**Nu‘uanu Congregational Church, 2651 Pali Highway**

**United Church of Christ Honolulu, Hawai‘i 96817**

**Online Worship & Sermon August 23, 2020**

**TWELTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

PRELUDE *Blessed Jesus, We are Here* | Dietrich Buxtehude Katherine Crosier

ANNOUNCEMENTS Lori Yamashiro

OPENING SENTENCES Mary Ann Saito

—*based on Romans 8:38-39*

Let us stand firm in the conviction that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION Rev. Jeannie Thompson

God of Abraham and Sarah, God of Jesus Christ, God of our mothers and fathers, you are a God who acts in history. Yet we confess that we are too busy with our own lives to perceive you at work in our time. We fall into fear and despair about our troubled world as if you have no care for us. Forgive our lack of faith and help us to join you as you labor to bring new life on earth; in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

***(Please offer God your prayers of confession as we keep a brief silence.)***

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Pardoned by God’s abounding grace, empowered by God’s constant love and protected by God’s peace, let us go forth to serve God and others, always humbly aware of our own shortcomings, but always encouraged by the faithful and loving presence of God in Christ Jesus, to whom be glory and power, now and forever. Amen.

PASSING THE PEACE OF GOD

*In the safest way possible, please pass the peace of Christ to those who are with you.*

GIFT OF MUSIC *I Love to Tell the Story* Rachel & Deanna Wong

A READING FROM THE HEBREW BIBLE Mary Ann Saito

Exodus 1:8-2:10 *The Israelites are Oppressed*

*8Now 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. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. 12But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. 13The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, 14and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.*

*15The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 16“When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” 17But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. 18So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” 19The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” 20So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. 21And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. 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.”*

*2Now 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. 6When 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.”*

SERMON *“Moses Lived”* Pastor

For me, some of the saddest words in the Bible are the ones that started-off this passage we just heard: *“Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.”*

I find the words sad and ominous because when people become strangers to one another bad things tend to follow. When it happens between individuals there are hurt feelings. When it happens between communities a million little slights and indignities become a way of life. Often, the dominant group will even perpetrate on the other, acts of outright injustice and humiliation. When nations become fearful of one another, destruction and death is not too far behind.

Certainly, we hear of death, and the threat of death, coming very quickly into the relationship between the Egyptians and the Israelites when the new king neither remembers nor acknowledges any connection to the Israelites. The only thing he knows about them is his own fear of their increasing numbers.

You may remember how the Israelites came to be living in Egypt. It happened when the Joseph who was not remembered by the new king was a young man. In his own homeland, he had been his father’s favorite. Because of this, his jealous older brothers one day plotted to kill him. At the last moment, they decide to sell him to a slave trader and he ends up in Egypt.

In Egypt, the young slave shows integrity, and an extraordinary skill in interpreting dreams. This causes him to rise in fortune and in rank until at last, he becomes second only to Pharaoh in authority and influence in that great and powerful land.

When a famine comes to the surrounding lands, Joseph’s family (who knows nothing of what has happened to him) make their way to Egypt hoping to live as refugees from the famine.

Of course, Joseph wants to deal with them himself—and you would think he would like to have revenge. However, when they meet again, the brothers are forgiven, and reconciled with Joseph. This is because Joseph is able to see God’s hand in all that has happened to him—even in the betrayal of his brothers.

Surely, he tells them, God has worked through all that has happened in order to place him in a position to save his family’s life. And so, Joseph welcomes his brothers into Egypt with all of their families. There they make their home—generation after generation—until, after four hundred years, the one family has become a large and hearty nation within-a-nation.

Sadly, despite those four centuries of life together, the new Pharaoh knows nothing of them except that they are more numerous than the Egyptians, and this becomes a source of concern, and then fear.

As we heard, out of fear, Pharaoh tries to work them to death in various public building projects. When that does not work he becomes even more ruthless. As we heard: first, he enlists the assistance of two of the Israelite midwives. He orders them to kill the newborn males. The males, he reasoned, were the threat. The girls, who apparently were not worth his notice, were allowed to live.

The midwives must have been terribly afraid. However, their “fear” of God, that is: their loyalty to their God, their faith, and their people caused them to disobey and, in fact, trick Pharaoh.

So, when that did not work, Pharaoh enlists his own people to do the dirty work. By his orders, whenever an Egyptian comes upon a male Israelite baby, that Egyptian is to throw the baby into the Nile.

We do not know how many male babies met with such a horrible death. All we know is what happened to Moses. Moses lived.

We know about how his mother kept him a secret for as long as she could. Then she, herself, put him into a basket, and set him into the very river that was supposed to be his grave—this time, she hoped, it would keep him alive.

We also know about his sister, who followed the basket as it bobbed along on the waters. She watched until it floated right into area where Pharaoh’s daughter was bathing. (It was, perhaps, even she who coaxed the basket to go where it did.)

So, we know what a group of Israelite women did, but we even know more. We know that Pharaoh’s daughter not only drew him out of the water, but she decided to keep him as her own.

There is more, of course, to Moses’ story, much more. In fact, the rest of Moses’ stories are some of the most well-known stories of the Bible: Moses and the burning bush, Moses and the plagues God visits on the Egyptians, Moses and the escape into the dessert, Moses and the parting of the Red Sea, and many, many more stories.

