

**27 August 2023 ~ Exodus 1:8 - 2:10; Romans 12:1-8**

***Worship and Picnic in the Park ~ Knox (Sooke + Victoria), St. Andrew's, Trinity***

---

***Conformed by Fear – Transformed by Faith***

*Women at the Riverside* from *The Pattern of Our Days*

**The Levite mother:**

I am a Levite woman, wife of a Levite man.

I carried his child safe in the secret cradle of my womb for nine months,  
afloat in the waters of life, until the day the waters broke  
and he swam out into a dangerous world.

For three more months I hid him in our hut, but his little voice grew stronger,  
so one day I took a basket woven of rushes that grow at the water's edge,  
I daubed on tar to make it watertight, a little coracle, then took it down  
to float where the river lapped among the reeds.

**The sister:**

I am his sister, a small solemn child  
standing by the side of a big river to see what will happen.

I see the river, wide, lazy, slow-moving, life bearing,  
with the sun glinting on its smooth surface.

I cannot see our little cradle-boat, but I know it is there,  
hidden among the whispering reeds with my baby brother.

I am a big sister, with a huge responsibility.

I see strangers coming down to the beach to play,  
as though they haven't a care in the world, to bathe in the river.

I see a great lady, one of our enemies.

Can she see the baby? What will she do?

My legs turn to water; my eyes fill with tears.

**Pharaoh's daughter:**

I am Pharaoh's daughter. I left the stale air of the palace,  
the baking courtyards and colonnades,  
the passions of politics, the hard facts of life,  
the reasons of state – I walked with my women on the bare earth,  
down to where the river offers another way of being,  
with its cool flow, its gentle caress, its feelings.

I wanted freedom to be myself in another element,  
and I fell for a baby.

### **A slave girl:**

I am a slave girl. All I did was wade in deep and fetch an ordinary basket from where it was hidden in the rough reeds. Did I guess its secret? What did I feel, as I held it, trembling, and heard the hungry cries? Who hears my voice?

### **Pharaoh's daughter:**

I was moved with pity by the tears of the baby.

I knew it must be a Hebrew child, and suddenly, there at my elbow, was another child: not asking for money like your normal urchin, but offering help; "Do you want a nurse for the baby?"

The child has sense – a wise child.

I suspect there's more in this than meets the eye: a story I don't know, an alien experience, a strange and powerful torrent of feeling. I accepted her help.

### **The sister:**

I called my mother, like a stranger.

### **The Levite mother:**

I came and nursed the child, who knew me.

### **A slave girl:**

I found him, as lost as myself.

### **Pharaoh's daughter:**

I adopted him and called him Moses because I drew him out of the water.

### **The Levite mother:**

We are the women: a wife

### **The sister:**

A sister

### **Pharaoh's daughter:**

A daughter

### **A slave girl:**

A slave – women without names

### **ALL:**

**But we are the ones who trusted the child to the strange and saving waters and drew him out alive and called him by name.**

In the retelling of the first ten verses of Exodus, Chapter Two, written in a book called The Pattern of Our Days, the women are not named – they are the *Women at the Riverside* – referred to by their role: the Levite mother; the sister; one of Pharaoh’s daughters; and the slave girl. It is the story of four women in ancient times. Each has a role in her community, and each has a role in this story.

We all have our roles. I am a woman – a wife, a mother, a sister, a daughter, a friend and neighbour – not a slave but a servant, yes because that is part of what it means to be a minister – a teacher – a reader. I am not sure which role is most descriptive – which one others might choose to use if they were to tell a story featuring me – but I have thought of myself as a reader the longest – for most of my life. When I started teaching, I felt confident about teaching math – I remembered learning math – recalled the struggle. But the idea of teaching someone to read made me nervous – sometimes it filled me with uncertainty – even dread. How could I teach someone something I didn’t remember learning? It was as though I had been born reading.

I guess that is why being part of book clubs and discussing what we are reading with friends and family is such a joy for me. In the Knox Book Club, there will often be a book that some people love and others dislike – some will have finished it and others will have set it aside – some will have things they can’t wait to say, and others will come to the meeting for the pleasure of listening. Reading and talking about books is exciting and mentally stimulating – even personally challenging because you often need to learn to disagree appropriately!

The church book club is one of two I belong to. The same situation occurs in the “Untitled” book club. Everyone gets a say in suggesting our selections. Usually I make an effort to finish the books so that I can join meaningfully in the conversation but I remember that when we were to read *On Becoming Fearless* – a self-help, autobiographical pick – it was not my favorite – I didn’t finish it – I tried! I got about two-thirds through before I decided that enough was enough. Perhaps it is because autobiography often comes across to me as too self-aggrandizing – or maybe I am not much of a believer in the self-help book craze. However, the question of fear and fearlessness tackled in that book is an interesting one – one that is relevant to our reading from Exodus today – one that needs to be addressed by every person of faith.

According to Arianna Huffington, author of *On Becoming Fearless*, “Fear is universal. It touches everyone – but it clearly doesn't stop everyone.”

