

Moses and Michael Brown
Exodus 2:1-10
Hillary Brownsmith
August 17, 2014

On Monday, I submitted a title for the sermon I was scheduled to present today. Now that title doesn't fit because in the past few days I had to re-write this sermon. I am presenting something different because it would be unconscionable to get up here today and not talk about Michael Brown.

In case you haven't been glued to this story, Michael Brown, an 18 year old black man, was murdered by a cop in Ferguson Missouri on Saturday August 9th. That following Monday should have been his first day of college but instead Michael's little town was understandably overcome with rage and grief and riots erupted. Cops came in combat gear that was issued to small towns in the hysteria that followed September 11, 2001. A protestor was shot, gas canisters were fired on citizens and reporters alike, people were taken to jail, and a no-fly zone was instated over a Missouri town of 21,000. But most of the American media decided it was appropriate to spend more time talking about looting and the destruction of property than the destruction of bodies of color. Now the media wants us to know that Michael was involved in a robbery because that somehow would make his murder warranted. This is the context in which I wrote this sermon. This is the context in which we come to church today. This is the context in which we live.

So that's our context but before I jump into this Exodus story, I want to also talk about our condition. A few years ago I was having a conversation with a Jewish friend about many Christians' perception that Jewish law must feel onerous. "No", she said "the law is an invitation into covenant. I can accept or reject it but my Creator has still offered it." What a great image! It made me wonder where the invitation is for Christians and what we're being invited into. As I read stories like the one we're working with today, I believe that our invitation is in the Bible and that we are being invited to fall in love...with the text, with God, with Jesus, with our neighbor.

This invitation seems exciting, even easy. But in our current context and with our current condition it isn't easy. Environmentalists have said that the reason we continue to kill the earth is because we lack affection for it. Americans are arguably the most transient, voluntarily placeless people who have ever lived on the planet. We don't know about place and land. And you can't love a place you don't know and you can't save a place you don't love. This logic makes sense. But this isn't just an environmental issue. This lack of affection is our current condition. We don't love a particular land. As the past week has shown, we don't love people. We spend a lot of time misappropriating cultures, so we obviously don't respect or love those. And we Christians have developed this condition as well. Many Christians are Biblically illiterate. We don't know our text so we can't love it. Of course, the Bible will go on being whether we love it and know it. But our identity as Christians is tied to our knowing, teaching and loving the story. So what won't be saved if we don't know and love the invitation, our story is our particular identity as Christians. And if we can't love and save our own identity then

we're not going to develop a knowledge and love of external things like places and people.

This problem is dangerous and urgent. So I want you to take the posture of people ready to fall in love as you listen to this sermon. It's the perfect story with which to take that position because we all know it and it is a story about identity.

The background for this story is that Pharaoh has been grinding the bodies of the Hebrews into the ground through enslavement. The Bible specifically mentions enslavement on construction crews and in fields...hard physical labor. Unfortunately for Pharaoh, the Hebrews continue to grow their families despite this oppression. The text says that the Egyptians "dreaded" the growing Hebrew population. So naturally the nastiness of the oppression faced by the Hebrews intensifies as Pharaoh's fear of them intensifies. Until one day, consumed by panic that the Egyptians will imminently lose their majority status and thus their racial supremacy, Pharaoh asks the midwives to go and kill all the male Hebrew babies upon birth. But the midwives concoct a story that Hebrew women are very healthy and give birth so fast that no birth attendant can even make it in time to catch the babies. They tell this story to their king, a man who knows nothing about life and creation, and he believes them. Still needing to curb the rising numbers of Hebrews, Pharaoh sets out to have all the male Hebrew babies drowned in the Nile. To execute this plan he enlists "all his people". Did you get that? Pharaoh didn't need to hire a security force or outfit a SWAT team; he just commends this work to the general population.

This is the context that the baby in this story is born into. The Levite woman, whose name we aren't told, has a baby and for three months she hides that baby. She delivered her child, held him close and for three months she nursed him. She smelled that sweet new baby smell, got to know her son and fell in love with him. And you know, I think she probably named that baby. It's hard when hearing this story not to think of Michael's mom, Lesley. She held her baby close, fell in love with him and named him after his dad. And both Lesley and the Levite hid their babies from an entire population of people who would be afraid of their sons. When these women couldn't protect their babies any longer, they let them go. For the Levite woman that looks like her putting her baby in a basket she's crafted just for his little body and setting him, somewhat ironically, in the Nile. Then she turns and takes a walk that I can't even attempt to imagine. And her three month old baby is left in the hands of God and the wilderness.

