

Unraveled: Seeking God When Our Plans Fall Apartⁱ
 5th of 5: *Jochebed, Miriam and Sheshan: Follow That Thread*
 Exodus 1:22; 2:1-10

15th Sunday after Pentecost ~ Sacraments of Baptism & Holy Communion ~ September 5, 2021
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Introduction:

When our first-born daughter Emily was a young child, the story you are about to hear was her favorite of all Bible stories. It's no mystery why. Miriam, baby Moses' big sister, is the hero! She plays a critical role in literally saving her brother's life. Of course, being a big sister, our Emily thrilled at the twists and turns of this story. And yes, more than once she bamboozled her little sister Hannah, younger by almost four years, to climb into in the laundry basket, get wrapped in a towel, and play the perilous part of baby Moses. All she had to do was cry on cue, and her big sister would happily keep playing with her. Those of us who are *not* the first-born child (I am the youngest of four children) may recall how willing we were to contort into just about *any* position no matter how uncomfortable or for how long, in order to keep playing in our sibling's game.

Truth is, in this Bible story, big sister Miriam was not acting alone. Notice as I read this story, the extraordinary convergence of not one, but *three* women's courage, defiance and alliance on the bank of the river Nile: Moses' mom, Jochebed; Moses' big sister, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter, princess Sheshan. Together they converged to save the life of one little baby boy. Of course, they did not know the story yet: they had no idea this fine little baby in the basket would become the one to lead the Israelites into liberation from oppression. But now I'm getting way ahead of the story.

One thing you need to know is the backstory that led to this daring river rescue: things had gone from bad to worse since the Israelites were now living under the power of a tyrannical, fearful king "who did not know Joseph." Talk about unraveling: first they were enslaved and consigned to hard, hard labor. But things got even worse than that. The first verse of today's scripture lesson, Exodus 1:22, is *not* typically found in the children's Bible version of this story. But we read it now, because it sets the motive for what happened next.

Communion Meditation

What is your story? What brought you here today? Okay, well maybe your mom or your wife or your husband or partner made you come today to church. Whatever your reason, I'm pretty sure that when you got out of bed and got dressed and made your way here, or opened up your device and connected to this service online, you didn't think about how Jochebed's basket boat making or Miriam's quick thinking at the river's edge, or Princess Sheshan's compassion and defiance helped bring us here today. But they did. Their story is part of our story. We are all characters inside of a story that we are not writing by ourselves.

The water we used to baptize Lily, the cup and the bread we will put in our mouths and swallow connect us with these three women. They are threads of *our* story. Threads like email

threads that spool all the way back to way before computers or telephones or telegrams or the pony express; yes, all the way back to creation, to Cain and Abel, to the Rainbow covenant, and on through to the new covenant sealed in Jesus' blood. Stories filled with surprise, impossibility, vulnerability, and self-emptying. This is the golden thread that lies just underneath the surface of whatever we do just to get through our worst day at work, or to keep breathing when we suffer a loss beyond the telling. In baptism and communion, we see and feel, we touch and taste and remember who and whose we are, we can feel that thread again. And remember Yes, we are all "fine" babies in God's eyes.

Whether we feel like it or not. Right now, I invite you to turn to the person on either side of you, look them in the eye and say, "You were a fine baby and you are still a fine person." 1,2,3, go... Fine people: if you are also feeling a little or very unraveled today, this is the place to find our place in the story that is being written in cooperation with God and the rest of humanity. In a few moments, we will break bread and share the cup. Yes, to keep us safe from COVID, we now use a tiny tasteless wafer, and a speck of grape juice in a plastic thimble-sized cup, but even with these elements we dip our toes in the river of life, we partake in a feast of love that connects us bodily to Jesus who was born to an unwed teenage girl named after Miriam, Moses' big sister and first woman prophet named in the Bible. Yes, all those Mary's in the New Testament are Miriam's.

Let prophet Miriam teach us God's truth that we are indeed our brother's keeper. God dreams that we see this call in our story and do our part to choose compassion, fierce compassion, against all odds. Let us also learn from the story of Pharaoh's daughter, the one who was bathing and noticed the basket and was moved with pity when she heard the crying of the baby. It was she who named him "Moshe" or Moses, for "from the water (*meshitihu*) I-drew-him.

Wilda Gafney, in her book *Womanist Midrash*, names Pharaoh's daughter Sheshan (the Egyptian word for lotus). She helps us consider Sheshan's story writing, "We are not told how old she is, if she is married or single, has other children or is infertile, if she has siblings. You have to wonder, what her relationship with her father was like. Whether he knew that she was fostering a Hebrew child. Did she publicly differ with her father on his treatment of the Hebrew women, men, and their children? Was she a beloved and indulged daughter? Or was she one of so many children by so many women that he could not keep them straight?"ⁱⁱⁱ

Wilda Gafney reads her as an ally of the Hebrew people. And so do I. In contemporary anti-oppression work, an ally is a person who uses his or her privilege to work for justice on behalf of oppressed people. Anne Bishop author of *Becoming an Ally*, defines ally like this: "Allies are people who recognize the unearned privilege they receive from society's patterns of injustice and take responsibility for changing these patterns. Allies include men who work to end sexism, white people who work to end racism, heterosexual people to work to end heterosexism, able-bodied people who work to end ableism, and so on. Part of becoming an ally is also recognizing one's own experience of oppression. For example, a white woman can learn from her experience of sexism and apply it in becoming an ally to people of color, or a person who

grew up in poverty can learn from that experience how to respect others' feelings of helplessness because of a disability...ⁱⁱⁱ

At this table, the Lord's Table, Jesus gives us a different kind of liquid courage, Jesus can give us the courage to strip away the veneer of niceness, show up authentically and with compassion (for ourselves and others), we have the chance to begin to be extraordinary (if imperfect) champions for one another. We too can become allies with God to push against the river of hate and distrust, fear and false assumptions. We can find our inner Sheshan, Miriam, and Jochebed. We can be a part of the counter narrative that stands for fierce compassion.

The past year and a half have been brutally challenging for many. And certainly, the challenges continue. I want to end with a conversation from a story written by J. R. R. Tolkien, in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, where his hobbit Frodo is speaking to the wizard Gandalf: "I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo. "So do I," said Gandalf," and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."^{iv} Will you decide to be an ally in the short time we have on this earth? In Christ, God has gone the distance to align with us, fine people!

What's your story? What will Lily's story be? We don't know: God and Lily will show us. What we do know is that today she was baptized in the sacred river of God's creation, God who is Love. Today, her story became a part of our story in a new way, as we promised to be her ally and friend. Who else needs you to be their ally? Let us come to the Table and we shall see.

Let us pray:

Creator God, thank you that you are writing a story of great adventure with our little lives. Help us yield to the challenges, the shadows and even the necessary pain. We trust you to bring about your dream for us through us, leading us home like the Hobbits to the shire with a song to sing and a story to tell.

ⁱ This sermon theme series, "Unraveled: Seeking God When Our Plans Fall Apart," was created by Lisle Gwynn Garrity, Sanctifiedart.org.

ⁱⁱ Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2017), p.99.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nadirah Adeye, in her article titled, "Being an Ally Versus Being a Nice Person" <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/daughtersofeve/2013/03/being-an-ally-versus-being-a-nice-person/>

^{iv} J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 50.