

WGUMC August 30, 2015 "Jochebed: A Basket of Hope"
Exodus 1:1-12; 1:22-2:10

In 1935, the Committee on Economic Security promoted the establishment of a program to help mostly widowed women with dependent children. AFDC, or "welfare" as we used to call it, was designed to "release from the wage-earning role the person whose natural function is to give her children the physical and affectionate guardianship necessary not alone to keep them from falling into social misfortune, but more affirmatively to make them citizens capable of contributing to society". [online source: *Oxford Journals*]

That was 1935. Somehow in all the politics of the past few decades, all the complaints about lazy "welfare queens," all the "welfare-to-work" programs, we've forgotten that the original idea behind welfare was to keep single mothers out of the workforce so that they could stay home and do the important work of raising children to be responsible adults in the community.

Now, I doubt that that noble idea was in the mind of Pharaoh's daughter when she pulled Moses out of the water and decided to hire Moses' mother to nurse the baby she found in the bulrushes, but the effect was the same. As next weekend is Labor Day weekend, I take the greatest pleasure in knowing that Moses' mom ended up getting paid to be his mother! It reminds all mothers that what we do has value. About \$120,000 a year, according to salary.com: that's what it would cost to pay someone else to do what moms do. But, instead of a paycheck, we get a card and some candy on Mother's Day.

Now, I'm not suggesting that Pharaoh's daughter was a proto-feminist, but she evidently didn't agree with her father's population control policy. Remember Joseph, who got his father Jacob and all his brothers down to Egypt during the famine. They settled in their new land and prospered there.

They grew in numbers and in power until the natives started getting nervous.

Then Pharaoh did what all governments do. He scapegoated them. He blamed these immigrants from the land of Canaan for all of Egypt's problems, and enslaved them. And when that wasn't enough to keep their numbers down, he ordered midwives to kill the Hebrew babies, boys only. I hate to think what they did to the girls.

Into this climate of anti-immigrant hysteria, Moses was born to Amram and Jocheved (we learn their names in Chapter 6). We don't know anything about his father, but we do know something about his mother. We know that Jocheved knew that her son was a fine boy, a good boy. By the way, the story uses the same word to describe baby Moses that God uses to describe the heavens and the earth after creating them back in Genesis. God made the world; Jocheved made Moses. It's all

very good. So, she knew that her son was a keeper, and she kept him hidden for three months.

During those three months, she must have worried. She must have known that she couldn't evade Pharaoh's genocidal schemes forever, that she couldn't keep Moses for much longer. So Jocheved had to make a decision: hand over her baby to Pharaoh or entrust him to God.

Now, she loved God more than she feared Pharaoh, so she gave him to God. Why, then, would she set Moses adrift in the river? To someone who nearly drowned in the Missouri River once and had to be rescued by my mother, I don't much like that part of the story. But, then again, I don't live in Egypt.

In Egypt, you can't get closer to God than the Nile River. All living things in Egypt depend upon that body of water. The Nile today is five miles wide and 4,132 miles long. It drains 1.3 million square miles (10% of the African continent). In Egypt,

as in much of North Africa, the Nile River is like God, the giver of life and hope.

Jocheved trusted God and trusted the River, but she made a waterproof basket or container of some sort to put her baby in. The word translated "basket" here is the same word used for the ark that Noah builds in Genesis. But whatever it was, a basket or a little boat, she made it out of papyrus, a seaworthy material. And she plastered it with bitumen, a tar-like substance used by ancient shipbuilders. So, this isn't a story about a mother abandoning her baby. This isn't the "child found in the trash can" story. She made this little escape pod with the greatest of care. And then she put her child into it.

Imagine that you are Jocheved, standing on the bank of the River Nile with what is most precious to you. You are about to be an empty nester. You are holding onto your last child before they leave for college. You have been a hands-on mother for twenty-some years and you don't know how else to

be. You don't want to give up this job, let alone this child. Or you are a recent divorcee. You are holding tight to all that hurt and anger and you're not ready to let it go, not by a long shot. Or your best friend is sick and now in a wheelchair. No more skiing vacations. No more parties and shopping trips and baseball games. You're clinging to the friendship that was and don't want to think about what the friendship will be. Or you are about to retire after 35 years at the same company, and you've cleaned out your desk but you are still holding onto the keys. They are the keys to your life and you can't make yourself hand them over.

It hurts to let it go of anything that is so much a part of us. It's like losing an arm or a leg. The pain is that physical. And giving it to God feels like casting it upon the waters of chaos. Must be how the Spirit of God felt at the dawn of creation. [Gen 1:2] But Jocheved wasn't quite that bold. She didn't entrust her baby to the chaos of the current; she didn't

want to give up that much control. So, she hid the basket in the reeds on the bank of the river. In the water, but out of the waves. And then she posted her daughter as sentinel to watch and wait.

Now, this could be a sermon on all the things about which we need to "let go and let God" in our lives. And I'm sure we all need to hear that sermon. But let's wade even deeper into the Nile for a moment. Let's leave the relative sanctuary of the reeds by the riverbank and wade out into the open water.

Imagine that that baby is not just something or someone that is precious to you. Instead, imagine that that baby is you. You are like baby Moses, who was born into circumstances over which he had no control. Not all of us are born into slavery or poverty or any physical deprivation. But all of us, like Moses, are born with limitations. All of us bear the scars of previous generations. All of us carry genes that, for good and ill, shape our destiny. All of us are born into social groups that tell us

who we can and cannot be. Now just try to be who God intended you to be in this crazy society that almost seems as if it were designed to destroy the soul. Around here, if the commute doesn't kill you, then your rent or mortgage will.

Do we want to get away from all the things that enslave us? Do we want to find God, the one who wants to free us? Then let's not keep standing here on the riverbank, waiting for Pharaoh to find us.

Jocheved didn't just stand there. She made a basket of hope and gave Moses to God. If she hadn't let go of that basket, there would be no Moses, no exodus from Egypt, no Mount Sinai, no people of the Covenant, no Promised Land. There would be no King David, no Jesus Christ, no Christian Church, no kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

You see, God has big plans. The prophet Jeremiah tells us: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans

for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." [Jer 29:11] So I don't care how old you are. If God were finished with you, you wouldn't be here. There's still life you need to live, still growing you need to do. So what we all need to do is make ourselves a basket, plaster it with hope, climb inside and push out into the river of life.

I saw it happen yesterday at our Change the World Day. Who would have thought that the Methodists in Willow Glen would host a barbecue for 60 homeless women, children and men? It was pretty incredible. It was beautiful.

But if jumping into that river sounds scary, don't worry. The hard labor is done for us. Let me tell you, the work our mothers did to bring us to birth is nothing compared to what God has done and is doing to bring us to new birth. Some may put a price on stay-at-home moms, but you can't put a price on our steadfast God, the one who formed our inward parts and knit us together in our mother's wombs. By grace, we are

fearfully and wonderfully made [Psz 139]. The River of Life is
flowing by. So jump in! Amen.