

Uppity Women and Others

I've said it before and I'll say it again: I appreciate uppity women. For those of you who haven't heard me wax eloquent or at least volubly on this subject before, perhaps I'd better begin by defining my terms. On-line dictionaries define "uppity" as "Taking liberties or assuming airs beyond one's station; presumptuous." It is an adjective most often applied to those in society who are expected to know their place as second-class citizens but who refuse to stay in that place. When I was growing up, I heard it applied to kids, people of color, and, of course, women. In recent years, what was meant as an epithet has become a badge of honor to those struggling to gain a sense of equality denied to those of their race or sex. A now-defunct feminist journal was called "Uppity Women Magazine." Its website proclaims, "This is a place for uppity women. You know who you are. You are a woman who refuses to keep your place, to limit yourself in any way, to live down to others' expectations. You are a woman who gets up again and again, every time life knocks you down. You've learned how to survive." There's an all women's theatre troupe that calls itself That Uppity Theatre Company. According to their website, "Our name reflects who we are: Bold, brave, willing to step outside the status quo in order to instigate social change, promote civic dialogue and produce transformative theatrical art of the highest quality."

I grew up surrounded by uppity women. Both of my grandmothers were charming Southern ladies and both had backbones of iron, which they displayed upon necessity. Nearly all of my aunts were and are an opinionated, unbowed bunch. My mother's streak of uppity-ness diminished along with her health but it is still what is remembered most by those who knew her the best. I married an uppity woman, which I'll bet y'all have figured out by now, and I am helping to raise one as well. As I've said before, being the parent of an uppity woman can be difficult in the daily workings of life but it gives me great hope for the future. There are one or two uppity women in this congregation. No, really, it's true. And yesterday, I was privileged to take part in a memorial service for a truly uppity woman. Edith Penland, the mother of Bob Berleen, who is a long-time member of the TOPS group that meets here on Wednesdays, died last week at age 97, having raised an amazing, faithful family despite having outlived three husbands whom she nursed through their last illnesses, and a host of other troubles, and never lost her sense of humor or her gratitude to God throughout.

And so, I have a great deal of admiration for uppity women and uppity people in general. They remind me of how far our society still is from the Beloved Community, the Kingdom of God, while at the same time inspiring me to stand up for anyone at the short end of a power equation. I think I come by this love of the underdog naturally. I come from a long line of people who were looked down upon by society's elite. Some of my ancestors came to this country looking for opportunity, only to be greeted by signs saying, "Irish need not apply." Others were here long before any European settlers, only to be chased from their ancestral lands in the verdant foothills of the Appalachians and the bountiful hunting grounds of Montana and the Dakotas. The ones who knew how to be uppity without raising the ire of the Powers That Be survived and thrived. I think it is from that part of my heritage, as well as from the Scriptures, that I have learned to be interested in issues of social justice, equality and fairness.

All of this is why I was glad to have another opportunity to speak about uppity women and uppity people in general presented by today's lectionary. We're going to hear this morning about five uppity women who helped change the course of history and we're going to consider

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who their spiritual heirs are now and whether all of us are on the side of the uppity ones or on the side of those who would keep them in their place.

The book of Exodus picks up where the book of Genesis ended. The descendents of Jacob, called Israel, the ones who carry the promises God made to Abraham, are now living in the fertile Nile Delta, in an area called Goshen. The promises of God have begun to be fulfilled. Through Abraham's great-grandson, Joseph, whole nations of the eastern Mediterranean world have been blessed by being saved from an extensive famine thanks to the granaries that Joseph has maintained in Egypt. The Children of Israel have grown from 12 brothers to a people numerous enough that the Pharaoh of Egypt is worried about them being a threat. The little band of expatriates has grown so large in fact, as Professor Scott Hoezee of Calvin Theological Seminary points out, that the word used for them by Pharaoh in Exodus 1:9 is the Hebrew word "am" or "nation;" the first time the word is used of the descendents of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And this Pharaoh, in the old familiar phrase of the King James Version, "knew not Joseph." He didn't remember that these foreigners were the family of the man who had saved Egypt. They were simply "other;" immigrants, strangers and sojourners, unwanted and feared.