What I would like us to notice is that none of those epic stories would have happened if all of the women in Moses’ life had not had the inventiveness and the courage to do what they did. The midwives, Moses’s mother, his sister, and Pharaoh’s own daughter—despite the fact that all of these women had little or no real power, all of them disobeyed, and even subverted Pharaoh’s orders, and because of them, Moses lived—and because Moses lived, so did a whole nation.

Another thing I would like us all to notice is that throughout the telling of the story of Moses’ birth and rescue, God was mentioned only once, and only indirectly, and yet, you and I know that God’s presence was strong and powerful throughout each moment of Moses’ life, even this, his early life.

Try to imagine what life must have been like for the Israelites. Did they remember the historic connection that brought them all to Egypt? Did *they* remember Joseph? We are not told.

However, what we do know is that they remembered God—especially all of the women in Moses’ life. They remembered God.

That is what I would like all of us to notice and to think about right now because I believe this is an urgent story for us today, and throughout our lives. For a moment, I’d like you to allow yourselves to really think about the words of this story. So much of the story is about cruelty, violence, and murder.

For most of us, this is not a story that with which we can identify. The story of “the state” willfully and deliberately targeting your sons for extermination—this is something most of us have only read about in history books or seen on the news.

And yet, we are reminded that there have been many mothers and fathers in our own country’s history who have, and continue to lose sons to violence in the streets—and so much of it has come at the hands of “the state,” from agents of the state. This is what the protests we have experienced of late have come from. This is why *Black Lives Matter* has become such a familiar phrase.

Still, I do not believe that any of us in *this* church or in this church community have been touched by this tragedy. Let us all give thanks for that.

What I would like you to try to do is to try to imagine what your heart, your spirit, your very life—what would *your* heart be like if this *was* a reality you have lived with. Try to imagine what it would be like to not know if your child was going to return to your home at the end of the day.

I cannot even begin to fathom the depth of fear, rage, and heartbreak that we would all feel. I cannot imagine the constant sorrow, and feelings of hopelessness that would come with living through such a time. This was what the life of the Israelites was like when Moses was born. This is what his mother and father—and the other Israelite mothers and fathers—were living through.

That is why this is a story for us and for our time, for we, too, are living through an ordeal of tragedy and sorrow.

To begin with the pandemic that continues to hold us all captive has fundamentally reshaped our lives, and will continue to do so for some time to come. I believe one of the hardest parts of it is not knowing when things are going to change for the better. In the meantime, people are being threatened and even assaulted over being asked to wear a mask and keep social distance from one another.

If this were not enough, we know that here in our own country, the content and the tone of the public conversations we have been having these past few years especially have grown more and more combative. Indeed, the word “united” in United States of America; that word has taken quite a beating as of late. Finding common ground is getting harder and harder, and “compromise” has become a dirty word rather than being acknowledged as the language of mediation and peace.

More and more of our public lives seem to be overtaken by a desire to “beat the other side into the dust,” rather than a desire to listen and build bridges toward one another. Many of us have begun to feel as though a shroud is being pulled closer and closer around us, and this makes us feel like life is a desolation. Our lives—yours and mine—they might not be as fraught with violence and fear as others, but the unrest lives with us, too, as does the sense of hopelessness.

That is why this story is so important for us to remember and hold on to.

We need to remember and to rejoice because Moses lived.

And he lived because the hearts and spirits, and characters of all of the women in his life would not relinquish their hold on hope and on life—even in the face of so much danger and death that kept trying to wrest life from them.

Instead, they undermined and subverted every death-dealing obstacle that came their way. Determined but quietly, they did what they had to, to keep Moses alive. Unlike the Pharaoh who did not know Joseph, the women in Moses’ life knew the same God Joseph knew. Moses lived because theirs is the God of life; the God who preserves life—even in the face of death and tremendous odds. Theirs is the God who *is* life.

Even though they were without any real earthly power, the women in Moses’ life—the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah; his mother, Jochebed; his sister, Miriam; and his adoptive Egyptian mother, Thermouthis, later known as Bithiah (daughter of Yaweh because she left Egypt with the Israelites and married an Israelite), and called Merris—all of these women’s lives were shaped by the holy, life-giving God. This is who they were—God’s creative life force was their identity.

This is who we are, too, because this is who God is and continues to be.

And even though the days are often dark, we can all still be like these women. We can still remember who God is, and we can tap into the same courage and creativity that God’s creativity inspired in these women. We can do all the small, behind the scene things that welcome and support life, and in the end, we, too, can be released into the same freedom and joy they knew that kept the child alive, that kept a whole nation alive. Moses lived. Let us give thanks. Amen.

MUSIC FOR MEDITATION *Fail Me Not, O Holy Christ* | Samuel Scheidt (1587-1654) Katherine Crosier

PASTORAL PRAYER & THE LORD’S PRAYER

*We thank you for your faithfulness to the ministries and mission of our church.*

*Please send your offering directly to the church.*

DOXOLOGY Aria Chock

**BENEDICTION**

Go forth now — always and everywhere be loving to each other

— be loving to friend, neighbor, stranger, the needy, our family

and even those whom we do not like.

Be helpful and compassionate to all everywhere.

Be thankful now and always for the promise of eternal life.

Go in peace. Amen.

**POSTLUDE *Toccata in F* | Buxtehude Katherine Crosier**