

Sermon Series *Dream Big Week 4: Jochebed* July 24, 2016

Israelites were fertile and became populous. They multiplied and grew dramatically, filling the whole land. Now a new king came to power in Egypt who didn't know Joseph. He said to his people, "The Israelite people are now larger in number and stronger than we are. Come on, let's be smart and deal with them. Otherwise, they will only grow in number. And if war breaks out, they will join our enemies, fight against us, and then escape from the land." As a result, the Egyptians put foremen of forced work gangs over the Israelites to harass them with hard work. They had to build storage cities named Pithom and Rameses for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they grew and spread, so much so that the Egyptians started to look at the Israelites with disgust and dread. So the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites. They made their lives miserable with hard labor, making mortar and bricks, doing field work, and by forcing them to do all kinds of other cruel work. The king of Egypt spoke to two Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah: "When you are helping the Hebrew women give birth and you see the baby being born, if it's a boy, kill him. But if it's a girl, you can let her live." Exodus 1: 2-16

Now a man from Levi's household married a Levite woman. The woman became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She saw that the baby was healthy and beautiful, so she hid him for three months. When she couldn't hide him any longer, she took a reed basket and sealed it up with black tar. She put the child in the basket and set the basket among the reeds at the riverbank. The baby's older sister stood watch nearby to see what would happen to him. Pharaoh's daughter came down to bathe in the river, while her women servants walked along beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds, and she sent one of her servants to bring it to her. When she opened it, she saw the child. The boy was crying, and she felt sorry for him. She said, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children." Then the baby's sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Would you like me to go and find one of the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" Pharaoh's daughter agreed, "Yes, do that." So the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I'll pay you for your work." So the woman took the child and nursed it. After the child had grown up, she brought him back to Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I pulled him out of the water." Exodus 2: 1-10

This month I'm preaching a sermon series called "Dream Big." Our memory verse is in the bulletin on page 3 and above us as well. Let's say it together, starting with where to find it. Jeremiah 29:11 "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not harm you; plans to give you hope and a future."

I've read stories of prisoners of war tell what it meant to them to know scripture by heart. After the Viet Nam War some POWs said that knowing scripture helped keep their sanity. When we learn scripture it becomes part of us... it influences us, it blesses us, and it invites us to dream God's dreams.

This month we've heard about people who dreamed God's dreams: Mary, the mother of Jesus; Joseph, whose brothers sold him into slavery; and Mary Magdalene, the first to see the Risen Christ. None of these dreamers knew the whole dream God had... they saw a piece of it, and trusted God to reveal it... like a puzzler puts puzzle pieces together and trusts the whole picture to emerge. We are called to dream big, to dream God's big dreams, of a world of peace and justice, of mercy and love, of hope and a future for all people.

None of the dreamers in this sermon series (maybe with the exception of Joseph who told his brothers that he dreamed that the sun and moon and stars bowed down to him!) had big egos, and I believe this tells us that God uses humble, ordinary people to carry God's dreams. This includes you and me. God entrusts God's dreams to us... and trusts that God's dreams will become ours. But unless we know God's dream that all people are loved and valued, all people are worthy of being God's children, we can start to believe that we are the center of the universe, and (again like Joseph) that all the world should bow down to us. So to dream big we need to align ourselves with God's big dreams. We learn most especially of God's dreams in Jesus, and His merciful, and inclusive, and trusting love. Mercy, welcome, and trust are part of God's dreams for us. If there's room on your puzzle piece you might write those words because they're so important to God's dreamers. Mercy, welcome, and trust.

Trust is one of the aspects of dreaming God's dreams, because we can't see the whole picture of God's Kingdom "come on earth as it is in heaven." We can only catch glimpses of it... God-sightings and holy moments. Some God-sightings come in scripture, in stories that come alive with truth and meaning, like this story of Jochebed, and how she trusted God for hope and a future.

Long ago the Israelites were slaves in Egypt and provided free labor for Pharaoh's ambitious construction projects. He needed the slaves but he obsessed about how many Israelites there were and how fast their families were growing. He worried that they would join his enemies in case of war, so he delivered an edict to the midwives: "When you see a Hebrew woman giving birth, if it's a boy, kill him." But the Hebrew midwives feared God (they revered and worshiped God... they were in awe of God) more than they were afraid of the Pharaoh, and they let baby boys live. They lied to

Pharaoh and said “Unlike Egyptian women, Hebrew women are vigorous and give birth before we get there!” Pharaoh said, “Then throw the babies into the Nile.”

There was a Hebrew woman named Jochebed, and she gave birth to a boy. He was a beautiful baby... and she and her husband, Amram, feared for his life. Jochebed had the same dream all mothers have for their children: she wanted her son to be safe. Jochebed must have been full of fear because if her baby boy was found he'd be thrown into the Nile. Day after day Jochebed must have feared that this would be her son's last day, that he would be discovered and killed. She must have panicked when he cried. What if an Egyptian heard him? What if a soldier came to investigate? She must have been terrified when she heard steps outside, fearing it was a soldier coming to search the house. For three months, Jochebed hid her baby boy, all the while living in fear, worrying about her his safety. But fear can choke the life out of faith, and Jochebed was a woman of faith, and she acted on it. She decided to trust God, to trust God's dream of hope and a future for her son. So she did something Jesus taught His followers to do... turn the other cheek, walk the second mile... in other words, do the unexpected, turn the tables, outsmart your oppressors.

