

Exodus 1:8-2:10  
Psalm 124  
Romans 12:1-8  
MATTHEW 16:13-20

## Five Women and a Baby

The first time I preached on today's Gospel – Peter's confession of faith in Christ as the Son of God and Jesus' entrusting him with the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven – I was a chaplain in a psychiatric hospital. Most of the people in the congregation at the McLean Chapel that day were there with staff escorts from their locked wards. *Keys* have a different meaning at a place like McLean where people are locked *in*; the thrust of my sermon was that Peter was given the keys by Jesus to *let people in* to the most wonderful place anywhere – a very different use for keys. Also, Peter was chosen by Jesus, I believe, not just because Peter spontaneously came up with the deepest confession of faith of any of the disciples to that point, according to Matthew, but because Peter's *shortcomings* – of which he would become extra-aware during the early hours of Good Friday morning – would make him a more compassionate holder-of-the-keys than most people. In that capacity, of course, he was to operate under God's direction.

Those are not, however, the themes which have been most typically drawn out of this Gospel passage over the centuries.

This text is, in fact, the supreme biblical passage used to justify the Papacy – the idea that Peter was the supreme apostle endowed with authority as Christ's Vicar on earth, the rock on which the church would be built, and the keeper of the keys of the Kingdom of heaven (meaning the person who would himself decide who would go to heaven and who wouldn't). The Papacy, of course, also is based on the theory that a self-perpetuating oligarchy (the College of Cardinals) is uniquely entrusted by God in perpetuity to decide which celibate male priest would be the vastly powerful heir to the married Jewish fisherman named Peter, *the rock*.

Or, *the stumbling block*, as Peter is called by Jesus in the Gospel passage immediately following this one (which we will read next week), after Peter denies that Jesus will have to suffer and die. Well, rocks can be both foundation stones and stumbling blocks, and Peter was both, so putting all the leadership of the Church on one person seems rather risky – especially as nowhere else in the New Testament is this done unless the one person is Jesus.

Matthew is the most hierarchical and the most male-dominated of the four Gospels; John is the least hierarchical (or most collegial among the followers of Jesus) and the least male-dominated of the four Gospels, combinations which I don't think are accidental.

The four Gospels give four different edited collections of authentic witnesses to Christ; it's a mistake to take one or two verses out of one of them and ignore other witnesses – like the testimony of John's Gospel that the first follower of Jesus to say to

him “You are the Christ, the Son of God” was *Martha*. I should add that the biblical scholar who opened my eyes the most to the very prominent role of women in John’s Gospel was the late Raymond Brown, a Roman Catholic priest.

St. Paul, the dominant (but not sole) writer of epistles in the New Testament, struck a *balance* between hierarchy (*he* was an apostle, his readers *weren’t*) and collegiality, and he often used his apostolic authority to remind his readers and listeners about the importance of people with a variety of spiritual gifts working together collegially, including in today’s passage from his Letter to the Romans.

Paul writes, “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.”

Please note that Paul does not isolate any of these gifts as belonging only to the ordained – or only to men or only to women. God gives spiritual gifts to all believers and everyone is called to use them for the glory of God, for the common good, as part of a team, and not to support their own vanity. Leadership *is* necessary of course – often to reinforce that it’s not just the leaders who do what is called “ministry”, but all Christians, and to help the team work together as well as possible. Peter himself did this.

Now, more typically, sermons that draw on three scripture lessons start with the Old Testament and work forward chronologically, concluding either with the Gospel or with the other New Testament reading. Today I will do the opposite and finish with the Hebrew Scriptures, since today’s passage gives a glorious example of what Paul is talking about. It’s especially glorious because Exodus 1:8-2:10 was not, to the best of my recollection, in the lectionary of The Book of Common Prayer which we used from 1977-2007, but as you can see it *is* in the Revised Common Lectionary which we have been using since the first Sunday of Advent.

Three major reasons have been given for the adoption of this lectionary – cycle of assigned Sunday Bible readings – by the Episcopal Church. First, it puts us literally on the same page each week with many other Christian denominations – hearing the same Bible passages read in church.

