

New beginnings

The book of Genesis ends well: God's chosen people were safely settled with plenty of food in a time of famine. The last of the patriarchs – Jacob – had been laid to rest in the land of Canaan. The people were safe and comfortable in Egypt, and all was well.

That's the end of Genesis, and when we turn the page from Genesis to the book of Exodus, and we find that things continue to go pretty well for God's chosen people. The 70 people of Jacob's family who had gone to Egypt had taken the command of Genesis 1:28 seriously ("Be fruitful and increase in number"), and Exodus 1:6 and 7 tell us of the generational change that happened, "Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them."

But then things changed. It was a new beginning, but not in the good sense of that term that we often assume.

Our reading from Exodus today began with the Egyptian reaction to this growth – "Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. "Look," he said to his people, "the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them" (2:8-10a).

The king's fear of the Israelite growth in numbers sets the scene for the dramatic events of the next thirteen chapters of Exodus.

The king, who is simply called by the title Pharaoh, says they must deal shrewdly with the Israelites. 'Shrewdly' doesn't really cover what Pharaoh did. He began a calculated, evil, plan. It began with forced labour. He made the Hebrew people into slaves. He put slave masters over them and oppressed them.

The forced labour didn't work. Verse 12 tells us that the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied. And so the Egyptians increased the workload. But still, the Israelites prospered in number.

Pharaoh's next step was much crueller – it was murder. He said to the midwives, "When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the birthing stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live." Kill half the babies. Can you imagine being given such an order?

The midwives disobeyed. And not only that, somehow, they managed to convince Pharaoh that the Hebrew women were not like the Egyptian women – the Hebrew women, they said, were vigorous and gave birth before the midwives arrived.

The midwives' names were Shiphrah and Puah. We heard in our reading that God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.

I think about the contrasts between the midwives and Pharaoh. And not just that they were at opposite ends of the social spectrum. We don't know Pharaoh's name, but we know the midwives' names. Pharaoh would end up losing his firstborn son.... and the midwives would have families of their own.

Verse 22 tells us of Pharaoh's next command, not just to the midwives, but to all the people: "Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."

There are several times in Exodus where we hear of Pharaoh's heart being hardened, and although it's not explicitly stated here, I think that's what we see it happening: Work them harder. That didn't work. Work them harder, oppress them. That didn't work. Kill the boys as they're born. That didn't work. Just kill the boys! I can imagine him being more frustrated when each step didn't work. Becoming angrier and angrier. Fuming, more and more, each time his plan didn't work.

Then, as we move to chapter two of Exodus, the scope of the narrative changes. It moves from looking at the whole of the nation, down to looking at one family which was living through Pharaoh's persecution of the Hebrews.

The beginning of chapter two tells us how a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman who we find out later is called Jochebed (Exodus 6:20). Jochebed became pregnant and gave birth to a son – a son who, according to Pharaoh's order, should have been thrown into the Nile.

But Jochebed hid that boy child – she hid him for three months. And when she was unable to hide him any longer, she effectively mocked Pharaoh's order by placing the child in the Nile. She got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile.

And then the baby boy's sister watched from a distance to see what would happen to him. Would he drift away never to be seen again? Would the basket sink? Would a crocodile come by?

Can you imagine Jochebed's anguish at leaving her son like that? It may have been his only hope... but still, even if he survived, she would almost certainly never see her son again. She was letting him go to a very uncertain fate in that basket on the Nile.

Interestingly, the Hebrew word that is translated as 'basket' is תבה (tevah), and that word appears only twice in the Old Testament. The other place is in Genesis 6:14, where God says to Noah, "So make yourself a Tevah (an ark) of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out".

In both cases, the tevah is the means - the vessel - by which God saves his chosen people.

And so the baby was in the basket, amongst the reeds along the bank of the Nile, with his sister watching on.

The Pharaoh's daughter came to bathe in the river, with her attendants standing guard on the bank. She saw the basket and sent one of her slaves to get it. Opening the basket, she found the boy was crying and she felt sorry for him. She recognised the child as one of the Hebrew babies. She would have known her father's order, of course. And she would have known what her father thought of the Hebrews, too. But despite that, she took pity on the child in the basket.

Bravely, the baby's sister approached Pharaoh's daughter, and offered to find a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby. "Yes, go." said Pharaoh's daughter.

Jochebed was brought to Pharaoh's daughter. "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So Jochebed took the baby and nursed him. And got paid for it!

In due course, the baby grew, and Jochebed took him back to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her adopted son. Somehow, this child, who Pharaoh would have had killed, ended up as his adopted grandson!

