

The Girls in the Reeds¹

Remember Joseph? Sold into slavery by his brothers, house boy for the Egyptian Captain of the Guard, wrongly accused and imprisoned, but gifted by God to lead Egypt in a famine survival strategy, promoted to Pharaoh's Chief of Staff—the second most powerful person in Egypt. Loved by Pharaoh and all of Egypt.

Then Joseph brought his family to live in the suburbs, where they grew and prospered. We don't know how much later our text for today begins:

[EXODUS 1:8-2:10] NIV *Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." ¹¹Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor... ¹²But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites... ²²Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live." ^{2:1}Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. ²The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. ³When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. ⁴His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. ⁵The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. ⁶Then she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. ⁷Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" ⁸Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. ⁹Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. ¹⁰When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."*

Notice two things. First, the main characters are young people and their parents aren't around. That's important, because this is a story about what happens when young people are in charge. Second, without this story, without these two girls in the reeds, there is no Moses. No Exodus. No liberation of God's people; not until the parents get off the stage and let the young people set things in motion.

Of course, we also should note: it turned out better for one of the girls than for the other; and the story is written by and for those who benefitted most from what happened here.

So, two stock roles for girls: beautiful princess - responsible big sister. And while we don't their ages, the text tells us that each had inner resources, just waiting to be unleashed. Each is ready to set aside what she *should* do, and work

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together on what they *might* do, which happens when you're down in the reeds.

In face of Pharaoh's evil plot, Moses' mother did what she could: she hid him for a while. But babies grow. And when she could hide him no more, she made a snug little ark. It's brilliant; but it's heartbreakingly limited. A tar-lined basket can't save a child for long. He has one day, maybe two, before he'll die of exposure; and anyone who finds him will get the mother's message, loud and clear:

This is what we've come to, in Egypt: tar-lined cradles.

It's all I could do for my child. All I could give him was two more days.

With that, the mother leaves the sister to watch. That's what big sisters do: they watch when the parents leave. Report back. It may not be what they choose to do, but it's their job, as part of the family. Watch your brother. Be the girl in the reeds, and then come home.

Enter Pharaoh's daughter. Being beautiful is a tough job. But that's what princesses do. It's their job, as part of the family. Take your maids, go to the river, and anoint that lovely skin because we need you to look good this afternoon. Be the girl in the reeds, and then come home.

So here they are: two girls in the reeds. Two girls who know what they're supposed to do. *Hide and watch. Bathe and dress.* Do as you're told and come home. And they might have done it and never even met one another; but, you know, the reeds are a watery, slippery, in-between sort of place: muddy and murky and hard to find your footing. Anything can happen down in the reeds to upset your balance, and on this day, something did.

You know what it was. The *Egyptian* princess found the *Hebrew* baby. You know what she was supposed to do with it. So did she. So did the sister. So, *now* what? What do you do with a baby in a basket when you're down in the reeds, at the river's edge, and the parents are not there?

The princess knew what her father wanted. It was a Hebrew male child; so, she was supposed to tip over the basket and let that baby tumble into the water; or, at least, close the lid, give the ark a little push, and send it on down the river for someone else to deal with. That's what she was supposed to do. The text says she had pity. I'd like to believe she just knew it was wrong.

The sister knew what her mother wanted. If the baby was found, even by an Egyptian, the sister was supposed to keep watching, as awful as things might get, to stay in her hiding place so she wasn't seen, and then report to her mother what happened. That's what times like these required, like it or not. And she was supposed to just try to survive.

Two girls in the reeds with a little boy in between them, each knowing what she was supposed to do. And you know what? They didn't do it. They couldn't.

Things look different when you're down in the reeds, without your parents. You have to think for yourself. Tell it like you see it, which is what the princess did.

Sometimes, the truth is the most radical thing you can say. Just name what you see, right in front of you. That homeless man, left in the street. That baby, left to die in a basket. Just tell the truth—say it out loud. *This must be one of the Hebrew's children, because Egyptian mothers are not reduced to this: making little arks to float in the Nile. Trying to save their babies from a flood of hate and fear.*

One truth calls forth another, especially when you're in the reeds. One girl, stammering out the truth about what she sees, calls for another girl to speak up. One girl, pausing over unspeakable evil, encourages another one to stand with her. "This must be one of the Hebrew's children," and then the sister got an idea. "Do you want me to find someone to nurse that child—for you?" she asked, stepping out of her hiding place.

And just like that, they had a plan. A plan to save a life, no matter what their parents thought of it. And it was about the craziest plan you could think of: take the Hebrew baby back to his Hebrew mother for a few years and tell everyone it's okay because Pharaoh's daughter OK'd it: really.

But they did it, and they got away with it, and when Moses was three years old, the princess adopted him: took him into the palace and raised him, with her father down the hall. Lord only knows what *he* thought about this whole arrangement. Scripture is silent about *that*. But then, this story isn't about parents, or doing what you're told, even if your Dad *is* Pharaoh. The story's about young people, doing whatever crazy thing they dream up together to get the baby out of the reeds.

So now I'm wondering about us: what's going on where we live, in our city, our neighborhood, during one of the most surreal years this country has ever had. *We're in the reeds*, y'all: the shootings, the violence; they've brought up all these things we haven't wanted to talk about for years, like why does racism still have such a grip on us, and what are we going to do about irresponsible people with guns, and why are people so afraid of the homeless, and how on earth are we going to have conversations without shutting each other down? What do we do, here in that muddy, slippery, in-between place, down in the reeds? How do we keep listening, and talking, and praying?

What if we brought these two girls in, and asked them to show us some new ways to be?

Would they say, first, that *we don't have to read the world the way our parents read it—we don't have to read the world like the political establishment reads it when we're down in the reeds and our parents aren't here, and we have to decide for ourselves about what we're going to do about this situation, this interruption,*

this baby in the basket, this Syrian child on the beach, this black boy in the street, this homeless man right here. And if the way we've been taught to read the world tells us it doesn't matter, or we can't make a difference, then something has to change; and it's up to us.

Would they say, second, these two girls, *if you're down in the reeds, and you don't know what to do next, start by telling the truth about what you see.* "This is one of the Hebrew children." Say it, out loud, because one truth calls for another, and you never know who may be listening—who may be waiting for a reason to come out of hiding to stand with you, and make a plan to save a life.

Would they say, third, these two girls, that this is how liberation starts. God's liberating work doesn't have to begin with a mass movement. It can begin one act of compassion at a time—down in the reeds, with an interruption we didn't expect, a truth we have to acknowledge. It can start with two girls and one really crazy idea. That's it; that's all we need. Because whenever the children of God claim the freedom to re-imagine and remix the world—well, then, Moses can grow up. The Exodus out of slavery can begin. And I tell you what: we all need to leave Egypt. It's the next chapter of a perfect story. Maybe God will lead us to write it.