

A sermon
When our plans for our children unravel:
Moses' mother gives up her son so he can live
Preached at Plymouth Presbyterian Church
St. Helens, Oregon
From the text
Exodus 1:22, 2:1-10
By Rev. Peter J. Blank

There is a saying, "Well, there are two kinds of people...":

There are two kinds of people:

People who plan everything and people who let life come at them willy-nilly.

There are two kinds of people:

People who follow the recipe exactly and people who improvise at every turn.

There are two kinds of people:

People who place the toilet paper on the holder with the tissue coming over the top, or people who place it with the tissue coming down the back.

I think you know these two kinds of people.

There are two kinds of people in this world:

People who say, "Everything I have ever done has led me right to this moment," and people who say, in the ever relevant words of David Byrne and rock band the Talking Heads, "How did I get here?"

I look at the characters in today's scripture story, and I wonder which kind of person each of them was?

The Pharaoh: frightened by what he perceives as an uncontrollable infestation of these not-quite-people to him, these Hebrews. His illusions of power and control completely unraveled by a situation that brings out every instinct he has to hurt, to punish, to dominate. Does he wonder, How did I get here?

The mother of the brand new baby: normally, or ideally, a joy... and yet, of course, under these circumstances, the circumstances of that baby boy being the target of that angry, frightened leader, surely more terrifying than joyful. All her dreams for her child unraveling as she struggles to figure out what to do. And her solution involves waterproofing a papyrus basket and hoping and praying. Does she, like Pharaoh, look at the world she is living in and wonder how on earth she has come to this moment?

The little girl who is a big sister: Maybe, young enough to still be living in the moment. Maybe old enough to understand danger. Maybe looking at sticking around to find out what happened to her baby brother as a bit of an adventure, a game. Maybe worrying when the baby boy starts crying, wondering, who will help him? Until the princess comes along, when play disappears, and a plan springs up that is life-in-the-balance deadly serious.

The princess: Daughter of the Pharaoh, coming down by the river to bathe—i.e., child of the guy with murderous intentions towards the child she discovers in the basket. How might her plans be unraveling? Or does the child offer her an opportunity to weave new plans together? Does she pray to her deity, “Perhaps everything that has happened has led me to this moment, praise my god Ra!”

See the way each of these people is connected to the others. Pharaoh to Hebrews; mother to children; children to stranger—perhaps a dangerous stranger, perhaps a benevolent one. Stranger—princess—to child, and child, and mother. And let’s not forget the attendants of the princess, whose job is to be quiet, and invisible, and efficient, and to do their work in a way that pleases. All of them connected, at this moment—this moment that could go either way, for good or for ill.

When I’ve taught this passage to Bible Study groups I have used the movie “Prince of Egypt,” to help. I highly recommend it—it’s the Moses story, the story of the Exodus, and Israel’s escape from slavery, with gorgeous music and visuals. I complain about the movie how it changes part of the story, because, as we have just read, Moses’ mother wisely places the basket with the baby in the reeds at the river’s edge. Where in the movie version, Moses’ mother wades out into the river and recklessly sets the basket adrift, and, : the current speeds up, and a crocodile surfaces, and hippopotami swamp the basket, and a fishing vessel hauls it up in its nets... and so on.

I think Disney movie creators were trying to convey the danger to the child, which makes sense. But, for me, the danger is already revealed, with a heartbroken, desperate mother leaving a three-month-old infant behind, and a tense little girl standing guard, and everyone holding their breath.

Will the situation unravel further? We are in the midst of a series of sermons on “unraveling,” and I don’t have to tell any of you how our plans can unravel in an instant. Every one of us has things we had planned to do this year, and places we had planned to go, and people we had planned to see. We make our plans, come down with Covid – nope we’re staying home. That’s not what I want—for any of us.

There’s a saying, that humans plan, and God laughs. I don’t believe God laughs at us, though I can certainly imagine a divine eye roll. My perspective is; we plan, and we hope and pray that God works with and through those plans.

Moses’ parents brought a baby into a world filled with danger. Then, they created a desperate plan for his safety, one that depended on their trust that God would take a hand in the situation.

Moses’ big sister seems to have concocted a spur-of-the-moment plan for what to do if someone discovered her brother, and decided to take him home—maybe Moses’ mother whispered that part of the plan in her ear.

I wonder what the Princess’ plan was? She is a young Egyptian woman who had freedoms to choose her future. Was she married, or single? Was she waiting for children to arrive in her life, or was she not ready in the least? We read in our passage that she “took pity” on the child, who

was crying. Did his wails evoke her pity? Or did her heart go out because she knew he was a targeted child of an oppressed minority, and she knew that she had a better chance of keeping him safe than just about anyone. What awaited him in her home? A suspicious Pharaoh, always hovering outside the door? An education, of the kind royalty tend to get more often than regular people can manage? Certainly, the kind of fierce devotion we all know you can find among adoptive parents. (And regular parents, of course.)

No matter the plans of each of these people... alongside those plans, were God's plans... living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. God stood ready to weave together the threads that had unraveled in each life, so that, at the end, an astonishing tapestry was revealed... a tapestry that brought together each of these individuals, each of these families, and, ultimately, the fates of two peoples, two nations.

And at this point, the tapestry reveals, in the blues of rolling waters, and the greens of reeds at the river's edge, a vision—not of certainty; The tapestry we see is the side with the loose threads hanging without much pattern until we step to the other side. Then we see what God is doing weaving the tapestry of our lives. When we step to the finished side of the Moses' tapestry, we see a vision not of rescue; a vision of hope.

The princess lifts the baby out of his little ark. The baby is named Moses the Deliverer. And hope is born. Hope is born!