

“A Heroic Spirituality of Everyday Goodness”
Exodus 1:8-2:10; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

Matthew 16:13-19

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Romans 12:1-8

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God,
to present your bodies as a living sacrifice,
holy and acceptable to God,
which is your spiritual worship.

²Do not be conformed to this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,
so that you may discern what is the will of God—
what is good and acceptable and perfect.

³For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you
not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think,
but to think with sober judgment,
each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

⁴For as in one body we have many members,
and not all the members have the same function,

⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ,
and individually we are members one of another.

⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us:
prophecy, in proportion to faith;

⁷ministry, in ministering;

the teacher, in teaching;

⁸the exhorter, in exhortation;

the giver, in generosity;

the leader, in diligence;

the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Exodus 1:8-2:10

⁸Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.”

¹¹Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor.

They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh.

¹²But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.

¹³The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, ¹⁴and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

¹⁵The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶“When you act as midwives to the

Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.”

¹⁷But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.

¹⁸So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?”

¹⁹The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.”

²⁰So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. ²¹And because the midwives feared God, God gave them families.

²²Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.”

^{2:1}Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. ²The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months.

³When she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with *bi-tu*-men and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river.

⁴His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

⁵The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it.

⁶When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him, “This must be one of the Hebrews’ children,” she said.

⁷Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?”

⁸Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother.

⁹Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it.

¹⁰When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, “because,” she said, “I drew him out of the water.”

The Sermon

The Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, defied the king’s decree, and instead listened to a higher authority, in whom they found the meaning of their humanity.

Bravery is not about being fearless; it’s about doing what is right and good even when you are legitimately afraid of the results it may bring. They knew they were breaking the king’s command. But they answered to a higher call.

And when they were questioned about it they gave one of the great replies in the whole sweep of Bible history.

“Why have you disobeyed my command, and allowed the boys to live when you are midwifing?”

“Uh, gee, king; you know, we try to get there in time and do what you told us to do, but, uh...you know, those Hebrew women are tough!

They're not like your Egyptian women; they're vigorous! I mean, we go running down the hall, but by the time we get there, the whole thing's already happened; they're already pushing the stroller out the door; and we just have to go, 'Oh, darn, we couldn't get there in time, and now everybody's already seen that the baby lived, and we're too late.' Sorry about that, king. Maybe we'll do better next time."

Nine or so months later, the Hebrew mother of six-year-old Miriam and three-year-old Aaron brought into the world her third child. At that time, an equally horrifying order from the Pharaoh was in effect: that all male babies born into Hebrew families were to be thrown into the river. For three months, she was able to hide her new baby boy.

Imagine the strength and ingenuity that must have required—but don't imagine she would have considered, for one billionth of a second, *not* doing whatever it took to save that beautiful baby's life.

And when she could hide him no longer, she made a water-tight basket that would float on the surface of the water. And in what must have been the most agonizing moment of her life, she put the baby in the basket, and put it among the reeds on the riverbank, while six-year-old Miriam stood at a distance, to see what would happen.

Big sister was right in place, then, when Pharaoh's daughter came with her attendants to bathe in the river, saw the basket, opened it, and found the baby, crying.

She knew he must have been a child of one of the hated and feared Hebrews—which, at that moment, listening to that helpless baby's cry, made not one bit of difference to her.

That's when Miriam made a brilliant move, incredibly clever. She stepped up to the Pharaoh's daughter and said, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?"

Yes, said Pharaoh's daughter; go bring a nurse. And without another word, Miriam went and got their mother.

And Pharaoh's daughter said to the nurse Miriam had brought, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages."

We are not told whether Pharaoh's daughter may have suspected all along that the nurse that had been brought to her was actually the baby's true mother. But given the nobility, compassion, and cleverness of every female in this story, I wouldn't doubt it for one second.

And even if she did suspect, everybody was in on the secret, and nobody gave it away.

And what the mother of Moses placed in the water
(which is what the king of Egypt had commanded that they do),
the king's daughter drew out of it—
the Hebrew verb for which was "*mashah*."
And she named him, "*moshe*"—Moses.

Refusing to deny their humanity
in the midst of a grotesquely, appallingly *inhuman* political situation,
each of the women and girls in this narrative
played a significant part—
their brilliant, attentive, compassionate, noble part—
in saving the life of a child of God, which is to say, a child.