And so Pharaoh began a campaign of what we might call now "ethnic cleansing" or genocide. He directed the midwives of the Hebrews, Shiprah and Puah by name, to begin killing all the male babies they helped bring into the world. The little girls, he decided, could live. After all, what threat would women be to the realm of Pharaoh? The irony here is delicious, for in discounting the ability of all females to impact the world around them, Pharaoh sows the seeds that will eventually unravel his plan and cost his successor dearly. It begins with Shiprah and Puah themselves. Exodus tells us that they "feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live." This of course is not the sort of fear that equates to terror but rather to the deepest respect and devotion. Shiprah and Puah might have been afraid of Pharaoh in the sense of knowing they would have to be careful or he could end their lives but their devotion to Yahweh, their sense of what was right and wrong in God's eyes, gave them courage to do the right thing. It made them uppity. And so they did what uppity oppressed people have always done when dealing with "The Man;" they told him a tall tale to deflect his anger. "Oh, Pharaoh, live forever," they might have said. "These Hebrew slave women aren't like the beautiful, gentle, refined women of your court. They're not at all like Egyptian women, the very flower of womanhood. No, these Hebrews are more like animals, you know. They just pop their babies out in the fields and go right on working. They hardly ever call on us, so we never know when they're giving birth. What can you expect from such primitives?" And Pharaoh, because women's concerns are beneath him, knows nothing about the reality of childbirth, so he swallows their tale, hook, line and sinker. It would never even dawn on him that these two Hebrew women aren't so cowed by his presence that they aren't automatically telling the truth. And so Shiprah and Puah get away with telling their whopper and God blesses them for it.

Of course, Pharaoh doesn't give up his campaign to slowly drive the Children of Israel into extinction while maintaining their involuntary workforce for a few more years. Now he issues an edict that any Egyptian who finds a baby boy among the Israelites should drown the child in the river. The Nile, which was the source of Egypt's life as a nation, is now to be used as the instrument of death. Once again, he fails to take into account the resourcefulness of women.

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One Hebrew mother, Jochebed, devises a plan to hide her baby boy and does so successfully for quite some time. When at last she can hide him no longer, she builds an ark – the Hebrew word is the same here as the word used for Noah’s ship – and places him in the Nile in the rushes that line its banks. Jochebed leaves her daughter, Miriam, to watch and see what happens to her baby brother.

Now, these are two more uppity women. First of all, Jochebed: she has dared to keep her baby boy in defiance of Pharaoh’s edict, in spite of what must have been regular patrols by Egyptian soldiers through the Hebrew encampment in Goshen. It is no easy thing to keep a baby hidden. They cry and sometimes they can’t be consoled or quieted. How many of you remember the final episode of the television series, “M*A*S*H”? In “Goodbye, Farewell and Amen,” the doctors and nurses of the 4077th Medical Army Surgical Hospital are preparing to leave Korea after the truce. The problem is that Captain “Hawkeye” Pierce has had a nervous breakdown. As the program develops, we discover why. Returning to camp from a holiday at the beach, the doctors’ bus had picked up a group of refugees, then been forced to hide from a North Korean patrol. A crying baby threatens to give away their position and in her desperation, the child’s mother has smothered the infant. Hawkeye blocks out the memory, saying it was a chicken that caused the ruckus, until his friend the psychiatrist helps him to deal with the dreadful truth. Had Jochebed not been made of sterner stuff, such a fate could have easily befallen the baby later named Moses.

Miriam had a pretty good uppity streak to her as well. When Pharaoh’s daughter comes to bathe in the Nile, sees the baby in the basket and decides to rescue him, Miriam boldly steps forward to offer some assistance. Surely the princess will need a nursemaid for the child, she suggests, someone to do the distasteful work of feeding and cleaning him so that all the princess has to do is enjoy the baby when he is full and happy. By daring to reveal herself, by being bold enough to speak up when confronted with royalty, a girl not much older than herself, perhaps, but with the power of life and death over her whole family, Miriam shows herself to be a truly uppity young woman. And she not only helps save the life of her baby brother, she manages to safely reunite him with their mother and gets her mother a steady paycheck into the bargain. Once again, those who are beneath Pharaoh’s notice foil his plans. And they do it on his dime, too!

