

A LUMINOUS WEB

Proper 16, Year A: Exodus 1:8-2:10
Psalm 124
Matthew 16:13-20

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Key Passages: *When she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. (Exodus 2:3)*

“And on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18b)

Some of my most pleasant memories from childhood were times spent at summer camp. It was run by the Presbyterians on a large wooded site, where there was a large lake for swimming and canoeing, arts and crafts, daily Bible study, fireside story-telling, and long walks in the woods. We learned to identify lots of trees, some birds, and noticed the natural world.

One day the project was to locate spider webs. We realized rather quickly that it was often hard to spot the web until we had walked into it, the tiny threads getting tangled in our hair, or covering an arm as we walked. The next day, we went out earlier, when the dew was still glistening on leaves and grass. Our patient guide showed us how to look carefully before crashing into a web, catching the light on the dew to guide our search. We took large pieces of colored construction paper with us, and when we found a web, we carefully put the paper behind the web and pulled it gently forward to capture the web on the paper. Seeing the intricate pattern preserved on the paper was fascinating.

There are webs around us that we often do not see. But they are there. And they are amazing. Our scriptures today remind us of this fact.

In our first reading, Joseph has moved his family to Egypt, and they have multiplied. The rulers of Egypt begin to be afraid of these immigrants and treat them as slaves. There is a terrible edict that would destroy the people by killing all the baby boys. When clever Hebrew midwives thwart the pharaoh's plans, another edict calls for all baby boys to be drowned in the Nile. Baby Moses is born into this dangerous situation. When his mother can no longer hide him, she places him in a basket made waterproof with pine tar and hides him in the reeds along the river. He is discovered by pharaoh's compassionate daughter, and another clever Hebrew girl arranges for the baby to be nursed by its own mother. The young Moses is saved, and becomes part of the royal household.

This engaging story combines humor and suspense to develop an ironic picture. We experience the fear of the Hebrew people as the oppression of slavery hardens upon them, including the terror of losing their infant sons. Our concern is focused on a particular baby, a son of a priestly household, whose precarious future is placed into a tiny basket. We are relieved by the humorous details of two midwives outwitting the powerful king, and we watch as the princess is beguiled by a baby and his alert sister arranges for the baby's own mother to receive wages for caring for her son.

How ironic that it is the women who assure the safety of the captive peoples. The pharaoh has power of life and death over all his subjects, but his will is thwarted by women—two devious midwives, a wise mother, a clever sister, and a compassionate princess. Four of these women have absolutely no power in the hierarchy of their society—as slaves and as women. Only the princess has royal status, but she too as woman is suspect and as daughter of the pharaoh likely under great surveillance. Through the powerless, God offers safety and liberation. The death-dealing authorities are overcome by the creative powers of people who risk doing what they can to work against the forces of violence and death.

The seemingly delicate web actually possesses great strength. Silk threads which seem so fragile reveal their strength in fabrics such as parachutes that withstand the forces of wind and gravity to assure safety. The individual strands of the web reinforce each other in threads that have remarkable strength.

It is from this precarious start that Moses is raised up to be the leader of the Israelite people. Afloat in a tiny basket, he is rescued from drowning in the Nile and nurtured to adulthood. He becomes the one who responds to God's call to lead his people across that Nile and into freedom. The web of care for Moses is woven by those who risk their own safety to work for the survival of others. Those whom the world believes have no power are part of that unseen web, whose tensile strength speaks to us of God's never-failing providence.

Perhaps you saw the story in last week's *Boston Globe* about the woman who came to the rescue of a Trump supporter at last Saturday's rally on the Commons. Her name is Imani Williams, a 27-year-old from Connecticut, who appears in her picture to be a person of color. She had gone to the rally because she wanted to be part of those standing against racism and white supremacy. She saw a man in a Trump hat surrounded by counterprotesters, who were hurling insults and spitting on him, and she feared for rising violence. She gripped the man's backpack and nudged him forward against the throngs of people. Some people began to turn their attention to taunting Imani, but she kept moving forward. Eventually she worked their way through the crowd, and towards safety for both of them.