The baby's sister can't manage to turn away so she stands by to see "what would be done to him". That's when Pharaoh's daughter shows up to bathe. She is surrounded by "her young women". These women are not just there to bathe her but to protect her from snakes and marauders. It is while they are policing the river bank that Pharaoh's daughter tells one of these women to pick up a basket she has spotted in the reeds. The servant brings the baby to her mistress and the text says she "took pity on him." When I heard this story as a child, Pharaoh's daughter was made into some magnanimous figure. But the text says she feels "pity" which isn't compassion and

certainly isn't solidarity. If we really interrogate her actions in this story a less generous image of Pharaoh's daughter emerges.

She sends a slave to pick up the baby. She sends the sister to find a wet nurse, a wet nurse who is the baby's birth mother. She pays the Levite woman a pittance to feed her own child. Then when the baby is weaned his mother has to deliver the child to Pharaoh's palace where her baby was made Pharaoh's daughter's son. And then Pharaoh's daughter re-names the baby Moses. You know why she re-names him Moses? Because Moses sounds like the Hebrew word for "draw out" and she claims "I drew him out of the water".

First of all, that statement is just factually untrue. A slave picked him up. Secondly, this naming negates the caring role of the wilderness. The river wasn't there to drown him but to carry him to safety. The reeds were there to cradle not choke. The wilderness was not the threat the Levite woman was attempting to save her child from. Third, Pharaoh's daughter never tries to figure out if the baby had a name before he is discovered in the river. By not engaging in this inquiry she can also forget that this baby had a family that cared about him. In fact, as she paints herself as his savior during this naming, she can pretend she is not only saving him from the wilderness but from a negligent, poor, uneducated woman who would be so careless as to leave her child in river weeds, abandon him! In her construction she saves him from a threat her family didn't cause.

This is where our verse for today ends but I want to carry this story a little further. Following Moses' very problematic naming there is a skip we expect from the Bible. Moses goes from a weaned child to a grown man. The first thing we hear about Moses as an adult tells us everything we need to know about the years that aren't documented. The text says that Moses went out and looked on the burdens of his people and noticed that an Egyptian was beating one of his people. If the taking in of Moses had been a loving adoption, Moses would have become Pharaoh's grandson. He would have developed a strong bond with Egyptians, his adopted people, and been assimilated. But in this one line, we learn that Moses' loyalty still lies with the people who couldn't raise him, not because they were poor or uneducated or neglectful but because they were persecuted and left without dignity or real choices. Perhaps Moses was always just pitied, treated like some wounded animal that a child finds and is allowed to keep.

In the next line, we learn that Moses kills that Egyptian and hides him in the sand. The next day he sees two Hebrews fighting and he attempts to mediate the argument. However they call Moses out for the murder he thought he committed in secret. Why is Moses worried? His grandfather his Pharaoh! He killed a random Egyptian man! But Moses was right to be afraid. Pharaoh does side with the Egyptian because at the end of the day, in this context, an Egyptian body is just worth more than a Hebrew body.

Moses has messed up so he runs. He finds himself by a well in the town of Midian. That's where he meets the family of a priest, waters his first flock of sheep, and marries a woman named Zipporah. They have a son together that Moses holds close and calls

by a name that means “I have been a sojourner in a foreign land.” We might imagine that he is referencing Midian but when Moses names this child he is really speaking his whole life story over him. He is saying in this naming, “I have never been at home. I have never been safe.” Maybe this name will be enough to inoculate his son against the pain that Moses has experienced.

Moses really is a landless child, a child of the wilderness. But by chapter four, God chooses Moses to be “as God to” Aaron. And we know that the rest of Moses life is about being chosen to deliver a hard, vital message. We must re-learn this whole story in earnest because their context is akin to our context. The Egyptians condition is our condition. And in this story we learn that the God we are invited to fall in love with is a God who chooses, a God of particularity. Our God turns God’s face from the Egyptians and towards the child in the wilderness and then makes that baby a child of promise.

We are invited to love this fierce God and this fierce story. May we be brave enough to accept that invitation.