Second, it offers the option to read from the Hebrew Scriptures in a way that tells a coherent story over a period of many weeks, as we have done and are doing from the oldest books of Genesis and Exodus. (In The Book of Common Prayer lectionary, passages from the Hebrew Scriptures were chosen to complement the Gospel reading for the day, giving the Old Testament reading an even more secondary role and affording even the most regular church-goer no opportunity to hear consecutive readings from the Hebrew Scriptures – or sermons based on them.) As the “regulars” here at 8:30 this summer know, I’ve taken advantage of this new opportunity to focus on the richness of the book of Genesis for several weeks, and now we’re starting a series of crucial faith stories from Exodus.

Third, this lectionary gives an appropriate amount of space to *women* in the biblical narrative.

So, today we have the follow-up, generations later, to the saga of the patriarch Joseph we heard about for the last two Sundays. There has been a regime change in Egypt, and a Pharaoh is in power who ignores or is ignorant of Joseph's historic role in saving Egypt as well as his own family and sees the Hebrew settlers in Egypt as a potential threat which needs to be controlled, exploited and even wiped out. The descendents of the favored foreigners of Joseph's time now become slaves at hard labor in the fields, and Pharaoh finally resolves to resort to genocide – having the boy babies murdered.

Those familiar with St. Matthew's account of Jesus' boyhood will immediately think of the vicious King Herod's murder of the little boys of Bethlehem in an effort to kill Jesus – but let's remember that Matthew's story would have evoked *this* one to his first listeners, not the other way around. And those with any knowledge of 20<sup>th</sup> Century European History know that Egypt would not be the last country where Jews would be systematically enslaved and murdered. The Exodus story of survival and liberation has had profound meaning ever since it first happened.

Into this dire situation the all time great hero, Moses, is born. His life is in danger from the moment of his birth. Moses, the most important human figure in the entire Hebrew Scriptures, Moses, the liberator, Moses, the law-giver almost wasn't.

So, to rescue the infant hero whose life is in danger God sends – a fleet of helicopter gunships with SWAT teams to grab the baby and fly him to safety in Israel where...nobody would be waiting for him because his entire people, and nation, were fellow slaves in Egypt? O.K., *that* wouldn't have worked. Cancel Matt Damon and the rest of the Hollywood casting call.

Instead, to rescue the greatest hero of all B.C., God sends...women. To be precise, four women and one girl. Talk about unsung heroines: anybody ever hear of Shiphrah and Puah before? Probably only those who were at the women's retreat that Jason Wells (then our seminarian) led four-and-a-half years ago. Shiphrah and Puah were the Hebrew midwives – the women who assisted women in childbirth – who had the *chutzpah* to stand up to Pharaoh and refuse to follow his orders to murder newborn Hebrew boys. Without them, Exodus would have been a *really* short book. Actually, the whole story would have ended here.

Next, there was Moses' mother, who had the courage to hide her son for three months and then the faith to put him in the famous basket in the Nile *believing that God had a plan*. And the plan was...for *Pharaoh's daughter* to find the baby and, perhaps in the most wonderful act of adolescent rebellion in history, to decide to ignore her father's campaign to kill Hebrew boy babies and *adopt* the child as her own child under her protection...as long as she could hire someone to do the messy stuff with the baby (she *was* a princess, after all). So Moses' sister, Miriam, pops up and volunteers to recruit a wet nurse – her and Moses' *mother* who then gets *hired* by an Egyptian princess to subvert the Egyptian King's edict and nurse her own son. Sweet.

Really, I don't think a testosterone-fueled SWAT team could have done any better.

Of course, this is just the beginning of the story. Joseph went from a freeman to being a slave to being privileged and powerful. Moses went from being a slave to being privileged – to, *by his own decision*, becoming a fugitive and exile, then by God's call a slave and then the greatest leader in the history of Israel until Jesus.

But all that was made possible by the four women and one girl who had different gifts, different ministries, a lot of power or almost none but who all participated in God's plan for the liberation of God's people.

So let's not make too many assumptions about what "help" is going to look like if we pray to God for help. The world may be in love with hierarchical power and male dominance, but that doesn't limit *God* to working through those instruments. Hey, St. Paul himself writes, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God." So, if you ever feel like you're "a basket case" *maybe God will send a few good women* to pick you up as he did for Moses and let you rise to the heights that God has in mind for *you*.

**(The Rev.) Francis A. Hubbard**  
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church  
Monmouth Junction, NJ