

## Being Who We Are Made To Be – Judy Cox

Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

At a Greenville College homecoming twelve years ago I first encountered the Strengths Finder. I became convinced of its merit, recognizing how well it describes who I am. Many of you, also introduced to this inventory through the college, may share my impression. Our senior pastor, in fact, is a fully trained Strengths coach! Alas, not everyone is so quickly won over. Some among us—not to name names, but my nearest and dearest, who HAS given me permission to share this—remained skeptics for years. (One suspects that he cultivates a shtick as skeptic!) He has even gone so far as to create his own alternative list of Themes. They left us rolling with laughter; as I recall, “catastrophizing,” and “cynicism” topped that list, but everyone’s favorite irreverent alternative was “shooing.” You know, not “wooing” but “shooing”... So much for shticks; finally REQUIRED to submit to this inventory, he learned to his supposed mortification that one of his Top 5 is...Positivity! Out-ed by Gallup—but no one who knows and loves him was surprised!

This aid to personal inventory, like Myers-Briggs and others before it, helps us better understand ourselves. It helps us better discern how we are made, who God created us to be. All of our texts today speak to this issue of being who God intends us to be. We who, like Simon, son of Jonah, by grace name Jesus as the Messiah, experience him in turn naming us as his. We self-absorbed, unreliable “children of Jonah” find ourselves named and made faithful—“solid rocks” in the Kingdom by God’s surprising grace. In Eugene Petersen’s paraphrase of our Romans text we are urged, as *excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ’s body*, to *go ahead and be what we were made to be*.

Together we begin a journey through the Book of Exodus today. And here too we find this emphasis on who we are created to be. Centuries have passed since Joseph. The language immediately preceding our lectionary passage clearly evokes Creation themes: *the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them*. Again and again these words appear throughout our passage. The descendants of the promise are doing very well at carrying out the Creator’s original blessing on and charge to humanity, to be fruitful and multiply! That blessing, intensified in the promise of many descendants to the patriarchs, is being fulfilled! But God’s purposes meet with the opposition of the world, as always. Egypt, as John reminded us last week, was once used and blessed by God as a place to preserve life—a “pocket of freedom.” Now, in its opposition to God and God’s people, it becomes a place of death.

From Genesis we already know of the ruler of Egypt as “Pharaoh.” This is a title, not a personal name. It means much more than “king”—the Egyptians considered their Pharaoh a god. Here in Exodus we find the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob revealed in action, facing down the Pharaoh and the other gods of Egypt on behalf of God’s people. The Israelites, forced into hard labor in service of the Pharaoh, are rescued and invited instead into the service of God. But I’m getting ahead of today’s text...

We see that despite Egypt’s opposition and oppression, God’s people continue to carry out God’s purposes, growing and multiplying! This is a sign of hope to us—opposition does not prevent obedience. Neither does it indicate disinterest on God’s part, nor block God’s intentions!

We also realize that we never learn the personal name of the Pharaoh. He is a placeholder more than a person. Unlike this anonymous Pharaoh, some in today’s text are called by name. Our world typically identifies, or “individuates” the wealthy. But God, this God, sees, and knows by name these who are

faceless, powerless and oppressed. As we watch, their paths are smoothed and providential care is provided them.

Fearing growing numbers of potentially warring Israelites, the Pharaoh orders that baby Israelite boys be killed. Yes, ironically, he focuses on the males. As a matter of fact, women are the ones who bear children!—and in this text women play the major roles. Ignored by the powers of this world, the “little women” are seen, used, and blessed by God. In spite of the words found on the Pharaoh’s lips, “Let us deal shrewdly...,” it is the disregarded women who repeatedly deal shrewdly here, and out-manuever the supposed God-king.

The midwives are Shiphrah and Puah—now there are some Bible names no one ever picks out of the Baby Name book! These defenseless women, professionally skilled at drawing forth life, creatively resist the Pharaoh’s order to become dealers in death. Because they know and honor God as God, they also know to hold to who they themselves are. Avoiding the Pharaoh’s command, they continue their supporting roles in God’s blessing of procreation. We are told that, because they commit to advancing that blessing, God expands it to include them as well, giving them their own families.

