

The Next Faithful Thing

Sermon by Lori Erickson

August 23, 2026

Let me begin by saying that I've been appreciating our use of Track 1 of the lectionary during these past months. If you're not familiar with what that means, the lectionary is the schedule of Bible readings that most mainline churches follow each Sunday. And when it comes to the readings from the Hebrew scriptures, we have two different tracks to choose from.

For many years at New Song, we've generally followed Track 2, which pairs the first reading thematically with the Gospel. Track 1 works differently: it lets us follow the great stories of the Hebrew Bible in sequence. We spend time with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and his family, and now the Israelites in Egypt. Instead of dropping into these stories here and there, we get to linger with them—and perhaps notice things we might otherwise miss.

And today's reading is an especially rich one. We have moved several generations beyond Joseph, who rose from slavery to power in Egypt and saved his family during a devastating famine. The descendants of Jacob have flourished there. But now, Exodus tells us, "a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." Whatever goodwill once existed has disappeared. Pharaoh looks at the growing Israelite population and sees not neighbors, but a threat.

Fear sets everything else in motion. Pharaoh is essentially having an anxiety attack on behalf of the Egyptian empire. The Israelites *might* become too numerous. They *might* join Egypt's enemies. They *might* escape. None of this has happened, but Pharaoh has already skipped ahead to the worst possible ending—which, as many of us know, is one of anxiety's special gifts.

So Pharaoh subjects the Israelites to forced labor. When that fails to stop their growth, he orders two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill every boy at birth. When they refuse, he goes further: every newborn Hebrew boy is to be thrown into the Nile.

And this is where the story becomes wonderfully subversive. The Pharaoh is the most powerful person in Egypt. He commands armies and taskmasters. He can issue decrees affecting the lives of thousands of people. And yet nearly everything that matters in this story is done by people who, by the standards of their society, have almost no power at all.

And most of them are women.

First there are Shiphrah and Puah, the two midwives. Pharaoh gives them a direct order, and they simply refuse to obey it. Exodus tells us why: "The midwives feared God." Their fear of God is greater than their fear of the Pharaoh.

When the Pharaoh demands to know why the Hebrew babies are surviving, they give him a wonderfully clever answer. The Hebrew women, they say, are so strong and healthy that they give birth before the midwives can even get there. You have to admire these women. They are

summoned before the most powerful man in Egypt and essentially tell him, “Sorry, Pharaoh. Hebrew women are just really good at childbirth.” And somehow they get away with it.

Then another woman enters the story, the mother of a newborn Hebrew boy. She hides her son for three months, and when she can hide him no longer, she makes a little basket, coats it with pitch, puts her baby inside it, and places it among the reeds of the Nile.

There’s an interesting detail here. The Hebrew word translated as “basket” is *tevah*, an unusual word that appears in only one other story in the Hebrew Bible. It’s the word used for Noah’s ark. Moses’ mother, in other words, makes a tiny ark for her son, a fragile vessel designed to carry life through dangerous waters.

The baby’s sister stands at a distance, watching to see what will happen. And then comes perhaps the most surprising woman of all: the Pharaoh’s own daughter.

She comes down to the river, sees the basket, and has it brought to her. When she opens it, she finds a crying baby. She immediately understands what she is seeing. “This must be one of the Hebrews’ children,” she says.

She knows exactly who this child is. She knows what her father has ordered. But something happens when she looks into that basket.

She sees a baby.

Her father looks at the Hebrews and sees a category of people who might become dangerous. His daughter looks at one Hebrew child and sees a human being who is crying and helpless. The text says simply that “she took pity on him.” Compassion breaks through the fear that Pharaoh has tried to create.

Then the baby’s sister steps forward. Would the princess like her to find a Hebrew woman to nurse the child? Pharaoh’s daughter agrees, and the girl promptly goes home and gets her mother.

And so we arrive at one of the great ironies of the Bible: Pharaoh’s daughter pays Moses’ own mother to nurse the child whom the Pharaoh has ordered killed. The Pharaoh has inadvertently put the future liberator of Israel on the royal payroll.

What I love about this story is that none of these women knows what is going to happen. Shiphrah and Puah don’t know that one of the babies they save will grow up to lead their people out of slavery. Moses’ mother doesn’t know where that little basket will end up. His sister doesn’t know what Pharaoh’s daughter will do when she opens it. And Pharaoh’s daughter certainly doesn’t know that the crying baby she lifts from the Nile will someday stand before Pharaoh and demand, “Let my people go.”

None of them can see the whole story. None of them can liberate Israel. None of them can overthrow Pharaoh.

But what they can do is this: they simply do the next faithful thing.

So they refuse an evil command. They allow themselves to feel compassion. They take a risk for someone who is vulnerable.

And through those small acts of courage and compassion, something much larger is beginning to happen. Long before Moses encounters God in the burning bush, long before the plagues, long before the Red Sea parts, God is already at work—in the courage of two midwives, in a mother's desperate ingenuity, in a sister keeping watch, in the compassion of an Egyptian princess, and in a little basket floating among the reeds.

The Exodus has already begun.

And I think that is where this ancient story begins to speak very directly to us. Because most of us, when we look at the troubles of the world, can feel remarkably powerless. We see wars and suffering, divisions in our country, poverty and loneliness, institutions that seem too large to change. We worry about people we love. The problems are enormous, and we are very small.

This is especially frustrating for those of us who secretly believe that, given sufficient information and perhaps a good committee meeting, we ought to be able to straighten things out.

But perhaps Exodus asks a different question. Not, "Can you fix this?" but, "What is the next faithful thing you can do?"

There's a story from the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 that reminds me of the Hebrew midwives. Damas Gisimba, a Hutu man, ran a small orphanage in Kigali. As the killing spread, he opened its doors until hundreds of children and adults were sheltering there. Armed militias came and demanded that people separate themselves into Hutus and Tutsis. But Gisimba had taught the children not to do that, and they refused.

The militias saw categories: Hutu and Tutsi, people who should live and people who should die. Gisimba saw children entrusted to his care. He couldn't stop the genocide. He couldn't dismantle the machinery of violence around him. But he could refuse to cooperate with it. He could protect the people in front of him.

That is one of the dangers Pharaoh shows us: what can happen when a category becomes more real to us than a human being. The Pharaoh no longer sees individual Israelites with names and families and hopes and fears. He sees "the Israelites"—a frightening mass of people who *might* someday threaten him. And once people have been reduced to a threatening category, it becomes much easier to justify treating them cruelly.

We do this too, often without realizing it. We sort people into categories: immigrants, conservatives, liberals, Muslims, Christians, rich people, poor people, rural people, city people. Categories can sometimes help us understand the world. The danger comes when the category becomes all that we can see.

Pharaoh's daughter offers another way. She knows the category. "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she says. But then she looks into the basket and sees something more fundamental: a crying child who needs her help.

Perhaps one of the most important spiritual practices of our time is learning to do the same thing: to see the person in front of us. To remain curious about people we don't understand. To listen before deciding that we know who they are.

And then, when compassion stirs in us, to ask what it requires of us.

Usually the answer won't be heroic. The next faithful thing may be a conversation, a meal, a phone call, a letter, a donation, an apology, an invitation. It may mean standing beside someone who is frightened or lonely. Sometimes it may mean refusing to participate in something we know is wrong. And often we will have no idea whether what we do will make much difference.

But we need to do the next faithful thing.

And sometimes, as story of Exodus reminds us, this is how God begins to set people free.