

“The Protective Power of Maternal Love”

Exodus 1:8–2:10

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Like all good literature and films, the Harry Potter series explores various themes and issues that shape human experience — the struggle between good and evil, the value of friendship and family, the meaning of life and death. Some churches are offended by the mythic world in which the story is set — the world of magic — but it is a mythic world and one that stirs the imagination about human experience and lifts up noble qualities like loyalty and courage. In the church I served in Winston-Salem, we had a Harry Potter Vacation Bible School, complete with a sorting hat, in which we explored biblical stories about friendship.

One central theme of the books and films is the protective power of maternal love. Harry, as any reader or viewer knows, is “The Boy Who Lived.” He survived the curse of the evil Lord Voldemort, the same curse that killed his parents. He has a scar on his forehead which marks an event he was too young to remember, but he survived. How did he do this, given that he was only a baby? He was protected by his mother’s love. He Who Shall Not Be Named had great power. It was evil power, yet great power, but it was no match for a mother’s love.

Very little is. Maternal love is a powerful force not just in this fantasy world but in the real world and in the biblical world as well. Consider our reading from Exodus. It is the story of Moses’ birth, but he only plays a bit part. The main characters are women, including two Hebrew midwives, Moses’ mother and sister, and Pharaoh’s daughter and her maid, all of whom act in ways that enable this future leader to live into adulthood. All children are vulnerable, but some are more vulnerable than others. This baby is a great risk, like the young Harry Potter. He survives because of the protective power of maternal love.

There is much we can learn from this story about the influence of women in general, the power of maternal love in particular, and the character of God as well.

The story begins with a new Pharaoh, who has not known Joseph, becoming fearful about the number of Israelites in his land. This is a Pharaoh who is extending the boundaries of his reign. By any reasonable measure, he is in a strong position, he has little to fear, but he is afraid because the foreigners in his land — the Israelites — are great in number, and their number is growing. Fear is never a good thing, but fear motivating a powerful leader is a dangerous thing.

In fear, Pharaoh starts oppressing the Hebrew people. At first, he imposes hard labor on them, treating them as indentured servants. When this fails to weaken them, he escalates to a more vicious strategy. He tells the Hebrew midwives to allow any Hebrew girls that are born to live but to kill the boys. They refuse, the text says, because they fear God, obviously more than they fear Pharaoh.

When Pharaoh finds out, he asks why they have not followed his command, and they come up with a creative answer. The Hebrew women are vigorous, they give birth before the midwives arrive. The text says God blesses the midwives for their courage, for doing what is right, but Pharaoh does not give up. He commands all of his people to kill any Hebrew boys that are born by throwing them in the Nile.

All of this sets the stage for Moses' birth and the actions that follow, but before we get to that part of the story, let's pause for a moment and reflect on this context of oppression and the acts of two midwives whose names are Shiprah and Puah — we should definitely say their names. Our tendency is to identify with the Israelites. Christianity grows out of Judaism, after all, and they are the good guys, even if they are slaves at this point, for all practical purposes.

But we are not Jewish. We can attend a Passover, but it is not our feast. Furthermore, in this context of a powerful nation with strangers in the land stirring fear, we might identify more with the Egyptians. It is not our focus today, but this shift in thinking merits consideration. We might not like to think of ourselves as being like Pharaoh, but we are the ones with power. How do we treat the strangers in our land? What atrocities has fear tempted us as a nation to commit or condone?

The other thing we might want to reflect on is the courage of Shiprah and Puah. They know who Pharaoh is and what he can do. But

they also know God and the difference between right and wrong. So, they do what is right, no matter what Pharaoh says, no matter what Pharaoh might do. They survive and are blessed by God, but they have no guarantees when they act. How does our faith compare to theirs?

Anyway, all of this sets the stage for Moses' birth. Two Levites have a baby boy, and when they see that he is a good baby, a fine baby, they hide him for three months. To say that he is good is not a value statement comparing him to other babies who are not good. We sometimes refer to babies as "good" meaning they are not difficult, they sleep well. We don't intend moral judgment, but we need to use different language. All babies are good, indeed precious, sacred gifts from God. What the term means here is that this baby is healthy enough to survive in the ancient world, a time long before modern medicine.

So, they keep him and hide him so that no one can kill him. But at three months, they decide the risk is too great. His mother places him in a papyrus basket made with bitumen and pitch, and she places the basket near the river among the reeds, as the boy's sister looks on from a distance. What is this mother thinking? Is she leaving him to die or hoping for a miracle? We might find a clue in the text. The Hebrew word for basket — *tevat* — is the same word used for Noah's ark which saves some people from the flood. She has not given up hope.

This *tevat*, this basket of refuge, is seen by Pharaoh's daughter who comes to the river to bathe. Her maid brings the basket to her, she looks in, sees the baby, and hears him crying. How will she react? She is a woman with power. And she says he must be one of the Hebrews' children. So, she knows this is a child destined for death. Everything hinges on her response. How will she respond? She pities him.

At this point, the baby's sister steps in and makes a helpful offer. "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" This sister, Miriam is her name, is taking a risk. She could be in trouble for suggesting they do anything other than kill the boy. But the princess says yes. Miriam finds the mother and Pharaoh's daughter pays her to nurse her own child. She takes him as her son and names him Moses because she drew him out of the water (Moses is a name related to the Hebrew verb "to draw out").