What is fear? The word comes from the Old English *færan*: to terrify, ambush, or surprise. It can be thought of as a verb or a noun – you can be afraid of someone, afraid to do

something or you can feel anxiety, apprehension or worry in response to some perceived danger. Fear also means reverence – respect or awe for somebody or something. This is what is meant by fearing God – but let's set that definition aside for a moment since usually we use the word fear to describe a sense of dread we feel.

At its best, fear helps us protect ourselves, and helps remind us that we don't have control over everything in our lives – and never will. At its worst, fear can turn us into murderous bigots or quivering cowards. There are many kinds of fear: sudden fear (alarm), strong desire not to do something (dread), fear of doing something against one's conscience or better judgment (qualm), fear of unfavorable results (worry), brief but strong loss of composure (panic), fear that causes immediate physical reaction (horror), fear of one specific thing beyond reason (phobia), and the surrender to extreme fear (terror). In many surveys that have been conducted one of the most common fears expressed by people is what I am doing right now – public speaking. Fear is a very personal thing.

In our congregations we have experience of fear. We worry about budgets. Will we be able to pay our bills? Is it good stewardship to spend money on our buildings when we could be doing more valuable ministry with one another and in our communities? We dread the loss of familiar spaces and traditions. How can we worship God in a new place – will it ever feel like holy ground? Are we being faithful to the saints who have gone before us by holding on for dear life or would we honour them more fully by letting go and trusting that the Holy Spirit will lead us? We experience qualms that the directions we take as individual congregations or the path we might take together will be too challenging – is it the right one? How will we know? We might even have a sense of panic, thinking that time is running out for our community of faith – can we survive independent of one another? Is it already too late for us to join forces? The fears are real.

One of the struggles I had with the book I was reading for my book club was that the goal stated in the title is *becoming fearless*. I suppose the most obvious opposite to fear would be fearlessness, being devoid of fear – maybe security, wellbeing or, in a less positive sense, detachment or not caring. I don't think bravery or courage are helpful choices because those words suggest there is fear but that one is acting to overcome it. Still, I am not convinced that the opposite of being afraid is to be without fear. Think about it for a moment – what would you say is the opposite of fear? What word is an antonym to fear?

Joy? Courage? Peace? Love? The strongest "Christian" answer would be *faith*, or *faith in God*. The antithesis of fear is faith and faith is the remedy for fear. All through the Bible we hear angels and others calling out: "Fear not!" It is a cry to faith.

Know God – respect your Creator – remember to whom you belong – live your life filled with awe for the Holy One who comes to us in Jesus Christ and who encourages by the power of the Holy Spirit. If you fear (revere) God, you fear nothing else. If you don't fear God, then you fear everything.

The Israelites were slaves in Egypt for some 400 years, after the time of Joseph. The Egyptians forced them to work very hard in an effort to make them give in to the Pharaoh's rule – to stop their growing power and oppress their Spirit – but in fact, the opposite was true – they multiplied and grew stronger. This reminds me of the cliché, "that which does not kill us makes us stronger." How accurate it is, that if we are true to ourselves and true to God, through every time of trial, we become all the stronger for the future. The Israelites faced incredible challenges in their physical and spiritual lives but continued to draw upon their faith in God to get them through.

Consider the women in the Moses story: the midwives, the mother, the sister, the slave and the princess. The midwives disobeyed Pharaoh because they feared God – revered God – had faith. They engage in what I would consider holy disobedience. The women conspire to save the baby boys – a royal daughter even defying her father's decree. And this raises the question for me of what our holy disobedience ought to be – what my own holy disobedience ought to be. When do I – or any of us – have to defy the powers that be? What kind of courage does it take? What kind of faith? And how do we know whether we are responding to a holy command or just doing our own thing?

In *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Morrie tells Mitch that "...many people walk around with a meaningless life. They seem half asleep, even when they are busy doing things, they think are important. This is because they're chasing the wrong things. The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning." In a Christian context this *means to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind; and love your neighbour as yourself.*

Psalm 23 says, "I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me." Fears that are turned over to God are muted or go away. When we stop trying to be in control and remember that God is in control, there is no cause for fear, for the Holy One loves us and seeks the best for us. Trust in God's love casts out fear.

I love to imagine those midwives as all wide-eyed and innocent before Pharaoh. I think of the women coming together in a way they would never have imagined. They did not allow themselves to be bound by obedience or fear, but pursued what they believed God wanted them to do. They were not conformed to the world but transformed by their faith

to discern the will of God. They did what they were given gifts to do. We also can focus on the gifts we have received that we may not recognize in ourselves, or that society doesn't recognize in us. Sometimes, we are given opportunities to make a difference, and no matter how challenging they may be, we can trust God to get us through. Even when it seems there is no way out of those situations, or emotions, which hold us captive, God begins to work in us if we but trust. I believe we are faced with just such a challenging opportunity in the lives of our congregations now – a crossroads if you will. One that causes us to question and fear. Perhaps we can be encouraged to be like the midwives – to hear the angels calling out to us: “Fear not!” We can trust God to lead us – to guide Christ’s church in the way we must go – so that we are not conformed and confined to a narrow vision but truly transformed by our faith to move ahead fearlessly in the sure knowledge of whose we are and whom we serve. Be not afraid!

The Reverend Laura T. Kavanagh