but he never gets a chance without Shiphrah and Puah, without the unnamed daughter of Pharaoh, without the Chonas and Gerris. Theirs—and perhaps ours—is a world that seeks no headline, but that paves the way to the Promised Land.