All four of these uppity Hebrew women have shown themselves to be true daughters of that trickster, Jacob, the founder of the line of the Children of Israel. But I would be remiss if I did not mention the fifth uppity woman in this story: the daughter of Pharaoh. We’re not told much about her in Exodus, just this brief story, but it is enough to let us know the profound impact she had on the history of God’s people. She drew the baby out of the Nile, just as the man the baby grew to become would later draw his people through the Red Sea. She named him Moses, part of a perfectly respectable Egyptian name. In Egyptian, the word means “son.” We know it from the names of Pharaoh’s such as Tutmose. But she also knew enough Hebrew, apparently, to recognize a pun in the language, for in Hebrew the word means “to pull out,” just as she said. How did she come to know the language of this despised underclass, these enslaved immigrants? What was her motivation for saving the child? We cannot know but Talmudic tradition tells us that she was, in fact, a secret adherent of the religion of Yahweh and that she had gone to the Nile that day for a ritual bathing to purify herself from the corruption and idolatry of the Egyptian court. Rabbi Michael Graetz, a teacher at a Conservative religious school in modern

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Beer Sheva, writes of the incident out of that tradition: “The spurning of God's ways and values is (called) idolatry, and one who rejects idolatry is called a Jew. But the princess does not have to have been a God-fearer to have performed this merciful, uppity act. Brooks Schramm of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg writes, “She is a truly subversive character. Daughter of Pharaoh. Daughter of the tyrant. In her hands is a child of a people who are supposed to be her enemies. Enemies of the state. Enemies of her state. And in that instant, she performed the act of subversion that tyrants fear more than any other. She had pity.”

This short passage in Exodus is an extreme example of how God uses uppity women in particular and uppity people in general to transform the world. There are five here, after all, in only seventeen verses. But God uses the supposedly weak to confound the supposedly strong throughout the Scriptures. We have in our Bible two beautiful songs by women, young mothers celebrating God's championing of the small over the mighty. In I Samuel 2, Hannah is giving thanks for the birth of Samuel and her prayer includes these words: “Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn... He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.” And in a passage that may be more familiar, Luke 1 records Mary's song of praise: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name... he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” Jeremiah 9:23 says, “Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth...” and the apostle Paul opens his first letter to the Corinthians with these words: “Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.”

On the one hand, it is very, very easy to claim these words for ourselves, to see in our own lives and in each other the mark of the uppity people of God. No one here today, as far as I know, is a millionaire. We do have some brilliant and well-educated people but I don't think any of us regard ourselves as powerful. And, indeed, it is true that we are subject to many powers in our own lives, the weight of which causes us to struggle to be free at many points. But we must also remember that by the standards of the rest of the world, we are impossibly rich. Our standard of living would have been inconceivable by anyone in the world not all that long ago. And around the world, America and Americans are seen as the powerful, those who bend the world to their own convenience. Even here, in our own country, in our own community, we must remember

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that we are the inheritors of subtle power. One thing I have learned from the wonderful mix of ethnicities and cultures in our Evergreen Association of American Baptists is that even when we don't mean to do it or even think we can do it, we "white folk" can exercise an unhealthy dominance in situations where we come into contact with our Black or Asian sisters and brothers. We must be very careful not to appropriate the mantle of the weak and uppity for ourselves without due consideration for the power we may hold over others. We must always be sure that we are not taking the side of Pharaoh.

I think we can save ourselves from false claims of uppitness by considering the witness of the truly uppity. Consider, for example, Martin Luther King, Jr., to whom I certainly heard the adjective uppity applied in my youth. Rev. Dr. King said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." That is a true calling to us when we consider the darkness of injustice that still haunts our world and our nation. Or consider Desmond Tutu. I don't know what the Afrikaans word for uppity is, but I'll bet he does. Archbishop Tutu wrote, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality." As God's people we are called not to be neutral but to be the friend of the downtrodden, the feeder of the hungry, the comfort of the sorrowful. As God's people we are called to be the champions of the needy, the healers of the breach, the sowers of love where there is hatred. As God's people we are called to recognize and celebrate our gifts and to use them not for ourselves but for others, no matter the cost to ourselves. Then we can stand alongside Shiprah and Puah, Jochebed and Miriam, Jeremiah and Paul, King and Tutu, and Christ Jesus himself, who took on the form of a slave and who, in taking on the power of death and destruction, was the most uppity one of all. Thanks be to God.