

A king who 'didn't know Joseph. 'A leader with no regard for history, or the great rewards of compassion and empathy. A pitiless, frightened autocrat, whose only goal was consolidating power and controlling the foreigners within the boundaries. This is not a pleasant opening paragraph (Exodus 1: 8-10) – but we and countless generations before us revere it as Holy Scripture, so let's do that.

Let's think about what it means to have people in charge who are frightened; so frightened of past and future that they encourage people to oppressive, xenophobic, or even genocidal behaviour in the present – all in the name of national security and good government.

Western democracies are not as far from this line of thinking as we would like them to be. Questions – legitimate questions – about immigration and justice for refugees are even now threatening to turn ugly and defensive in the name of 'national security and good government. 'So yes, everything old is new again.

But we're not yet throwing babies in the river.

And that is where I get stuck when I think about Moses 'story. An infant under threat - one of the people whom the pharaoh would portray as 'them' or 'the enemy within' is raised by a surrogate family who were not on kind terms with his family of origin...but somehow....somehow...through divine intervention or an outbreak of common sense, Moses lives, and God's people are delivered.

From worse than nothing comes this great man of God. And his journey begins in a basket on the river.

I can't believe that Moses mother was the first to resort to such measures – surely there were others who followed the letter of the law...

*(Exodus 1:22 – Pharaoh commanded all his people “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile...”)*

...and consigned their male children to the river in ways that allowed sympathetic friends downstream to rescue and raise these innocents.

Moses mother may not have been the first (or only), but hers was the child that drifted past the palace wading/bathing area. Hers was the child who aroused the sympathy of the princess. Hers would be the child who would ultimately see that no more children would wind up in the river.

This story has a perfect villain. Pharaoh is thoughtless and fearful; ruthless and arrogant; Villain with a capital V. We delight in the ways this story unfolds; we cheer when Pharaoh gets what's coming to him, forgetting that it comes at the cost of Egyptian innocents and those who have put faith in a faithless system.

This foundational story of the Jewish faith - a story that our traditions shares through Scripture - (though without the same sense of 'this is where we come from') - has been told in flannel-graph and film for generations. We have clear ideas about who the villains and heroes are. We use the story in ways that are not always legitimate - assigning God a cameo so we can talk about injustice or determination or whatever else suits us. The story has become a framework for telling other stories - and that is what good stories are for. But Moses' story matters to the Christian church because of the depth and breadth of mercy and compassion that is offered - and much of it from an unlikely source.

Heroes find ways to do the right things under tremendous pressure, with little regard for the consequences to themselves. Heroes take the necessary steps (and more) to show compassion and to act in kindness. Heroes are not selfish, and they fear harm to others more than inconvenience to their status, their privilege or their comforts.

We are quick to assign the role of villain to those who are in charge. I am not immune to complaining about the ways that governments fail to 'think the way I think -

– 'even though I know that the task of governing is far more complicated than any of us could imagine. Our stories need villains just as surely as they need heroes, and the Exodus story has me thinking differently about both.

Hero talk has been running wild since March. We bestow the title on health care workers, first responders and more generally on those who kept us fed and watered during the early days of the shutdown. And while it is important to recognize the many ways that people went above and beyond their usual duties - most of those we hailed as heroes would tell you that they were just glad that they could do their jobs. Villains too got special notice - whether they were local or global, we were a little too quick to assign blame and imagine the worst of individuals, governments or entire nations.

These days there has been a shift in our thinking. We are more likely to praise those who champion 'a return to business' (whatever that means...), and vilify anyone who suggests that 'we're not out of the woods yet...' and I think the beginning of the Exodus story might help us navigate this strange new circumstance.

In a time of uncertainty and chaos - during a season of fear and highly emotional public discourse - it would be good to think about what compassion looks like. How do we act across ideology and political pontification and just be concerned with decency? It is possible, you know. We don't need to invent this behaviour - it's part of who we are. The daughter of Pharaoh acted on this basic and beautiful human instinct and not only rescued 'the enemy', but nurtured him - allowing his terrified mother to continue to nurse the child. She raised her father's enemy as a member of the family.

This is how God works.

If we truly wish to act as those who have been redeemed by the person, passion and presence of Jesus, then it doesn't matter what our political affiliation, or our nationality, or our economic status - we each of us have the power to stand up to the villain - to stop throwing innocents in the river. The villain of the piece only has power if the rest of the actors concede that power to them.

The princess - the daughter of the villain - found compassion and acted in love. The midwives too. These are acts of God - this is the way the world gets changed for the better. Not overnight. Not without distress and discomfort.

This is where we are.

After a long difficult spring and an unsettled summer, we imagine the struggle is over. We've been fortunate in this part of the province; not untouched by the virus, but not affected to the extent of larger cities or other parts of the world. The struggle continues and our efforts to act with sensible compassion still matter. So in worship, we wear masks - and take extra cleaning and sanitizing precautions. Not because we're frightened - not because we've 'bowed to the wisdom of a faceless, fearful government' - but because compassion wears a mask and takes every necessary precaution.

It's how we keep people out of the river.

The Exodus story covers Moses entire life - birth to death. That's how long it took for the people of God to struggle their way to change - to stumble and complain their way to the promised land. That story is an helpful metaphor for our own challenges - an ancient reminder to beware of quick-fixes and of leaders that promise too much, too soon. Our brief pandemic 'exile' is not yet over, but the lessons of the Exodus are there for the learning. The gifts of compassion and cooperative resistance are helpful and well within our abilities.

The Christian approach to this ancient Jewish life-lesson should remain rooted in compassion and the selfless pursuit of what's best for all, not just some (or one).

May we worry less about heroes and villains these days. Let's do more to ensure that the compassion that Jesus modelled - the compassion that exists even in a member of Pharaoh's household - Let's be sure that compassion is evident in our lives. Amen