

Fear is a powerful political tool. Witness the metaphors used to describe migrants and refugees. Animal metaphors are especially popular: horde, swarm, leaches, cockroaches. Water metaphors too: a tidal wave; a river flooding, drowning, swamping us. Military metaphors as well, invasion being high on the list. Even racial-purity metaphors. *“They are poisoning the blood of our country,”* as Donald Trump said a couple of years back. Populist movements, like the BNP, are driven by fear. As they say on their website, *“Immigration is the greatest threat to our precious and unique British identity.”* Such weaponizing of fear is nothing new. It is from exactly the same playbook that the new pharaoh employed in our story from Exodus today. His was a new dynasty and he had big plans. But there was a problem. The land in the Nile delta that he’d decided upon for his grand building projects was occupied by a sizable immigrant group: the descendants of Israel. Previously, relations between the Egyptian regime and the immigrants had been good. They had been a blessing to Egypt and Egypt, in turn, was good to them. But the new ruler knew nothing of Joseph and felt no obligations to his family. *“Look at all these Israelites. They’re breeding like rabbits. If we don’t act fast, they’ll overrun us. They could join forces with invaders and fight against us—they’re an enemy within our borders awaiting their moment to strike.”*

So pharaoh implements **Plan A**: enslave the Hebrews. This plan has the dual function of restraining them, making it harder for them to fight, and obtaining mass labour for his grand building work. And the narrator tells us that the slave masters were ruthless, grinding the Israelites down. However, Plan A didn’t deal with the problem of the growth in the immigrant community: Israel continued to multiply.

Pharaoh decides he needs to implement a **Plan B** to run alongside Plan A. He will reduce the population slowly by thinning out the number of males. He’ll get midwives attending births to surreptitiously kill baby boys, passing it off as natural infant deaths. This, interestingly, is a secret plan. He doesn’t want the Israelites to know about it, presumably to avoid increasing the risk of a slave uprising. He tries to get the Hebrew midwives to work with him on this plan—by threatening them, I

imagine—and he clearly thought they were on board. They were *not*, as we'll see. So Plan B failed. The Hebrew population continued increasing. An exasperated pharaoh moved to **Plan C**. He abandoned all stealth and sought to whip up the general populace to turn against their Hebrew neighbours: Throw any newborn Israelite males into the Nile. It's interesting that he doesn't use his military forces but seeks to encourage and empower the ordinary Egyptians in his work—a strategy for which modern parallels are not hard to find. We don't know how effective Plan C was. We don't know how many normal Egyptians followed the pharaoh's incitement to violence. Presumably many didn't, because later in Exodus there's no indication of any lack of males Israelites. However, the political incitement to violence against their children did generate real fear among the Hebrews. We glimpse this through a window into the lives of one couple: Jochebed and her husband Amram. This couple already had a couple of children: a boy and a girl, Aaron and Miriam. But Jochebed had just given birth to a baby boy, a potential target. She's terrified. What can she do?

This is the scenario that opens the book of Exodus. A tale of political terror, of a vulnerable minority group becoming first the object of fear and then the object of oppression. It seems like an impossible situation for Israel to deal with. They have no power. They have no influence. They have no voice. And they are feared and despised by those around them. *How are they to live as the people of God in such a situation?*

Consider then, the heroes of our story today: five women who refuse to bow the knee to pharaoh. First, we have Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives. Consider their situation. They've been commanded by the king of Egypt, who was believed to be the representative of a god, to kill the male babies. Saying no is *not* an option. "*But . . . the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king commanded them.*" That's an incredibly important verse. As a rule, all other things being equal, Christians are called to obey the governing powers and to seek the welfare of the city in which they live. This is an important part of our living out the faith. However, it is not an absolute rule, and other things are *not* always equal. There are times when our faith in

God requires us to *disobey* the authorities. Thus Peter, defending the apostles' actions before the Sanhedrin, asked, "*Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you or to him?*" (Acts 4:19). This is a holy disobedience. And the midwives too disobey pharaoh *precisely because* they fear God. Discipleship involves *discernment*: knowing *when* not to obey, and *how* not to obey. In this case, they were shrewd. They didn't simply refuse the king. He'd only have killed them and used others to do the work. That's no use. So they deceived him into thinking that by the time midwives can get to the houses of Hebrew women giving birth it's too late to secretly kill the boys and pass it off as natural death. He's a bloke—what does he know about such things? So the mightiest person in the country, the alleged manifestation of a god, is outsmarted by two slave women.

