

A Saviour is Born - Exodus 1-2

Series: Out of Egypt - Exodus

Date: 7 June 2026, 1st Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Exodus 1-2, (Matthew 2.13-18)

One of our worst fears as human beings is that we will be abandoned and left alone. It's especially true when we're in pain or suffering. We want someone to hear us, to see us, to know us and to be with us. It's one of the reasons hospital and prison chaplains are so precious. What's true for individuals is also true for groups. This has been a feature of our culture. Groups that experience or have experienced oppression and exploitation cry out for justice. Often change will come when an advocate emerges to champion their cause. We think of Martin Luther King Jnr leading the Civil Rights movement in the US. Or Nelson Mandela fighting apartheid in South Africa. But even as we can think of some of the causes that fill our news and social media headlines, if we stop and think, we know there are many many more people who face injustice and oppression who we don't know about. Who hears, who sees them?

This week we're starting a new series on the book of Exodus, the second book of the Bible. This is the story of God's rescue of his people Israel from slavery in Egypt. It's one of the greatest stories in all literature. It is the founding narrative for Jewish faith and identity. And it's essential to understanding who Jesus is and what he has done for us. There's 3 big sections of the book with three big themes. Chapters 1-15 are all about God's Redemption of his people from slavery in Egypt. Chapters 16-24 are about God making a Covenant with the people who he has redeemed for himself. This is the famous Mt Sinai and the 10 commandments. Chapters 25-40 are about God's Presence, building the Tabernacle, a portable Sinai, where God can be present in the midst of his people.

Today we're going to look at chapters 1 and 2. If you've got a Bible it would be great to follow along. Let's dive in.

1.1-7 - Exodus in the storyline of the Bible

The opening of Exodus helps us see where this book fits in the storyline of the Bible. The Bible begins with the accounts of God creating the world in Genesis 1 and 2. God makes humanity tells them to be fruitful and multiply. In chapter 3 we see the Fall where our first parents listened to the serpent, doubted God's goodness and disobeyed God's word. This unleashed the curse on humanity and the world. Then in chapter 12 God calls a man Abraham and promises that through his family he will undo the curse and bring blessing on

all the families of the earth. The rest of the whole Bible is all about how God's promise works out - to undo the Curse of sin and bring his Blessing to all the earth.

Genesis ends with Abraham's family now grown to Jacob (also known as Israel) and his 12 sons being saved from famine by going to Egypt. So Exodus opens with a recap. The sons of Israel and their families go down to Egypt. They and their generation died, but God blessed their family, as he had promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So we read, verse 7, "the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was full of them." It's a deliberate echo of Genesis 1 and God's command to humanity.

1.8-22 - The Promise under threat

But as we come to verse 8 there is an ominous turn. Egypt has a new king who knows nothing about Joseph. He's afraid that this family, who has now become a numerous nation, might side with their enemies in war and fight against them and leave. There's an irony here because he will fight them, and in so doing fight against God and cause the people to leave. Anyway, Pharaoh's first plan is to squash any potential threat from the children of Israel by treating them as slaves. He puts slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labour. The Egyptians make their lives bitter by pulverising them in hard labour in the fields and brickmaking and building the store cities of Pithom and Rameses. The text repeats the word work over and over again, and anticipates the blessing of the Sabbath command to rest. The Hebrew word "work" can also mean "service" and "worship". And this too anticipates God's command to Pharaoh, "let my son go, so he may *worship* me."¹ As the Anglican prayer for Peace in the service of Morning Prayer puts it, "His service is perfect freedom".

The mention of Pithom and Rameses touches on the concrete historical grounding of the events recorded in Exodus. Scholars disagree over when the exodus occurred. The two most likely periods were during the reign of Thutmose III around 1447BC, or during the reign of Ramesses II around 1250BC. There are wall paintings from the days of Thutmose depicting scenes of brick making and building construction, with the inscription from the mouth of a taskmaster, "The rod is in my hand, do not be idle".² And Rameses was an ancient city that the Pharaoh Ramesses refounded and named after himself. He was also one of Egypt's great builders during his 66 year reign and would have needed vast amounts of manpower.³

¹ Exodus 4.22

² Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, Schocken Books, New York, 1996: 23

³ *Ibid* 20.

