

*Invisible: the Original Super-Power*

Exodus 2:1-10

We've been talking a lot around here about racial justice. The events of this summer have heightened our awareness that the systems we depend on for a good life—schools, banks, police, health care, our cities and laws, even our church—are still, *still*, constructed and organized in a way that treats people differently because of the color of their skin. This month almost 200 of us are talking in small groups about how we are *personally* affected by the racism that infects our country.

Maybe you've wondered, as I have, whether there is anything you can really do to make a difference. Maybe you've thought, as I have, that no matter how willing your heart is to try to make things better for other people, you're pretty powerless to change things enough. Maybe even to change yourself enough. Maybe you feel, as I sometimes do, that as a person who has lived in relative privilege your whole life, you have no voice in this conversation; that you're pretty invisible to the things that seem to matter right now.

I want to tell you a story from our tradition.

Bithiah was the daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh. She was born into privilege. Egypt was the United States of America of its day: the world's superpower, a nation that excelled in technology and education, business, sophisticated infrastructure. All her life, Bithiah had heard the stories of Egyptian greatness. They were her stories, her family's stories. And she saw for herself that they were true. Life was good there on her side of the Nile River. Everything worked; order prevailed. Her father was king.

But she also knew that her country—her father, the laws, the things that *worked* and made her life comfortable and safe—didn't offer the same benefits to everyone. She knew that in the distance, on the other side of the river, there were Hebrew slaves who spent long hours every day baking bricks in hot ovens, carrying them on their backs to build the pyramids. That those people lived in crowded apartments, that their children were put to the same work when they were still toddlers, that they had no reason to hope for anything else. But what could she do? She was privileged, but she wasn't powerful.

At night, when she was lying in bed and the motion of her big house had quieted, she could hear from across the river the faint sound of Hebrew slave women singing. Sad songs, laments over their lost children, babies who were killed at birth by law, by order of Pharaoh. Bithiah's father had explained to her why this was necessary: if the population of aliens in their country was not regularly thinned, they would just keep multiplying. Even a forward-looking, technologically-adept country like Egypt couldn't manage the drain on its resources that millions of uneducated, hungry, dependent Hebrew immigrants would present. And so this order, that midwives kill at birth all the sons of Hebrew women, may not seem kind, but it was necessary, he said. It would save their country, their way of life.

Something sounded wrong about this, but Bithiah understood what he was telling her. Who was she to argue? And so she went on. Late at night she hummed those songs of lament along with the women who sang. She hoped they might at least feel the heart of someone in the palace leaning toward them. And still, she felt troubled.

One day she walked down to the river. In the custom of that time, she took off her robe and waded in. Maybe that day it was like a ritual for her, immersing herself in the water of the Nile. Some have suggested she had a skin disorder that was soothed by the cold water. The rabbis say she had watched the ritual baths the Hebrew women took to cleanse themselves, and that Bithiah designed her own ritual cleansing. Because she needed to wash off the grime she felt when she thought about the difference between the lives of those grief-filled slave women and her life.

While she was in the water that day, something caught Bithiah's eye. In the tall reeds that grew by the side of the river, she saw something move. She couldn't see exactly what it was, so she sent one of her servants to look closer. It was a baby—carefully, intentionally, put in a basket that was floating in the river. And that baby was a boy. A circumcised boy—which meant a Hebrew child, that by order of Pharaoh, her father, ought to be dead. And was not.

The baby cried, and her heart cracked open. What should she do? This is another of those biblical moments that is told as if everything happened in a heartbeat, but you know nothing could have been that obvious. If she picked this child up, she would be breaking the law, defying her own father's order. If she left him in the river, he would drown. No one would know, but she would always remember. I wonder how long she stood there and weighed the options.

The rabbis tell stories about that moment. They say that miraculously, her arm stretched out long enough to reach the basket from yards away. They say that when her handmaidens tried to dissuade her disobeying Pharaoh's order, an angel appeared and silenced them.

Suddenly there was a young woman standing next to the basket—the baby's sister, as it turned out. She asked Bithiah, "Do you want me to find a Hebrew woman to nurse the child for you?"

As if this child already belonged to her.

Yes. She would take them home, this baby...and the baby's mother.

And as Bithiah adopted this floating baby she named him, this child who was not hers, this child who should have been dead. Just like Adam named the animals that God put in his care at creation, she gave this child a name, and at the same time a promise to care for him for the rest of her life.