As the story continues we see God’s purposes advanced through other creatively resistant women! Together their actions defeat the threat of the Nile—which was also worshipped as a god in Egypt! Moses’ mother, although a slave and a woman trapped by this policy of infanticide, holds fast her call as a mother. She follows the orders of the Pharaoh literally. She does put her baby boy in the Nile—in a carefully constructed and waterproofed basket, or “ark.” (Yes, we’re supposed to remember and take hope from the story of Noah here, with the recurring of these ark-and-water themes. Noah’s family, too, was commanded to be fruitful and multiply!) Moses’ sister, a female slave even more “helpless” due to her youth, safeguards him during his time afloat. Then she resourcefully ensures that their mother be hired as his nurse.

Finally, the Egyptian princess holds a position of power and influence. She leverages that position for good, and furthers God’s purposes. She calmly defies her father’s policy, choosing compassion rather than compliance. Her non-compliance, in knowingly adopting a baby her father has condemned to death, underscores the Pharaoh’s real powerlessness. Repeatedly and unexpectedly he is circumvented by these unlikely women, who steadfastly stand, in their various ways, against his policy of death.

And so the Israelites begin to experience Who the God of Israel is, fulfilling the purpose for which they were created. We know the rest of the Biblical story—we know God’s pattern of using the weak and lowly, those with no obvious power, to bring down the strong. God’s ways, the reverse of the world’s ways, are most evident in the Incarnation, when God’s self becomes a helpless baby—a clear echo of Baby Moses, soon to become an unlikely leader who will foreshadow an unlikely Messiah.

This text challenges us to consider who we are made to be! What is God’s intention in and through us, both individually and corporately? Of all the roles open to us as this unique St. Paul’s community, which are those for which we are created? What opposition might we find, and how are we to meet it? Are we to be midwives, acting to bring new life into being, to preserve it and draw it forth, against pressure to do otherwise? Such as: thirty-some years ago, being “midwife” to an Interterm class of “Select Individuals Motivating People to Love Extravagantly” that gave birth to The Simple Room? Struggling as a board member to preserve it in the intervening years? Consider too those who were midwives to the new congregation called St. Paul’s, in the mid-90s?!

We could be called, like Moses’ mother, to see beyond the moment, and choose to act creatively with hope. You’ve lived this story well—exchanging a “safe” and affordable little brick building in another

corner of town for this risky (and not so very waterproof) “ark” on College Ave. Seeing beyond the moment, acting courageously and creatively with hope!

We could be Miriams, strategically and subtly coming alongside those at risk to partner with those who might save them. I’d say we have Miriams coming alongside and befriending those at the prison, advocating with the College to provide them free tuition...and other Miriams serving with Set Free, engaging community-wide resources to provide a safe house for victims of trafficking.

And let’s not forget the princess—her influence and access to power ensured another’s care and safety in an atmosphere of fear. Haven’t we all, hearing and watching the news out of Ferguson, experienced, if remotely, an atmosphere of fear? But whoa, you say, where’s our influence? Power, what power?

Did you see the live news coverage early Monday evening? A line of peaceful protestors linked arms and, with their backs to the police, acted to herd more disruptive protestors away from violent confrontation. Later we learned that local clergy were part of that linked line, acting to absorb violence in their own bodies, even as Jesus did. How can we, in Greenville, also link arms, whether simply to stand in solidarity or even to absorb violence? Will we acknowledge that we do have influence and privilege, and be willing to use it for the sake of others?

There’s yet another role in our Exodus text. Honestly, reluctantly, we might recognize ourselves in the Pharaoh, who reacts in fear, wanting to secure the status quo. Remember our Romans text? Will we ignore Paul’s caution not to be conformed to this world? By the mercy and grace of God, can we present ourselves sacrificially to God, body as well as soul?

In our text God’s people were called, and blessed, to be fruitful and multiply, against all odds. Who are we, God’s people in St. Paul’s community, called and blessed to be? How are we invited into the service of God? Let us together ask God for the listening ear and the wisdom we need to discern. Then let us ask for the courage to be who we are made to be!