It's so interesting that for all the millenia between this text and the 21st century it is still the case that ethnic minorities are still exploited in construction and agriculture. Men, women and children around the world are still in conditions of virtual or actual slavery, in sweatshops, as seafarers, forced prostitution, domestic service and even in brickmaking. And fear of foreigners can be used by those in power to stay in power and justify exploitation and repression. There is even state sponsored genocide. Reading Exodus should open our eyes and give us a sensitivity to see these injustices in our world today.

Whether it was Thutmoses or Rameses, this plan didn't work. And so Pharaoh turned to a second tactic. He ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill every Hebrew baby boy at birth. But we read, verse 17, "The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do." Pharaoh's plans are again thwarted. As one commentator has noted this is the first case in recorded history of civil disobedience in defense of a moral cause.⁴ We might question the ethics of Shiprah and Puah lying to Pharaoh, although the fact he fell for it only confirms the folly of his prejudice, but it's clear that they were faced with a choice. Would they obey God or obey man? It's the same choice Peter and the apostles face when they were arrested by the Jewish authorities to stop proclaiming Christ.⁵ It's something that Christians around the world face, and integral to our faith. Our highest allegiance must be to God.

God honours the midwives faith and blesses them with families of their own. And these lowly women are named where the great Pharaoh is anonymous. "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."⁶ It's a pattern that runs through Exodus right down to the song of Mary herself. "He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble." And they are not the only women who get in the way of Pharaoh's schemes.

Pharaoh's final scheme sets the scene for chapter 2. Drowning every Hebrew boy born in the Nile.

2.1-10 - A Saviour is born

Chapter 2 opens with what should be an everyday occasion of joy. A man and woman get married and find she is expecting a child. But with that threat hanging over them it's a moment of great anxiety. Will it be a boy or a girl? When a boy is born what will she do?

⁴ Sarna, 25

⁵ Acts 5.29

⁶ Proverbs 3.34, cf. 1 Peter 5.5

Verse one reads, “When she saw he was a fine child, she hid him for three months.” The Hebrew literally reads, “She saw that he was good”. It’s another deliberate echo of the creation story, where at the end of each day after creating, we read, “And God saw that it was good.” Pharaoh is cast as the arch-Enemy, like the serpent, bent on destroying God’s creation and thwarting his good purposes.

We get another echo of Genesis in what the baby’s mother does next. She puts him in a papyrus basket and places him among the reeds in the Nile. The word the NIV translates as “basket” is the word that back in Genesis chapter 6 is translated as “ark”. There humanity in the form of Noah’s family is saved from the floodwaters of death as they find refuge in the ark. Here again the waters of death threaten to swallow up the baby, but instead he is saved through the ark. It’s a picture that will get repeated in the book, God saving his people through the waters of death, at the Sea of Reeds. And it’s a picture that the apostle Peter says that we see in baptism.⁷ In his baptism Jesus identifies with us. In our baptism we are united to Christ who goes down into the waters of death and rises to life in triumph giving us a hope and a future.

But let’s return to the story! The baby’s mother places him in the Nile. His sister watches over him. Then none other than Pharaoh’s daughter hears his cries and has compassion on him and goes down and rescues him. She is a picture of what God himself will do. It’s that theme of divine reversal. Pharaoh’s wicked plans are thwarted by his own daughter! And then the baby’s own sister offers to take him to be nursed by his own mother. And then Pharaoh’s daughter raises the boy as her own son, equipping him with the education he will need to do just what Pharaoh had feared, lead the children of Israel out of Egypt. She gives him the name Moses. This sounds like the Hebrew for “draw out”. But it’s also an Egyptian name that means “to be born” or “son”. We’ve already seen it in the names of the two Pharaohs - Thutmoses, “born of Thot”, and Ramesses, “born of Ra”.

