

A Portrait of Motherhood
(Ex 2, Luke 13)

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Today is Mother's Day. A day for those of us who are not mothers, to pause and celebrate our mothers and all the women who have been true "mothers" to us. So, rather than stick with the regular readings, which have little to say about it, I decided to go to a couple of choice readings that give us a powerful portrait of Motherhood.

The first is the story of "Moses in the Bulrushes." It is a gripping story, in some ways like the risky operations of women in the French Underground during World War II or abolitionists channeling slaves along the underground railroad to freedom.

Several women conspire to whisk an infant out of danger; a child who, it so happens, will become the most important figure in the Old Testament, and who will lead his people out of bondage to the Promised Land. Moses.

You may recall that, at the end of Genesis, the people of Israel had moved to Egypt to escape famine. They had been saved by the remarkable way in which God's hand can turn a family disaster into a saving grace. For Joseph, who was thrown into a pit and abandoned by his older brothers, had in time become the trusted right hand man of the

Pharoah and it was he who brought them to Egypt and fed them from the Pharoah's granary.

But now, some time has passed and the people of Israel are living in Egypt under the rule of a new Pharoah who worries that they are becoming too numerous and prosperous, and who sees them as a threat. So in order to keep them under his control, he enslaves them and orders that their boy babies be put to death.

Around this time, a Hebrew woman named Jochebed (none of the women are named here) gives birth to the baby boy who will be named Moses. She hides him for as long as possible, then puts him in a basket in the reeds by the river, whereupon Moses's older sister Miriam hides herself nearby and watches to see what will happen.

Along comes Pharoah's daughter. She spots the basket and tells her slave to fetch it for her. And when she sees the baby inside, her heart goes out to it.

Miriam, who is watching all this, sees her opportunity and slips up beside Pharoah's daughter and says "If you want, I can find someone to nurse him for you." Pharoah's daughter agrees and so Miriam rushes home and fetches Moses's mother, Jochebed, whereupon Pharoah's daughter pays her to nurse and raise him. It's a clever ruse, but it seems

almost certain that Pharaoh's daughter saw through it and went along with it anyway.

What all of the women in this story have in common is that they see what a precious gift an infant is. And they all share an unwillingness to let this fragile and defenseless creature be sacrificed for the sake of power. So, while Pharaoh and his men are committed to controlling the population using murderous tactics, these women, as is the case in so many Bible stories, are like an "underground movement", using subtle tactics and concealment to defy them and shelter the child from harm.

One of the important details in this story is that these women come from very different circumstances. Pharaoh's daughter is a member of the ruling elite and Miriam and Jochebed are members of the enslaved minority. But all three appear to be motivated by the same basic compassion.

The story tells us that when Pharaoh's daughter saw Moses, "she felt pity for him." And perhaps this is the emotion that binds all of the women in the story together and makes them all "mothers" to Moses. Each feels drawn to this vulnerable infant and is willing to wheel and deal at great personal risk, if that is what it takes to protect and allow the child to grow.

And this story suggests to us that there are remarkably no boundaries to this compassion, because it doesn't matter to Pharaoh's daughter that the baby Moses is not an Egyptian. She knows that the infant she is looking at in the basket is a child of her father's sworn "enemies." But more importantly she sees the baby with the true eyes of her heart. And that is enough to awaken her compassion and galvanize in her a desire to protect it.

The Bible is making a bold claim here, as it does in many other places, that when we experience this kind of compassion, we are experiencing an emotion that comes from deep in the heart of the God who created the universe. And these women are manifesting that love.

Mother Hen

We see this claim about God being made again in our Gospel reading, where Jesus, the 3rd Person of the Trinity and therefore God himself, experiences the same compassion as he looks out upon the people of Jerusalem. And it is no coincidence that the way Jesus expresses these feelings is by drawing on the vision of a Mother Hen sheltering chicks under its wing.

It is a tremendous example of how Jesus uses a simple everyday observation taken from the barnyard to help us understand how God works in the world. What is more watchful and tenaciously protective

than a Mother Hen? What is more reassuring and comforting than the warmth and shelter provided by the downy underside of her wings. And what is more fragile and easily frightened than a tiny baby chick? Those adorable little yellow furry balls running around and peeping. Your heart can't help but go out to them.

By using this example, Jesus is telling us that this is the way God feels about us. It is the way Pharoah's daughter felt, when she saw the baby Moses. It's the way true mothers feels, not just about their own children, but about all children.

Fire in the Barn

I once heard a story about the love of Jesus in rather shocking way; comparing his love to that of a Mother Hen in a barn fire. In the pandemonium, the chicks come rushing under their mother's wing. And after the fire, the Mother Hen's barbecued body is found among the ashes of the barn. But out from under its wing come the peeping sounds of the chicks that somehow survived under her wing.

It's a gruesome story meant to illustrate how Jesus suffered and died on the cross for us and ultimately to show us what God's love is like. And it is also a story about Motherly love and about how far she is willing to go to protect what is most precious to her, the life of the vulnerable chicks that are in her care. It is about the tenacity of that love. Tenacious

love! Love at all costs, like the love of Miriam and Jochebed and the Pharoah's daughter and of those women we know to be our true mothers. They knew the cost. And they loved us anyway.

So if you are a Mother, thank you. I doubt that there can be a more straightforward expression of God's love than yours. Us guys like to think we make the world go around. But it's really you who keep the world from going off the deep end.