Interviewed later, Imani cited an incident from one of the Harry Potter books in which Harry risks his own life to save his sworn enemy from a fire. “He knew it was the right thing to do, even if he didn’t want to, even if he had to put himself at risk,” she said, continuing, “And that’s what I did too. Sometimes it’s difficult having a strong moral compass in a mixed-up world. But in this case, I saw where I could help and I did. That’s all you can ever do,” she concluded. (*Boston Globe*, August 23, 2017, p. B3).

“Imani” is an Arabic word meaning “faith”. I have no idea whether Imani Williams is part of any organized religious faith. But she clearly demonstrates the characteristic of a faithful person, one who trusts in the inherent goodness of humanity and who works to promote that dignity. One who, though she may have been marginalized herself, continues to offer respect to others. And one who though she may have known fear for her own safety, is willing to risk that safety in order to save another.

Imani shows us the power of the invisible web to bring about good. In the face of the murderous powers of systemic oppression, she helps us recognize the power of God, subtle and silken, often unacknowledged but unbroken. With the Hebrew midwives, Moses’ mother and sister, and the Egyptian princess, Imani did her part to maintain that web, to affirm love over hatred and life over death.

In today’s gospel Jesus says that the powers of Hell will not prevail against the rock on which his church is built. Sometimes I think we can clearly see that rock and feel its support. At other times, it seems less apparent. Not because God has deserted us, but rather that we have let that rock become hardened in old patterns of oppression and privilege, and we have lost sight of the true foundations. That’s why today I am focusing on the story of Moses in the bulrushes, as a sign of the precariousness we feel today, of uncertainty as to what will sustain us in murderous times. And I take heart from the signs of the web of support that bears us up. The promise that the river on which we float—the river that has been declared a source of death by drowning—that river will bear us until we mature enough to respond to God’s call for liberation. And then that river will be parted by God, the one who makes a way toward liberation and reconciliation.

Many of you know that I went to Charlottesville, Virginia, two weeks ago. I was responding to a call for people of faith, and especially white clergy, to come and support the faith communities of that city as they stood for love over hate. I returned to the area of my youth, with many of the concerns I had in those days of civil rights, and with a greater sense of God’s strength undergirding us. I was only one small link in that web, but I was glad to be there with my collar, to meet the Bishop of Virginia and let him know that Trinity Church in Boston was praying for this work. I didn’t do anything heroic, nor was I really afraid,

though it was unnerving that the terrible murder by car crash took place two blocks away from me. I have stayed in touch with a fellow clergyperson in that city as they continue to heal, and she has in turn offered support to us as Boston prepared for last Saturday. All of us are looking for ways to move forward.

Because that is the task for all of us. Going out in the early morning, when the dew is still on the leaves, so that we can better see the strength of the webs around us. Coming to church with our pieces of colored paper so that we can capture an image of that web, to inspire and assure us that we are not alone. The web of God's love may not be visible at every moment, but it is constantly there. We pray for the humility to see it, the courage to trust it, and the wisdom to be part of it.

In 1989 the Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were working to break free from Soviet domination. In what is called "the Singing Revolution," over two million people formed human chains across these three nations and sang songs of freedom. It was a powerful, nonviolent expression of solidarity and the resolve of the people to reclaim their sovereignty. It was a strong, resilient web. Within two years, the failing Soviet power was dissolved.

Last Sunday I was out of town, leading services in Maine. I was glad to be there and sorry not to have been with you as you poured onto Copley Square to do what we know how to do: sing hymns together. The music linking us together with silken threads of resilience, to say with our many voices blended, "We have faith in you, O God. We affirm your divine spark in each of us. O Christ, reveal our unity and strengthen our faith. Reveal the path for us to follow. For in your path we will find peace."