2.11-22 - Moses’ own Exodus

In verse 11 we skip forward in time. Moses is now an adult. Although being raised in Pharaoh’s palace he identifies with his own people. He goes out and like Pharaoh’s daughter he sees the plight of his people. He sees their hard labour. He sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brothers, and his sense of justice burns hot. Looking around he sees no one and strikes down the Egyptian. Again, we have what seems a morally ambiguous act.

⁷ 1 Peter 3.20-21

Moses takes justice into his own hands. His furtive glance seems to suggest he knows he is about to do the wrong thing, or at least he's worried he might get caught.

One rabbinic commentator offers an intriguing alternate reading. There is one other place in the Bible where that phrase "he saw there was no one" is used: Isaiah 59.15-16. This says,

The LORD looked and was displeased
that there was no justice.

¹⁶ *He saw that there was no one,*

he was appalled that there was no one to intervene;
so his own arm achieved salvation for him,

Here the phrase is about there being no one to bring justice, so God himself intervenes. On this reading, this is a deliberate echo of Moses in Exodus 2.12.⁸

The next day Moses heads out but this time he sees two Hebrews fighting. The violence of the oppressors is being mirrored among his own people. He steps in to try and impose a standard of justice. Often in Hebrew narrative the first words and actions of a person show you what their character is like. The Hebrew offender recognises this and throws it back in his face: "Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?" There's something of a double irony in these resentful words. Moses will indeed be the ruler and judge over his people and God himself will put him in that position, but that moment has not yet come and Moses realises that he has acted foolishly on his own authority. So he flees as a wanted man. But second, this is only the first in a long sequence of events where the Israelites question and rebel against Moses' authority.

Moses finds his way to Midian. He stops at a well. 7 girls come to water their fathers flock, but some shepherds drive them away. Moses steps in, comes to their rescue and waters their folk. They take Moses to meet their father, a priest of Midian. He is named here as Reuel, which means "friend of god". Later he will be called Jethro.⁹ Moses marries one of Jethro's daughters Zipporah and she has a son whom Moses names Gershom, which sounds like "a foreigner there". Moses says, "I have become a foreigner in a foreign land", or as you might be more familiar with, "a stranger in a strange land". Moses' meaning is unclear. Is he a foreigner in Egypt or Midian? The name in fact tells the story of Moses' whole life. He is never at home. He is always on the move. He dies waiting to enter the promised land. It's striking that both Hebrews and 1 Peter pick up this word to describe Christian identity. We

⁸ Christopher J.H. Wright, *Exodus*, Zondervan, 2021: 79-80

⁹ Sarna suggests that Reuel is Jethro's father based on Exodus 3, 18, and Numbers 10.29 and Judges 4.11

are “foreigners and exiles” on earth, yet chosen and loved by God.¹⁰ We long for a better country, a heavenly one, a city whose architect and builder is God. We keep our eyes fixed on Jesus even as we journey as strangers through this life.¹¹

2.23-25 - God hears, God remembers, God sees, God knows

For all that we’ve seen in these opening chapters of Exodus you may be surprised to notice that God has not yet been mentioned once. He has clearly been at work, behind the scenes. But now in the closing verses of chapter two, God enters the stage.

²³ During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. ²⁴ God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. ²⁵ So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.

We’ve come full circle to the problem Exodus opened with. God’s people in slavery. The Hebrew text is even more emphatic. God heard their groaning. God remembered his covenant. God saw the Israelites. God knew.

The Israelites think they have been forgotten. The Egyptians think they can get away with their oppression. Moses thinks he won’t be able to help his people again after his failed attempt. But God knows. And what follows in the rest of the book is how God acts with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm to bring judgment on the perpetrators of oppression, and to bring salvation for his people because of his love and faithfulness to his covenant promise.

Today we remember that the same God hears our cries. He remembers us. He sees us. He knows us. We know this because he is the same God who in the fullness of time would send another Son, born to a humble woman, whose life a jealous king sought to take by murdering innocent boys, who would grow up to be the true ruler and judge, the Saviour of all people, Jesus.

¹⁰ 1 Peter 1.1-2, 2.9-11

¹¹ Hebrews 11.9-10, 13-16, 24-27, 12.2