In doing so, they also saved something in the baby's mother,
and the rest of the baby's family;
and I daresay they all saved something in themselves.

On an afternoon in 2006 in a restaurant near Little Rock, Arkansas, a woman of middle-middle age was surrounded by a group of young students. They gushed over her. They lined up to get their pictures taken

with her. They became emotional—at least one burst into tears—just to be near her.

We can only wonder whether a piercing irony may have latched itself onto the mind of the woman at the center of all this adoring attention:

specifically, the irony that almost exactly half a century earlier, in a place not far from that restaurant, she had also been surrounded by a crowd of highly emotive students, but that emotionally charged crowd had been the opposite of happy to see her.

Her name is Elizabeth Eckford. She was the student in the center a famous photograph taken by Will Counts: a lone African American student arriving for school on September 4, 1957 at the segregated Little Rock Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.ⁱ

There were supposed to be nine African American students walking in together that day, but plans had been changed the night before, and while the other eight families all had telephones; Elizabeth Eckford's family did not. She never got the message.

So, when she arrived at school that day, she was alone—alone to walk through 400 white protesters and the Arkansas National Guard, deployed by the governor to block the students from entering the school.

The high school girl in that photograph wears a look that is as vulnerable as it is determined, eyes hidden behind shaded glasses. She is not smiling or frowning or furrowing her brow; she's just a young teenager walking.

Around her are white girls and white women and white National Guardsmen, and not a single one of them looks happy. Some are furious. Some look at her the way you would look at a snake slithering into your house if, like many of us, your most visceral fear tends to manifest itself as anger.

One white girl walking right behind young Elizabeth Eckford in that photograph has her mouth wide open, evidently in the midst of a bellowing shout aimed directly at the back of Elizabeth's head. She's not the only one, but in the picture she is the most prominent.

In the midst of all the shouting and taunting and ignorance being sprayed at Elizabeth, words of hatred projectile vomited from wide open mouths full of craven fear and appalling inhumanity, Elizabeth walks.

From the resolute look on her delicate face, she seems to be somehow both tuning everything out and absorbing every word.

“Listen and understand,” said Jesus;

“it's not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person;
it's what comes *out* of the mouth that defiles...

Whatever goes into the mouth goes out to the sewer,
but what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart,
and this is what defiles.

Out of the heart come evil intentions, murder...false witness, slander.
These are what defile a person” (Matthew 15:10-11, 17-20).

And this white crowd, mouths open wide, are defiled.

In later years, she and the white girl who had shouting at her from behind met as adults, each having to confront in their own ways that ugly historical moment and the ugly history behind it.

Improbably, they had experienced a miracle together in the establishment of a friendship—which, sadly, eventually frayed and disintegrated over the years in a spiral of further misunderstandings and complications and mutual disappointments.

And now, fifty years after that morning in 1957, Elizabeth Eckford is in that room, at a planned event, to speak with the latest generation of Little Rock students.

She had made this kind of appearance before,
and now she shared again
the lessons that she had learned to articulate:
deep wisdom,
harvested from grief and pain,
accumulated from determination and pride,
wisdom that she brought out
every time she spoke to students like these.

“Even a shy person can develop steel;
even the most ordinary can do extraordinary things.

Stand up for the most defenseless among you.

Reach out to someone being harassed; you might help save a life.”ⁱⁱ

It’s not easy to define what constitutes heroism anymore. Maybe it’s one of those things that “you know it when you see it.”

The king of Egypt gave an appalling and unacceptable order to the Hebrew midwives, an abominable decree from a paranoid, power-hungry king who, simply by issuing that decree, demonstrated a weak, twisted, unstable mind.

But he was the king. And so it was the law. And Puah and Shiprah broke the law.

The Bible says it was because they answered to a higher authority. But I find it hard to believe that that would be the only reason that a strong

and capable woman would decline to arbitrarily kill a newborn simply because of its sex.

How on earth is one who is so intimately familiar with life supposed to be able to administer death based solely on a horrifying bureaucratic regulation?

I can't help but imagine that those women—under that preposterously inhumane directive, quite apart from their belief in God and their hope in their peoplehood as God's covenant people— I can't help but imagine that those women needed to ask themselves only two questions:

What does it mean to be human?