Then there's Jochebed and Miriam, the mother and sister of the baby. What can *they* do? First, Jochebed keeps the child indoors and then, when it's too dangerous to keep him at home any longer, she puts him away from built-up areas, out of sight and sound, in the Nile—ironically, doing exactly what the king had commanded . . . except that she puts her child inside a little ark to keep him safe in the water. (It's the same Hebrew word, *tēbā*, used of Noah's ark.) Miriam keeps watch, and presumably they bring the baby food and move him about. It's a *desperate* plan, with a high chance of failure. But when back is against the wall, desperate is all you've got.

Finally, we have the daughter of pharaoh himself. And here we're reminded that in this story ordinary Egyptians are not the baddies. Indeed, there are members of the royal family itself who are not 'on board' with the pharaoh's plan. And in an absolutely brilliant way, the princess uses her position to do what she can to resist her father's policies. She sees the baby and immediately realises what's going on: "*This must be one of the Hebrews' children.*" But she doesn't kill it. She doesn't alert anyone. She's not filled with fear or loathing. Rather, she has pity. And her pity shapes the future of this nation.

Miriam sees the princess approaching her baby brother and I imagine she was gripped by absolute terror. This is the *very worst* thing that could have happened: not simply an Egyptian; pharaoh's own daughter. But then she witnessed the woman's compassion, and Miriam seized the moment in a discerning and daring gamble: "*Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?*" I've no doubt pharaoh's daughter has a very good idea who that nurse will be, and she too seizes the opportunity. *Yes, do*. In fact, she says to the child's mother, I'll *pay* you to raise the child. And when he's grown, bring him to me and I'll raise him as my son. (Her unspoken words are just as important: I'll keep him safe from my father.) What a way of sticking it 'the Man'!

This child was Moses, the one who, many years later, would lead the children of Israel out of slavery. His name is interesting. Moses is an Egyptian name, so it would not be suspicious within the court. But the princess chooses to give a *Hebrew* rationale for the choice: *Moshe*, Moses, sounds like the Hebrew word *māshâ*, to draw out. So she's saying something like, "I'll call him Drew because I drew him out of the water." I think that this is a sensitive little detail. Moses has a hybrid identity, as immigrant children often do. He's Israelite. He's Egyptian. And navigating the tension between those identities is an ongoing challenge for him, as it is for many people today. The princess in the story seems to have some sensitivity to this. She allows his mother to raise him when he is young, as an Israelite, and then she gives him an Egyptian name that serves both to hide his Israelite identity from others, for his protection, but also to remind him of it, and of the way in which he was rescued.

What do we take from this story? I have just one point. Look at the world around us. Watch the news. Do you ever feel a sense of despair that the darkness we face is too big, too overwhelming, coming from too many sides? Do you ever feel powerless to fix things, that you don't have the influence, the resources, the answers, the power to make a difference? What does it mean to follow Christ in such situations? Learn from these women. Look at them. *Midwives!* Not only that, but

midwives from a despised ethnic group. I mean, flipping heck! Hardly great warriors! What kind of power and influence do *they* have? What kind of difference can *they* make? They can't save the world. No. And they don't try. All they do is what they can do. And God blesses them for their holy rebellion. Not for doing *everything*, but for doing the thing they *could* do. That is enough. Look at Moses' mum. She's a nobody. She wouldn't even register on the pharaoh's radar as a 'person of interest'. She can't save the world, but she can try to save her *son*. She does what she can. And Miriam. She's a blooming *kid*. But she faithfully watches over her brother and has the wisdom and courage to see an opportunity when it appears and to grab it. She does what she can. She plays her part. The princess is the agent with the most power here, but she is only a daughter and her power is extremely circumscribed. Helping a Hebrew is very risky for her. Yet she too works to use her position and influence to protect this one child.

And we might think: Was it worth it? Such small people. Such small actions. The rescue of just one baby. In the grand scheme of things, so what? And for the next eighty years the situation remained much the same. The oppression continued. So they didn't change *anything*, right? Wrong. They changed *everything*. They changed the world, though only Miriam lived long enough to hear the first whispers of that. The rest of them never knew. *Never* underestimate the significance of our small prophetic acts of hope. You do not know how God can use the kind and good and righteous words and actions of small, insignificant people. Jesus said: "*The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.*" (Matt 13:31,32). This kingdom of God is crazy! Upside down, back to front. Full of surprises. Do *not* underestimate it. Today, God does not call you to save the world. God calls you to plant mustard seeds of the kingdom in a thousand tiny acts of goodness and mercy. So plant! Another will water, and leave it to God to give the growth. Amen.