

**Sermon: Rev Susanna Pain
24 August 2008**

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Exodus 1:8 – 2:10

Matthew 16: 13-20

MOSES

My stepdaughter, Kate, gave birth to a son, Isaac Harry Thomas Halcrow, on Thursday. We go to the Blue Mountains and hope to see him today. Apparently he is a beautiful baby with lots of black hair – like his sister.

How can I even imagine an order to kill him and all other newly born boys?

The story from Exodus of the birth and childhood of Moses is echoed in other stories of that time, and repeated again in the infancy narrative of Jesus.

Let's immerse ourselves in today's story and see what emerges and then look briefly at the gospel.

The Exodus story is partly about five women's collaboration in sedition and a ruler's political expediency. Pharaoh was concerned for the safety of his borders. And worried that the Hebrews would turn against him and join his enemies.

The midwives were brought before him, the God of the Egyptians, the Almighty, the Supreme Ruler, and asked, indeed commanded, to do the impossible, to go against all their training, their morals, their ethics and kill the baby boys they deliver. How can they? Yet how can they not, when their life depends on it.

He asks if they understand – Of course they understand! They bow their way out, and Pharaoh is satisfied. After all, he is used to being obeyed, and they, women slaves, of a slave people would not dare, would not even consider disobeying ... mission accomplished ... rid me of these people.

Months later reports come back. Hebrew boys are being born. How can this be?

'Bring them to me, these women! (What will they do? They decide their story together – it's worth a try. They are going to their death! Shiprah and Puah will speak.)

'The Hebrew women are not like other women' they say. 'They give birth before we get there!' (What does Pharaoh know of birthing rooms? But he could check their reports ...)

The women seem to get away with it – and prosper. This is a contest between Gods – and their God seems to be winning ...
but the genocide continues ...

‘Throw the babies in the Nile’ commands the Pharaoh, God of the Egyptians.

The story is not over yet – more sedition – from both inside and outside the royal house.

A mother places her child in a coffin (like the coffin Noah built to escape from the flood). She places the coffin in the water and bids her daughter keep watch. Did she know? Or was this a desperate measure?

Pharaoh’s daughter, no less, comes to bathe. Does she bathe here every day? Was this a calculated risk on the part of the baby’s mother? A coincidence?

At the baby’s cry, he is drawn out of the water. Pharaoh’s daughter – name unknown, knows the edict, knows to whom the child belongs, yet she still takes him.

She was royalty, a princess and no doubt had all the material possessions her heart desired. What drew her to adopt a Hebrew baby with all the risks such an act entailed? Did she have no children of her own and did she long for a child? Or was she a mother and therefore acted out of maternal compassion? Was she opposed to her father’s edict in general? Did she intervene to save the Hebrew babies? Did she lobby for a change in the law? ... for a change in her father’s attitude? One wonders what became of the law that all the women refused to follow. Pharaoh’s daughter is a symbol of one in authority taking initiative to supersede an unjust law. (from ‘Women Witness’ by Miriam Therese Winter.)

She shows us how those responsible for oppressive structures are the very ones who can turn things around.

... And the baby’s sister finds Moses’ mother, to care for him ...

Five women:

Shiprah, Puah (and their colleagues)

Pharaoh’s daughter

Moses’ nameless mother

and Miriam, his sister

defy authority creatively for the sake of life! Each has a different role to play.

What do you need to do to live and support the life of others? Of Claudia, here to be baptised today?

Where are you called upon to creatively defy the forces of death?

And who supports you in your efforts? ... for the sake of Claudia (and my grandson) and the other children and babies in our midst and yet to be born.

In the Gospel, Jesus asks 'who do you say I am?' Peter too, breaking with tradition, is seditious. He calls Jesus the new beginning, the Messiah – the great I am – God – life giver!

Peter got it right, for once! Dangerously so! We have the clues and the answer-sheet.

Who do you say Jesus is?
What do you know, in the present moment?

Many, many hours have been spent in recent years looking back, digging deep in the quest for the 'historical Jesus', paring back myth and legend.

What did he actually say? Who was he?

If I am asked the question, in my ignorance and simplicity, I would reply:

You are the Christ, the son of the living God! You are my companion, my inspiration, you are the one who heals, who challenges. You are one who teaches me about relationship with God. You are 'be-ing' itself.

You stood up for what you believed and died for it. Somehow you are present, still alive. Your Spirit speaks in my heart and out there in community. You care for the poor and marginalised. You see to the heart of things – you are truth and beauty and love – no crap – real. You challenge me to be who I am. You delight in me and call me again and again to be authentic, life-giving, healer; worker for justice and peace.

You call me as I am with my humanity, my faults as you called Peter so long ago. You call me and call out the best in me. You nourish me with your being – your body and blood.

You are the ground of my being – source of light and love.

Plenty of stories in the Scriptures tell me this and I know from experience.

You call me to build a church not of bricks and mortar, but based on love, justice, community, a church of followers of your way – inclusive, seditious – alive!

In claiming to be king, Jesus was killed for violating the sacredness of the emperor and accused of the crime of sedition.

This is the dangerous faith into which we baptise Claudia.
This is the faith into which you were baptised.