And am I human, or not?

Am I willing to accept the consequences
of embodying my God-given humanity,
the fact of my being made in God's image?
Or not?

Human lives are always at risk of being swallowed up and flushed away by paranoid bureaucracies, and not just in distant, undeveloped countries dominated by cartoon dictators.

“Do not be conformed to this world,”
said the Apostle Paul to a diverse Christian community in Rome,
“but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,
so that you may discern what is the will of God—
what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

I would submit to you the consideration
that God invites us into a spirituality of claiming our humanity,
of paying attention and looking out for endangered people,
as embodied by six-year-old Miriam,

and her mother,
and the midwives,
and Pharaoh's daughter,
and Elizabeth Eckford,
and the once-hate-filled girl who walked behind her,
named Hazel,
who, as an adult, in repeated acts of self-abnegation
made appearance after appearance to say,
painfully, publicly,
in the face of derision and disbelief,
“I was wrong, I was a racist,
I'm so sorry, I wish I had never done it.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In a generation before Moses was born, God had manipulated events so that an Israelite named Joseph ascended to grand heights of power and relevance in the alien kingdom of Egypt, and was beloved by the Egyptian king.

But eventually, a new king arose over Egypt, one who did not know Joseph.

And with him, all the flimsy institutional memory, all the gentlemen's agreements, the deals sealed with a handshake and a trusting word, all the nostalgic and sentimental memories of good and deep and painful and transformative times endured together—all of that was lost.

Twelve centuries after the loss of that familiarity between the kingdoms of this world and the covenantal promise of God, Jesus and his disciples came into the district of Caesarea Philippi. And it was there that he asked them, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

And they said, “Some say John the Baptist; some say Elijah; some say Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.”

He said, “But who do *you* say that *I* am?”

In a world that is willing to sacrifice other people's children to political calculations,
who do you say that he is?

In a world where some people don't see how hurtful the symbols of hate and genocide are to those whose families have been brutally, torturously victimized under those symbols—but others see it very clearly, and fly those flags as deliberate, provocative threats—
who do you say that Jesus is?

In a world where it remains doggedly acceptable to treat some human beings as less than human, and some human beings as garbage,
who do you say the Son of Man is?

“I say you are the Messiah,” said Peter, “the Son of the living God.”

I say that you came to testify to the truth (John 18:37).

I say that you came not to judge the world,
but to save the world (John 12:47).

I say you came to call not the righteous
but sinners (Matthew 9:13).

I say that you came that they may have life,
and have it abundantly (John 10:10).

I say that you gave your life for the redemption of the people who nailed you to a cross. And I am one of them.

I say you are the one who will be there
for the outcast and the oppressed,
and with the atheist and the oppressor;
with the lowly and the arrogant;
that you give flawed people enough love
to last through any hell they are going through,
and you give repeat offenders a way to live

that says they don't have to keep doing
the same damnable things over and over.

I say you are the embodiment of the most important truth in the
universe: that God loves us—
this messed up, beautiful,
war-torn, peace-craving,
alienated, loving,
starving, compassionate,
inhumane, tender,
broken, altruistic, human world.

“I say you are the Messiah,” says Peter, “the Son of the living God.”

And Jesus says, I will build my church on that rock, and the gates of hell
will be no match for it.

Do not be conformed to this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,
so that you may discern what is the will of God—
what is good and acceptable and perfect.

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us:
prophets,
ministers,
teachers,
cheerleaders,
financial donors,
leaders,
caregivers.

I appeal to you therefore, siblings in Christ, by the mercies of God,
that we all learn to present ourselves as a living sacrifice,
holy and acceptable to God,

which is, in the way we treat one another,
the things we say about each other,
and what we are prepared to do for one another,
our spiritual worship.

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August 27, 2017

ⁱ David Margolick, *Elizabeth and Hazel: Two Women of Little Rock* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 266-67. All information in this illustration is gleaned from this book.

ⁱⁱ Margolick, *Elizabeth and Hazel*, 265.

ⁱⁱⁱ Vivian Counts paraphrasing Hazel Bryan in Margolick, *Elizabeth and Hazel*, 254.