

“SUNDAY SCHOOL REVISITED: V - MYSTERIOUS WAYS”

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Exodus 2:1-10

One of the things I learned about preaching in seminary was that the two most important parts of the sermon are the beginning and the end. You’ve got to grab your listeners and draw them in at the beginning, and you’ve got to leave them pondering or challenged at the end. Now, sometimes those tasks come easier than others. Sometimes I figure out how to start a sermon pretty quickly, other times not so quickly. Well, it was one of those weeks, when it wasn’t coming quickly - and then, God provided - just in the nick of time!

Just before I was ready to sit down and write the sermon, I checked my email, and lo and behold, someone in the church had forwarded something to me, and thanks be to God, I read it! (Sometimes I don’t!) But I read this one, and immediately thanked God, because it leads right into what I want to say.

So here it is! (If you’ve heard it before, act like you haven’t!) A little boy was starting kindergarten, and his mother was understandably nervous about it. He had to walk to his school, and that really made her nervous. He thought himself quite the big boy, and didn’t want her to walk with him. Well, she wanted to give him the feeling of independence, but she also needed to know that he was safe.

So she arranged for a friend of her’s to follow him. She knew that that friend went out walking with her little girl every morning, so it wouldn’t be a big change of routine for them. The neighbor said, sure, she’ll be glad to.

And so she did. The next day she followed little Timmy and his friend as they walked to school. And the next day she followed him again, and the day after that. She did it for a whole week.

Well, one of those days, as Timmy and his friend were walking, the friend said something to him about the lady and the little girl following them. “Have you noticed that lady following us to school? Do you know her?”

Timmy casually said, “Yeah, I know her.” His friend asked, “Who is she?” “Oh,” Timmy replied, “that’s just Shirley Goodnest and her daughter Marcy.”

“Shirley Goodnest? Who the heck is she and why is she following us?”

“Well,” Timmy explained, “every night my Mom makes me say the 23rd Psalm

with my prayers because she worries about me so much. And in that psalm it says, 'Shirley Goodnest and Marcy shall follow me all the days of my life,' so I guess I'll just have to get used to it."

Cute, huh? Yet, what happened to Timmy is exactly what happened to another little boy in this morning's lesson from the Hebrew scriptures. His name was Moses, and he too, had women watching over him, keeping him from harm.

Let's go back and remember this old Sunday School story.

Once there was a king in Egypt who was afraid of the people of God - the Israelites. Oh, he was in charge of the land, but he saw that the Israelites were prospering in growth, and it scared him. So he enslaved them, oppressed them, and forced them to work long hours in harsh conditions. He would do whatever he could to grind them down and wear them out. But it didn't work. The scripture says that the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread.

So the king knew something had to be done to stop them. He told the woman who were midwives to the Hebrew women, that any time a male baby was born, they were to kill him. Thankfully, the midwives feared God more than they feared the king, so they didn't do it, and when the king asked, they made up some tale about the babies always arriving before the midwives were able to get there - and he believed them.

So that scheme didn't work. Later, the Egyptian ruler commanded the people that any male child born to the Hebrews should be thrown in the Nile and killed.

And so that was the background of the birth of Moses. Moses was born of Hebrew parents, both of the house of Levi. As soon as he was born, his mother particularly took pains to hide him. She did that well for three months, but then she knew she had to do something to protect his life - and she did the only thing she could - she sent him away. She put together a waterproof basket and set him in the reeds on the side of the water, and turned and walked away with a broken heart.

But while she walked away, someone else was there nearby watching the whole thing, and waiting to see what would happen next. It was the woman's daughter, Moses' sister Miriam. She stood and watched.

And as she did, she saw Pharaoh's daughter come down to the riverside to bathe. She saw Pharaoh's daughter spot the basket holding her baby brother and she saw her send one of the servants to fetch it. Pharaoh's daughter melted at the sight of this precious baby, and so right then and there, she decided to keep him,

even though she knew it was a Hebrew boy.

Well, just when she's fawning over little Moses, up pops Miriam to help out. She offers to get a wet nurse for the baby - one of the Hebrew women, and Pharaoh's daughter agreed that was a great idea. And guess who it was that Miriam got for the job - her mother, Moses' own mother! She nursed him, and cared for him, until he grew and went to live in the home of Pharaoh, the home of wealth and privilege, the home of royalty.

It's an incredible story, isn't it? And if you read the whole of Exodus, you realize it gets more incredible still, because though this is the first we hear of Moses, it is certainly not the last. He encounters God in a burning bush, he climbs the mountain and comes down with the commandments from God, he leads God's people to freedom through the sea. He is one of our forefathers of the faith - and he came within a hair's breath of never having a life at all.

But he did, by the grace of God. I read a wonderful quote this week that says it so well: "Moses' birth and rescue from the waters of the Nile show so beautifully that God works ahead, and redeems that which is tossed into the waters of chaos."

God works ahead and redeems that which is tossed into the waters of chaos. What good news for Moses, and friends, what good news for you and me. Our God is a God who works ahead, who makes a way, who, when all the evidence points to a disaster, God makes things happen, good things,

God goes before us and redeems that which is chaos. He did it powerfully in this lesson. He put people - women, in this case - in the right places at the right times to do the right thing for Moses. When Moses' mother sent him off into an unknown future in that basket, God positioned his sister in the perfect place to intervene. God even used someone who, by rights, should have been an enemy, Pharaoh's daughter. Instead, she fell in love with him and took him as her own. The circle was completed when Miriam arranged to have Moses' own mother nurse him into childhood. God took this chaotic mess and redeemed it.

And God takes care of our chaotic messes and redeems them too. As in the story of Moses, so in our lives too. In times of danger, God goes before us and makes a way. Moses never would have lived, had God not made a way.

