

A Force of Five

Exodus 1:8-2:10

I grew up in the age of black and white television. My father would tell me that one of my favorite shows as a toddler starred George Reeves as Superman. When he would come home after his classes at university, he would be met at the door by cries of “Soop-man, daddy.” To which he responded by picking me up and “flying” me around the room. Later when we got a color television, the adventures of Batman and his sidekick Robin would entertain my sister and me. Although I found these shows entertaining, they were not all consuming to me. Today, if you have grandchildren or great-grandchildren, you may be aware that young folks seem to be obsessed with superheroes. Comic books, movies, merchandise, there are even conventions featuring the current crop of superheroes and villains. The two most popular franchises are the Marvel Universe and the DC Universe, each with their own cadre of devoted fans. Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, Wonder Woman, and others, each of these superheroes possess superhuman powers that they use for fighting evil.

This morning I would like to talk to you about a group of superheroes that we learn about in the Exodus story. Superheroes in Exodus, really Lynne?! Yes, not only superheroes, but female superheroes. Five women who did not possess superhuman powers, were at the lowest

level of the society they lived in (even if they lived in the palace), and yet they were able to make an impact on history by their very human actions in response to an evil Pharaoh's orders. Let's take a look at these superwomen.

Exodus begins by recounting the family of Jacob, which serves as the segway from the end of Genesis until 300 years later when a new Pharaoh came to power in Egypt. This Pharaoh was ignorant of his nation's history, as he had no knowledge of Joseph and what he and his people had done for Egypt. All he knew was there were a lot of Hebrews in Egypt and that frightened him. He made an assumption about the people, saying they were "more and mightier" than the Egyptians, according to the King James Version of the story. From there his mind jumped to these people turning on the Egyptians if there would be an enemy invasion, although there is nothing in the text to indicate that would be true. From this story, we learn that scapegoating is nothing new, just the parties involved have changed – Russia vs. Ukraine, North Korea vs. South Korea, the Right vs. the Left, and the list goes on. Finding a way to place blame on another in order to gain an advantage over them is never advisable and cannot be counted on to work out as planned, as we learn in today's story.

Pharaoh's forced labor of the Hebrews only served to strengthen them and increase God's blessing on them by growing their population. In an attempt to thwart the growth of what would later become the Israelite

nation the first two superwomen are enlisted by Pharaoh. Shiphrah and Puah, were two midwives serving women in Egypt, Hebrews and Egyptians alike. When given the order to kill Hebrew boys at birth, the women, who both feared God, devised a plausible story to tell Pharaoh; that because of their vigor, the Hebrew women delivered their babies before the midwives even arrived to assist in the birth. For their faithfulness, the Lord blessed these midwives with families of their own. Failing in his attempt to kill Hebrew boys at birth, Pharaoh called on the Egyptian populace to lay hands on any male Hebrew infants and toss them in the Nile. This decree to kill innocent children in advance of a deliverer arising for Israel would foreshadow the massacre of the baby boys at the time of Jesus' birth. Do you find it interesting that the nation responsible for the first slaughter of innocents would be the place of safety and deliverance for the Messiah as a child at the time of the second slaughter of the innocents? When God is involved, all things are possible.

The next superwoman was a simple Hebrew mother who wanted to see her male child survive, unaware of his part in the future deliverance of her people. She devised a very human plan for her baby to be discovered and saved. The baby Moses, was placed in a watertight basket and floated near the place where the daughter of the Pharaoh would normally bathe. I have to believe that Pharaoh's daughter had a reputation for a kind and generous heart, because she would have been

aware of both her father's decree and the fact that this foundling was a Hebrew baby. Yet, even with that knowledge, she proves herself a superwoman by disobeying her father's decree and taking the child as her own. Although it would be thousands of years later that Martin Luther King, Jr., would write these words in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," all four women acted in civil disobedience to an unjust law. Martin Luther King wrote:

"One may well ask, "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: There are just laws and there are unjust laws. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust."

Certainly, any law or decree that calls for harm to a human life would be considered an unjust law. The story continues.

Moses had been discovered and removed from the Nile, but he was still in danger. There was no Enfamil or Similac in ancient Egypt, how would Pharaoh's daughter feed this child to keep him alive? Enter our fifth superwoman, or rather supergirl. Moses' older sister, Miriam, had been spying on her brother to make sure he would be safe. When

Pharaoh's daughter drew him out of the water, Miriam boldly approached the woman and offered the services of a nursemaid to feed the baby. What a wonderful act of God that baby Moses would be fed and nurtured by his own mother. Not only that, but his mother would be paid for her services, nursing her own baby!

These five superwomen had no superhuman powers, no capes or laser vision, yet they each are remembered in the annals of history as being a part of birthing the nation of Israel. What can we learn from these women? First, Shiphrah and Puah taught us to follow our conscience. They knew that infanticide was wrong and found a way to be true to their conscience. Second, we learn that sometimes we have to let go in faith. Moses' mother trusted in God to keep her baby safe during a time that was anything but safe for him. Third, Pharaoh's daughter taught us that it is right to disobey unjust laws. Although she was not a believer, she acted in accordance with Micah 6:8 to "seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly," in that, despite her father's orders to kill Hebrew babies, she was willing to take a Hebrew baby as her own and so save his life. And, lastly, we learn to look out for others and be prepared to offer assistance. Moses' sister, Miriam, kept a watchful eye on her baby brother floating in the reeds. She was ready to jump into action as soon as he was lifted from the Nile. She offered a solution to a problem almost before the problem had been voiced.

I doubt that any of these women were aware that God would use their actions to raise a deliverer for an oppressed people. Yet, here is the story of five very human people, accomplishing a superhuman task with the Lord's guidance. We, too, are likely unaware of how our actions toward another may be a part in God's greater purpose for us, for the other person, or for the greater community. Can you think of a time that some simple action on your part led to something bigger than you had expected? Did the adoptive parents of Dave Thomas know that their act of kindness would lead years later to the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, championing the cause of foster and adoptive children in the US? Was local Mennonite minister, Claude Good, aware when he founded the Worm Project to help the Triqui children in Mexico, that the project would eventually help the poorest of the poor around the world? These were everyday people who ended up being superheroes to so many people.

What is our takeaway from today's story? We should be aware that each of us has the power of the Holy Spirit within us that empowers us to be a superhero for God, no cape or laser vision required. AMEN

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