

Sermon for August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014 (Proper16A) **“Blessed Conspiracy”**  
(based on Exodus 1:8-2:10 and Romans 12:1-8)

He was *that* sort of pharaoh-- big on ego, short on history, fond of big projects and Important Declarations. He had a loud voice and a powerful fist. He loved to walk out along the Nile in the cool of the evening, with his viziers and scribes and servants, just to see all the merchants and beggars and slaves scramble to clear a path. It pleased him.

What didn't please him was the number of Israelites cluttering up his kingdom. He didn't remember how they'd come to Egypt, how Joseph had risen in the ranks and saved the people of Egypt from famine by wisely interpreting his own dreams. He didn't remember how Joseph and his brothers and all their descendents had been welcomed and celebrated. That was generations ago. All he knew was that they had gone forth and multiplied.

This Pharaoh wasn't skilled in diplomacy. He wasn't good at making friends, but he was pretty good at making enemies. So he got nervous, and decided too many Israelites could be a very bad thing. He decided that he would round them all up, make them work so hard they'd have no energy left for baby-making. Anybody want to tell me how well that worked? Pharaoh kept trying to grind them down and wipe them out, but there's a truth he hadn't counted on: *sometimes, something new needs to come into the world. And blessed are the ones who help it, and woe to them who try to hold it back.*

The Israelites, in spite of the Pharaoh's plans, did not cease their increase. Even though they became slaves, more and more cruelly oppressed, they kept on fathering and mothering.

Now, Pharaoh didn't know much about birth, but he knew that midwives were involved. At that time, midwives were standard medical professionals—like nurse practitioners. Everyone, rich or poor, went to them for reproductive health, infant care, and other concerns. Pharaoh's wives had used midwives & the Israelite women used them too. Pharaoh had a second great idea. He called in two midwives who served the Hebrew community. One was named “Shiprah,” meaning “beautiful.” She

must have been a woman of substance, well-placed in society, for Pharaoh to know her—perhaps she had eased the birth of the Pharaoh's own children—yet she was also known to provide services to the Israelite slaves. The second midwife was called Puah, which means young woman or girl. It's likely she was Shiprah's daughter, or an apprentice. She had witnessed and aided at her share of births, but the work was still full of wonder and terror. She knew she stood at the balance point of life and death. It was her calling to act on behalf of life.

Pharaoh told the midwives to keep serving the Israelite women, but—after delivery, to kill every infant who turned out to be a boy. “Let the girls live...” he said. Apparently, it never occurred to him that girls could be dangerous.

Did he understand what he was asking, and *who* he was asking to do such a thing? These midwives, already serving slaves who could not possibly pay them, these midwives, inspired by the same God as the slaves they served, chose to defy Pharaoh's order. In fact, their defiance is the first recorded act of civil disobedience in human history. Because they knew a truth Pharaoh had forgotten: *sometimes, something new needs to come into the world. And blessed are the ones who help it, and woe to them who try to hold it back.*

It was wonderful, what they did. They delivered every newborn just as carefully as before, ensured that mother and infant were doing well, then made this excuse: “...the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” Pharaoh believed it. And God blessed the midwives—for, even though they helped keep so many children alive, they escaped Pharaoh's wrath and lived on, prospering in their work and creating families of their own.

Pharaoh gave up on them and commanded all the Egyptian people to take over the task, to throw every Hebrew boy baby into the Nile. Again, he told them to let the girls live. He couldn't imagine they could be a threat.

Now there was a family among the Israelites in Egypt. The father was a priest, and his wife came from a family of priests as well. They had a daughter: Miriam. Her name combined the Hebrew words for bitterness and rebellion. She carried the

bitter burden of her parents' enslavement, but also the fiery hope that, somehow, they might rebel against their oppression and become free. They had a son, as well: Aaron, born before Pharaoh's decree and therefore safe. They hoped he'd become a priest or scribe, and someday serve his people in freedom. The whole family dreamed of freedom, because they remembered what some preferred to forget: *sometimes, something new needs to come into the world. And blessed are the ones who help it, and woe to them who try to hold it back.*

When Miriam's mother gave birth to her third child, it was healthy and fine—and a son. She knew her she was placing her own life in danger if she protected him. But she knew of God's promises, and she knew no child deserved to die. She also knew Shiprah and Puah. She decided it was time to join their blessed conspiracy.

For three months, she managed to hide him. Miriam helped, ran errands, sang songs to the boy to keep him quiet. She knew her name meant “rebel.” She wanted to be part of the conspiracy too. When he got too big and noisy, Miriam helped make a basket of reeds, woven tight and plastered with pitch to make it waterproof. They talked as they worked, going over their plan. They studied the currents. They noted when the royal women came down to bathe. They sang prayers over the child, placed him in the basket, and set it down in the reeds where the right currents would catch it. And Miriam stood guard, watching her little brother float downstream, with her mother on standby, ready for what they hoped would happen next.

Pharaoh's daughter used to love bathing in the river. When she bathed, no men were allowed near, and she was beyond her father's reach. The cool water washed the salt from her skin. But she had seen other women at the river, slave women, weeping and wailing for their drowned sons. She hated what her father had done to them. She wished she was not so carefully watched and attended. She wished she could do something for those weeping women.

When she saw the basket and the child, something leapt inside her. She knew she was taking a risk. She also knew this was someone's beloved child, in a basket prepared with great care. Her heart was moved and her spirit rose up. Then and there, she joined the blessed conspiracy. Because *sometimes, something new needs to*

*come into the world. And blessed are the ones who help it, and woe to them who try to hold it back.*

Miriam made her move. “Shall I go and get you a Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?” When Pharoah's daughter said yes, the girl called her mother, who just happened to be in calling distance. Pharoah's daughter hired her, paying her to tend her own son, raising the Israelite boy right under the Pharoah's nose. He grew with his mother's whispered teachings, the history and culture and faith of the Hebrew people. He grew with all the privileges and training of a royal child. And she named him Moses, which means “drawn out” or “delivered.” Moses would grow up to be a deliverer, the one to lead God's people out of Egypt.

This is how the life of Moses began: in a blessed conspiracy of women who dared to act, not according to the timeline or agenda of human power, but on God's time, guided by God's Spirit, acting on God's promises. There was plenty that could have held them back, but they acted—because *sometimes, something new needs to come into the world. And blessed are the ones who help it, and woe to them who try to hold it back.*

It's the same call Mary and Joseph heard, when they were bewildered and afraid. It's the same call Jesus grew into, through the guidance of elders and the challenges of the poor, the unclean, and the forgotten. It's the same blessed conspiracy the disciples joined when they began to practice Christ's teachings and helped birth a new kind of community called “church.”

Are we so different from these men and women? Is it so much harder for us? We, too, are touched by death. And we know what it is to be ground down by hard work. We are surrounded—and exhausted—by injustice. You may not see yourself as a person of power in any way. Yet God is calling us to be part of the blessed conspiracy. So who is your Pharoah, and what is your Egypt? What is your river Nile—or river Denial, as the case may be? What is in your basket, and where might the river take it? Who is that person, totally different from you, who will be waiting at the river to help? Because, *sometimes, something new needs to come into the world. And blessed are the ones who help it, and woe to them who try to hold it back.*

--Preached by Rev. Holly S. Morrison  
Phippsburg Congregational Church, UCC  
*Phippsburg, Maine*