I learned recently about a town in Austria that was in grave danger because of the threat of invasion by the forces of Napoleon. Soldiers had been spotted on the hills above their little town. They knew their time was short, so the citizens got together in a church to plot their strategy. Should they try to defend themselves, or should they simply wave the white flag of surrender?

Well, it happened to be Easter Sunday, and as they were deliberating, the pastor of the church rose and said, "Friends, we have been counting on our own strength and apparently that has failed. As this is Easter Sunday, the day of our Lord's resurrection, let us just ring the bells, have our services as usual, and leave the matter in God's hands." Which is exactly what they did. They had their worship and they rang their bells, and you'll never believe what happened. The enemy heard the bells pealing, concluded that the Austrian army had arrived that night to defend the little town, and before the service ended, Napoleon's men broke camp and left - leaving the little town safe and sound.

God goes before us in times of danger, and makes a way, redeeming our chaotic messes.

And he also goes before us in times of despair. No one, but a mother who has given up a child, knows the despair Moses' mother was feeling - no one. It had to be excruciating for her. She loved him dearly, and would have wanted a whole life with him - and yet to save his life, she had to sacrifice her time with him, and trust an unknown future. Perhaps the only ones who can truly understand his mother's pain are those mothers who have given their children up for adoption.

Yet, in the midst of Moses' mother's despair, God went ahead and made a way. He redeemed the chaos, he made things right for Moses. God went ahead in the midst of his mother's despair, and made a way, and friends, God will do that for you and me too.

There's a man who lived long ago that could tell you how true that was in his life. He was a small businessman in Illinois, in business with a partner, his friend. Their business, sadly, was failing, and failing quickly. They were both despondent, and the one man said to the other, "You know, I wouldn't mind so much if I could just do what I want to do. I really want to study law. If only we could sell everything we've got, pay all our bills, and have just enough left over for me to buy one book - Blackstone's Commentary on English Law - that's all it would take, but oh, that's not going to happen."

Well, not long after that, a wagon came up the road, and the driver said to the man, "I'm trying to move my family out west, but I've run out of money. I've got a good barrel here that I could sell for fifty cents." The businessman looked at the pitiful man and his equally pitiful wife sitting in the wagon.

"Okay," he said, and he slipped his hand into his pocket and drew out his last fifty cents, gave it to the man, and with his help put the barrel on the front porch of the store. And there it stood the rest of the day. His partner kept razzing him about buying it. Later that evening, the businessman went out and took a look at the barrel, and started to take old papers out of the bottom of it. As he did, he felt something solid, and when he pulled off the papers, he was dumbfounded. It was a

copy of Blackstone's Commentary on English Law. That businessman's name was Abraham Lincoln.

Oh, my dear friends, in times of despair, God goes before us and makes a way through the chaos, very often in mysterious, mysterious ways - sometimes through women who are in the right place at the right time, or a book in the bottom of a barrel.

And finally, God goes before us, even in times of doubt. God goes before us, and finds ways and people and things and events to reassure us, and set us on our feet again. Surely, when Moses' mother heard her own daughter asking her to come and be Moses' nurse, all of her doubts vanished. Her doubts about his future, her doubts about his life, her doubts about everything vanished, because God had gone before and made a way, and her Moses was alive and thriving!

Perhaps it is in our times of doubt that we have the hardest time understanding that, even then, God is going ahead to make a way out of it for us, to calm the water of chaos stirred up by doubt. And perhaps it is in times of doubt that God works most creatively to bring us around.

That surely was the case with one man, who was really struggling with his faith. He just was having a hard time feeling God's presence, knowing where God was in his life. Then one day God spoke to him in an unexpected way.

It was through his brother Kevin. Kevin was 30 years old in age, but mentally disabled due to an injury at his birth. He was 6'2" tall and looked, from all outward appearances, like any other adult, except that he reasoned and communicated with the capabilities of a seven year old.

One night, John passed by Kevin's room and heard him saying his prayers. "Are you there, God?" he said. "Where are you? Oh, under the bed . . ."

John laughed as he continued on to his room, but then he started to think about it. Kevin's life was different than anyone thought it would be or wanted it to be. But Kevin was great about it. He had a routine each day. He had a job at a workshop for the disabled, he loved doing chores around the house. On Saturdays, their father would take him to the airport to watch planes take off and land, and he loved it.

As John sat there that night, he realized the joy of Kevin's life. He was happy working and being busy. He wasn't stressed with his work or his life. He believed in the goodness of people. When he was happy, he showed it, and when he was sad, he showed it. He didn't hide any emotions.

And he trusted God, with the faith of a child. God was his friend, plain and simple. His closest companion. Someone who made him feel happy, and safe and protected. John said that Kevin seemed to know God - to really be friends with him in a way that is difficult for "educated" people to grasp.

So when he sat there that night, and thought about his little brother Kevin and God under the bed, the veil of doubt lifted from him, and all was well.

Sometimes, in times of doubt, God goes ahead, and makes a way for us to come back to faith - sometimes he does that through family, sometimes he does it through friends, sometimes he does that through events. But however it happens, God always goes ahead, in the midst of our doubt, and makes a way through the chaos.

It's called grace, friends. God's grace. God's grace that carries us through anything and everything, and makes a way. Not because we earn it, and not because we deserve it. Just because God is God, and God loves us more than we can possibly understand - except when we look at the cross and see what He did for us in Christ Jesus our Lord. The ultimate triumph over the chaos of life.

So the next time you feel your back is up against the wall - because of danger, or despair, or doubt, or for any other reason - know this. God is in the midst of it, and God goes ahead, to make a way through it, until all is well. Thanks be to God!

Amen.