"His name is Moses." The daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh named this child who would grow up to lead the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt. He would become the man who would directly challenge Pharaoh on the system of slavery that had had made Egypt powerful. The man who would invoke plagues on this country until it let the slaves go free. The man who would climb up Mt. Sinai and speak to God face-to-face. The man who would lead the people of Israel to the promised land.

A Gentile woman, daughter of the Hebrew people's oppressor, gave Moses his name. In the biblical tradition, to name someone is to be a co-creator with God.

She herself didn't always have a name. In the story we read this morning from the Book of Exodus, she is called simply, 'Pharaoh's daughter.' Only later in the biblical story—generations

later, actually—long after the Hebrews had escaped from slavery and gone through forty years in the wilderness and arrived in the promised land, she is given her name. Bithiah, she is called. The Hebrew version of her name is *Bat-yah*. *Bat* means daughter (like *batmitzvah*). *Yah*, as in Yahweh—the name for God. She is named, literally, daughter of God. The daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh has become the daughter of God. The rabbis say this was God’s reward for her goodness, her actions. That God said to her, ‘Moses was not your son, yet you called him your son; you are not my daughter, but I call you my daughter.’

This woman—young, invisible, powerless, part of an empire that stood as enemy to the purposes of God—she became the daughter of God. She raised, and she named, the child who became *Moses*.

This is what God does. God takes powerless and invisible people and makes out of them an instrument for making things right. Maybe even for changing the world. How does that happen? How do people like us—invisible, powerless, born-into-privilege people like us—become people that God can use to make things right?

I think there are clues in this story.

- She made herself available. Bithiah walked out of the comfort of the royal palace and into places she didn’t have to go. Places where she saw for herself that not everyone had the privileges of her life. Like many of the Bible’s stories, this story says that God doesn’t need people who are particularly gifted or talented; God looks for people who are *available*. Wealth and privilege can be a barrier to our availability; that’s what happened in the story of the rich young ruler whose attachment to his possessions kept him from following Jesus. But they don’t have to be. They are not barriers to God. We choose.
- Bithiah was willing to see and to use her privilege. She knew she was Pharaoh’s daughter. So when she saw that baby that was at risk, she made a connection. She didn’t just feel bad about the situation; she knew she *had* to do something. That’s the responsibility that comes with privilege: not to feel guilty about it, but to use it well.
- She was willing to take risks. This part of the story is completely missing from the Bible’s pages, but what do you think happened when Pharaoh discovered that his daughter had adopted one of the slave babies? Or later, when Moses grew up and demanded that Pharaoh release the slaves? ‘Where did you grow up?’ I imagine Pharaoh asking this impertinent young man. ‘Downstairs. In your daughter’s apartment.’ Bithiah defied her father’s order, subverted her government’s policy, when she helped that Hebrew baby live. She did it knowing she was putting her favor with her father at risk. And she was willing to pay the price for her disobedience.
- She was willing to relinquish her own power—stand aside—and let others lead. Bithiah couldn’t nurse that baby, no matter how much she wanted to raise him. She just couldn’t. And so instead of heroically insisting that she could do it herself, she brought into her home someone who could nurse him—Moses’ birth mother. Kind of an unusual adoption situation, right? And so Moses grew up with two strong women loving and nurturing him. Bithiah didn’t elbow the other woman out of the way. She stepped out of the light, every time that child was hungry.

- One more: she didn't get overwhelmed by the magnitude of the work that needed to be done. I imagine there was a moment when Bithiah looked at that one baby floating in the Nile River and thought about all the other infants who had died, whose mothers sang for them every night. Wondered if saving just one child would make even a dent in the suffering of those slave families. And then she stepped toward that basket and she did the one thing she could do.

Maybe today you feel invisible, powerless, in the face of all that aches in the world right now: pandemic, fires, climate change, ugly divisions in our country. Maybe you feel insignificant, just one small person staring up at things that are so much bigger than you are. Maybe you're afraid that in this time, your privilege disqualifies you from participating in the work that is needed today. If you feel like that, I want to say to you: You're right.

Lucky for us, we're part of the story of a God who says, 'I can do something with that.' A God who is, all the time, looking for ordinary, invisible people to carry in us *God's* power to re-make the world, to create goodness again.

May it be so for us.