The boy was named Moses, with Pharaoh's daughter explaining that she drew him out of the water. Moses is our translation of the Hebrew מֹשֶׁה 'moshe' meaning 'to draw out'.

You may have noticed something unusual about this story: the heroes are all women. Moses, of course would be a hero later on, but in this story, he's very passive – as you would expect of a three-month-old.

But the heroes here are women. The midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who stood up to Pharaoh's cruelty. Moses' mother Jochebed, who hid her infant son as long as she could – for three long months – and then trusted him to an ark. Moses' sister, who we learn later was named Miriam, stood watch over her baby brother. Pharaoh's daughter who drew Moses from the waters of the Nile, and who adopted him even though she recognised him as a Hebrew, and then Miriam again, who bravely approached Pharaoh's daughter, and reunited mother and child!

Yes, all the heroes were women. Often in the wider church women have been pushed aside and their role in the life of faith downplayed. William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, was criticized for allowing women to hold responsible positions in the organisation, even though it was clearly doing a great job caring for people in need and sharing the good news of Jesus. I understand that Booth responded by telling his critics that "All my best men are women."

Just like Pharaoh was going to cripple the Hebrew people by wiping out all the boys, I think we can cripple ourselves and our church if we ignore women. Or if we ignore any group of people, for that matter. As Paul tells us (Galatians 3:28) "There is neither Jew

nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”.

All the heroes are women, and we can see it is God working through them. God was putting his plan for salvation into action. God’s people were hurting. They were being enslaved and worked to death in a land that was not their own. Pharaoh’s objective was not simply completing building projects; it was working the Hebrews to death.

And into that world of oppression a baby was born. Moses’ birth was one of many and would have seemed unimportant, but his survival and the circumstances of his survival were special indeed.

When Moses was drawn out of the waters of the Nile, it was a new beginning. Not just a new beginning for him, but a new beginning for his people. Just like it was a new beginning for all people when Noah stepped out of another ark all those years before.

It was a new beginning because it would be through Moses that the Hebrew people would be freed from slavery in Egypt, and be led all the way to within sight of the promised land.

Pharaoh tried to stop Moses, but at each attempt, his heart was hardened. He tried to work the Jews to death, but failed. He tried to get the midwives to kill the Jewish babies but failed. He tried to get the people to kill the Jewish babies, but his own daughter saved one!

Pharaoh was the most powerful man in the world. Yet he couldn’t stop God’s heroes or God’s plan.

I often reflect on how we see God working through the unlikely. The shepherd boy who slew the giant and eventually became king or the young boy sleeping in the temple who heard God’s call or the fishermen who left their nets to follow Jesus or even the tax collector who abandoned his booth to do the same. Or the greatest persecutor of the early Christians who had an encounter with the risen Christ and became an apostle.

Or of course, the baby born in humble circumstances in Bethlehem, who heal and teach and give his life for us all on that cross outside Jerusalem, and who would rise again and call us to follow him.

And we might think of ourselves as unlikely, or unworthy too, or of our congregation as insignificant, but God is at work in our lives, and in our church. He will save us and has plans for us too.

The story of the birth of Moses isn’t just a story of an evil Pharaoh and heroic women. It’s a story that we can learn from – and take heart from – today.

It’s easy to see the similarities in the birth stories of Moses and Jesus – laid in the ark of papyrus, laid in the manger, the order for boy children to be thrown into the Nile at the

command of the evil Pharaoh, the order for all boy children under two to be killed at the command of the evil Herod.

And just like the birth of Moses was a new beginning for the Hebrew people enslaved in ancient Egypt, the birth of Jesus was new beginning for God's people too – and not just the Hebrew people, but, as the angels announced, "...on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests." (Luke 2:14)

Our gospel reading today tells us a bit more about the new beginning that Jesus brings. Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" (Matt 16:15) and Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." We get a bit used to that statement, but at the time it was a bold declaration – the very son of God had arrived in creation, and Peter recognised him.

Jesus went on to tell the disciples how things would be, "on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." (Matt 16:18)

We are that church.

What Pharaoh's daughter did for the infant Moses, God has done for us: When we were overwhelmed by the metaphorical waters of the world, God has drawn each one of us out of the water. And rather than being adopted into the family of a Pharaoh, we are adopted into the family of God - as the opening of John's gospel tells us, "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." And as Paul says to the Galatians, "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith."

Wherever we are, whatever we've been through, each one of us, and all of us together, have a new beginning in Jesus.

Amen