We may wonder how she feels later when this baby grows up to liberate his people from Egyptian oppression. Exodus does not tell us anything more about her, but a Midrash refers to her as Moses' foster mother, and buried in the seemingly boring genealogies of 1 Chronicles is this simple statement. "These are the sons of Bithiah, daughter of Pharaoh (that daughter of that Pharaoh) whom Mered (of the House of Judah) married; and she conceived and bore Miriam, Shammai, and Ishbah father of Eshtemoa (1 Chronicles 4:17)."

Writing about our passage from Exodus for *The Christian Century*, Liddy Barlow makes this observation (August 12, 2020, p. 20).

In the end, it seems the princess became part of the family, linked not just by adoption but also by marriage. The noblewoman attended by servants became a wilderness refugee, wandering with her new clan for 40 years in the shadow of the Sinai. She gave birth to her own vulnerable children and named her daughter after that brave girl at the riverside. Bithiah became Jesus' great-great-auntie, an unlikely ancestor winking from his family tree.

It is a fascinating tale wherein courageous women enable a frail baby to survive, which turns out to be pretty important to the Hebrew people.

So, what is the message for us in all of this? One layer of meaning concerns the significance of women. Without the courage of the midwives, many Jewish boys would die and the entire ethnic group and faith would be at risk. Egyptian men would intermarry with Hebrew women and assimilate their children into Egyptian culture. Without the courage of Moses' mother and sister, he would probably be found and killed before obtaining this name, much less growing up. Without the kindness and compassion of Bithiah, not to mention her willingness to defy her father's orders, the baby boy would die anyway. It all depends on the women in this story, as it often does in our lives.

It's not that men don't matter. As we approach a child dedication, the love and care of a mother and father matter immensely to a child. Women and men guide us throughout life. But for many of us, women

have played a critical role — mothers and grandmothers, teachers and coaches, Sunday School teachers and choir leaders, and more recently, thank God, ministers too. We know their names and see their faces...

Even in the world around us, women have played critical roles at pivotal moments in history — Harriet Tubman developing the Underground Railroad that freed so many slaves, Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on that bus in Montgomery, Mother Teresa serving the poor in the Spirit of Christ, the brilliant mathematical women who helped us go to the moon, Abigail Adams who had vision about many matters that would have made her as fine a president as her husband. It is almost impossible to overestimate the significance of women.

Another layer of meaning in this story concerns the power of maternal love, the unique manner in which mothers guide, shape, inspire and protect us — beginning with the nine months we all spend as frail creatures-in-process living entirely off of our mothers. Not all mothers are caring. They have their own challenges, and some have deep-seated problems, but most of our mothers have nurtured us in selfless ways, sacrificing their own interests. I lived with my mother for most of my first six years of life, in between her divorce and remarriage, the most critical years of life. I would not be who I am today without her care.

I heard an interview this week with a woman who had spoken at the Democratic convention on gun violence. I care deeply about public life, but I don't watch either convention. All I saw was this interview. Her highly-gifted teenage son was hit by a stray bullet some years ago. The shooter has not been caught. Her son nearly died, remains paralyzed and cannot speak. Apparently there was a time soon after the shooting when medical personnel explored the possibility of turning off life support, but this mother said no. She told her son, "You have to fight. If you will do that for me, I will fight for you. I will be your arms and legs, your hands and feet. I will be your voice."

The passion in her voice is impossible to get out of my mind. It was part pain, part righteous indignation at the injustice of her son's shooting, and all love. A mother's love is incomparable, as Moses surely knew because of his mother and foster mother. Mothers can't protect us from all harm, but they sacrifice all they have in trying.

But there is one other layer of meaning in this story. It not only highlights the significance of women and underscores the protective power of maternal love; it points to the character of God. As we have noted, this story is about the birth of Moses, but he is not the main character. The women take center stage. Yet there is another character who is even more important than the women: God. Scripture, including the book of Exodus, is about God's interaction with human beings. The people matter immensely, but God matters more.

In this story, God is working through various women to nurture and protect a future leader and prophet. How they carry out the Divine Intent points to the character of God, which in this story is fascinating. God is ultimately sovereign over all things, though God allows for free will and the rough edges of the created world. We are accustomed to thinking about God's sovereignty being carried out through mighty acts of nature and powerful human force. But on this occasion, God's strength is revealed through acts of compassion, the gentle yet bold protection of a frail child. God is like these midwives, mothers, sister.

My theology professor Frank Tupper often said that Jesus did call God Father, Abba, perhaps better put — Daddy. But from the way he spoke about God and tried to bring God's reign near, Frank said Jesus was talking about a Motherly Father. I like that image. God is not human. God is beyond our concepts of gender which cause us enough confusion on a human level. But as we think of qualities that are Godlike — that tell us something about God, gentleness and compassion, motherly love and protection ought to be included, according to Exodus.

“Do not mistake compassion for weakness,” writes Roger Nam, commenting on our text, “Maternal care is powerful. This passage shows that a royal edict cannot defeat the resilient strength of maternal compassion. As Pharaoh increases the oppression, the compassion of the different women ends up raising the one who will truly lead the Israelites into liberation from this oppression (workingpreacher.org).” Indeed. We give thanks for the women in our lives and world who

extend such courageous compassion and for the God whose character is revealed through them.