Jochebed's decision to trust God led to the future salvation of her people. God's dreams involve salvation, healing, hope, peace, joy... things like that. Now we don't know if Jochebed was visited by an angel in a dream... or if she was silent and in her prayerful imagination she heard God's dream... but we know that she dreamed of hope and a future for her son, so she decided to let her baby go. It's hard to imagine the pain Jochebed must have experienced when she gave up her baby, but her love for him, and her dreams for his future, gave her strength to trust God. Jochebed made a basket, put her baby in it, and placed the basket in the reeds in the Nile River. And Jochebed let him go. Sometimes that's required of us if we're dreaming God's dreams: that we not hold tightly to them, but that we let them go... we trust God.

We don't know if Jochebed know the schedule of Pharaoh's daughter and what time she came to the Nile River to bathe, but when the princess and her attendants arrived at the river she heard a baby cry, and saw the basket in the reeds. She said, “This must be one of the Hebrew children,” and her heart was touched. She named the baby “Moses”, which means “I drew him out of the water.” Miriam, who was baby Moses' sister, was hiding in the reeds and watched, and when she saw that the princess was going to keep her brother, she approached her and said, “Would you like me to find a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby?”

God's dream for freedom and hope and a future for the Israelites continued... Moses was not thrown into the Nile River to die, but laid in a basket in the river, and found by

the Pharaoh's daughter. Moses grew up in Pharaoh's palace but he knew who he was... an Israelite... and he led his people out of misery and captivity. Moses came to trust God's dream of hope and a future for himself and for his people. Jochebed was a small part of God's dream, and this too tells us something about being God's dreamers. We're (probably) not called to dream grandiose dreams... but called to be bearers of small pieces of God's dream. Miriam went and got her mother, and the princess said, "Here, take this child, and nurse him and when he grows up, bring him to me." The princess paid Jochebed to nurse her own child. Jochebed held her son in her arms again.

Jochebed's dream for hope and a future for her child echoed God's big dream of hope and a future for the Israelites, and for all people. Jochebed was given a little part in God's dream... to save her son, first by hiding him and then by letting him go... and she was part of God's larger dream for Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt.

We are entrusted with pieces of God's dreams. God's dreams are woven into the sacrament of baptism: we die to sin and self-centeredness in the waters of baptism and rise to new life in Christ. Moses was pulled out of the waters of the Nile, and we are pulled from the waters of baptism to be bearers of God's dream, of God's Kingdom come, here on earth as it is in heaven. We might play only a small part in God's dreams like Jochebed did, whose name is unfamiliar to most of us, but whose trust in God freed a people from captivity. Jochebed was a bearer of God's dream, like you are.

So I'm asking you today: What's your dream? I'm not asking about your fantasy of winning the Lotto or driving a hot car, or being the envy of all your friends because \_\_\_\_\_ (you'd have to fill in that blank because it's your fantasy.) I'm asking you what you and God dream for our congregation. What do you and God dream for children here? What do you and God dream for youth here? In our community and in the world; what do you and God dream for the poor, for the homeless, for the lonely, for the refugee? What is God saying to you - to your heart and mind - about being a bearer, and holding a piece, of God's dreams?

My religious upbringing taught me that believing in God, and going to church, was all God wanted from me. I didn't know God dreamed... and I certainly didn't know I was called and chosen to be part of God's dreams. Recently I had lunch with a woman who's new to ministry but whose list of accomplishments and professional experiences are almost as long as my arm. I felt that old creeping fear that I'm not enough. Not good enough. But thank You, Jesus! The Holy Spirit took me by the shoulders and shook me to remind me that I am one of God's dreamers, called to carry and participate in God's dreams. I tell you this because we Christians tend to be modest people. We are raised

to be kind, to be quiet, to not think too much of ourselves.... But our God has dreams... and God's dreams are meant to be carried by us and delivered by us... and if we are not God's dreamers... then who is?

Once there was a young woman, poor and probably illiterate, from a backwater town in a wretched time in history, who gave birth to the Messiah. Her name was Mary, and she was chosen to be one of God's dreamers.

Once there was a boy who was his father's favorite son, and whose brothers despised him, and sold him into slavery. He grew up to manage Pharaoh's storehouses, and in a time of grave famine, he saved his people, and fed his starving brothers, and forgave them. His name was Joseph, and he was chosen to be one of God's dreamers.

Once there was a woman possessed by demons who was healed by Jesus, and who followed Him, and became one of His disciples, and who helped support His ministry. She was the first person to see Christ risen from the dead. Her name was Mary Magdalene, and she was chosen to be one of God's dreamers.

Once there was a woman who lived in captivity, and was ruled by a cruel and paranoid king, who decreed that all Israelite baby boys be killed. She gave birth to a son and hid him, and put him in a basket in the Nile River, to be pulled up out of the water by a princess. He would deliver his people from slavery. Her name was Jochebed, and she was chosen to be one of God's dreamers.

These dreamers are our biblical ancestors, and their faith and trust in God is part of our spiritual DNA. We are called, as they were, to be bearers of God's dreams of a new kingdom to "come on earth as it is in heaven." We are called to carry small pieces of God's big dreams, of God's picture of a world healed and restored.

Once more let's say our memory verse. Let's commit it to heart, so that we remember that God has plans and dreams for humanity, and that God has entrusted pieces of God's dreams to us. Jeremiah 29:11 "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not harm you; plans to give you hope and a future." Amen.