

The Sympathizing Tear
(“He Was Crying, and She Took Pity on Him”)
Romans 12:1-3; Matthew 16:13-19; Exodus 1:8-2:10

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, he 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 bitumen 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

About 20 years ago there was a movie called *The Truman Show*, which I've seen described as a "psychological science fiction comedy-drama."ⁱ

I won't go through the whole plot, but *The Truman Show* invites you to imagine there's a round-the-clock reality show following the life of one guy—Truman—who since the day he was born has only known life in what he thinks is his seaside hometown. In fact, it's all a gigantic soundstage; there are thousands of hidden cameras around; everybody Truman knows is just an actor, acting; and even daytime and nighttime are really just special effects that are controlled by a production team.

Eventually, Truman comes to realize that the world he inhabits is artificial, and he knows there's got to be something real out there, and he realizes he needs to go beyond the boundaries in which he has lived his whole life. But of course the producers, especially the one who created the show and has been directing it for Truman's whole life, don't want that to happen.

Truman is going to have to go up against everything that that whole artificial world and the people who benefit from its existence can throw at him.

He gets on a sailboat and goes out onto the sea, of which he is terrified. The director causes a storm to come up; Truman survives; they call off the storm, and then the artificial clouds part in the artificial sky, and it looks like God is now smiling down on Truman.

But it isn't God. It's the forces behind the whole human-made construct.

And now at last, Truman has made it out onto the open water, not knowing where he is going but headed toward the horizon and feeling the wind of freedom in his hair, until

in one of the saddest scenes I've ever seen in a movie, with a sudden, disorienting sound of metal scraping metal, the boat's hull has crashed into what proves to be the wall of a giant dome, which had been painted on the inside to look like an endless horizon of sea and blue sky.

In an artificial world, even one designed to look like the prettiest day ever, there are always boundaries, always limits.

And then from somewhere up near the artificial sun, the voice of the director comes booming into the world to speak, for the first time, directly to Truman, and gently and lovingly tells him that here in this gigantic soundstage, he has everything he needs, and will always be safe, and wouldn't he rather just stay within the confines of his artificial world?

At one point Truman asks the disembodied voice in the sky who he is, and he answers.

And Truman says, then who am I?

The voice booms over the water to speak directly to Truman.

But it's only the voice of someone directing a false world in which there is no true freedom for Truman. It is a fabulous spectacle. But it is not the voice of God.

Maybe when Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?", and they tell him what people are saying—"John the Baptist; Elijah; Jeremiah or one of the prophets"—and then he asks them, "But who do *you* say that I am?",

he is leading them to ask the next logical question.

Jesus, if you are the messiah, then who does that make me?

If you were there when the Spirit swept over the unfathomable, deep waters, when the whole universe was dark as pitch, and brought light;

if while we were yet sinners—when I was still deliberately running away from you—you died for me;

if you gave yourself up for this world, and in so doing participated in the redemption of the people who nailed you to a cross;

if you are the one who will always be there for the outcast and the oppressed, there to give flawed people enough love to last through any hell they are going through, ready to give repeat offenders a way to live that says they don't have to keep doing the same damnable thing over and over;

if you are the embodiment of the most important truth in the universe: that God loves us;

if you are God with us;

if you are God with me, and you still love me after all of it—

then what does that mean that I am,

and what can I be? Or maybe the better question is, what couldn't I be, or what couldn't anyone be?

What artificial boundaries could possibly stand in the way of you leading me into a life rooted and growing in truth and goodness and kindness, and a generous love for every human being and all creation?

“Do not be conformed to this world,” Paul wrote to the Church 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.”

The Indonesian-born Chinese American poet Li-Young Lee has said, “The body is spirit, too. For me there is no materiality to apparent materiality. In our bodies, 3 billion cells a minute are dying and being reborn. So our bodies look solid, but they aren’t. How many minutes have just gone by and how many cells have died and been reborn? We’re like a fountain. A fountain of water looks solid, but you can put your fingers right through it. Our bodies look like things, but there’s no thingness to them. We’re forces of God.”ⁱⁱ

God’s love is channeled into the world through spiritual connections that are deeper and wider and more all-encompassing than our most sophisticated artificialities, our most triumphant industries, our most imposing governmental powers could ever devise.

The epic story of God’s people includes Joseph and his brothers winding up in Egypt, and Joseph had ascended to a very high position in the Pharaoh’s court.

But later, a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, the Egyptians, “Look, the Israelites are more numerous and more powerful than we are.

We’ve got to dominate those people and keep them down and not let them get any power—and we can’t let them escape, either.”

So the forced labor became harder and the treatment became worse. And they kept growing their families, which scared the daylights out of the Egyptians. Which only made the Egyptians become more ruthless and cruel.

And the king of Egypt gave this appalling order to the Hebrew midwives, saying when a Hebrew baby is born, if it’s a boy, don’t let it live.”

But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live, and they made up this great excuse when the Pharaoh brought them in for questioning:

“How come all these boys are still being allowed to live?”

And they said, “You know, these Hebrew women are tough, man. When they’re ready for the baby to be born it’s just boom; there you go! We can’t even get there in time. It’s the darndest thing.”

So then Pharaoh—how’s this for unhinged—commanded all his people, “Every boy born to the Hebrews, throw ’em into the Nile River.”

A baby was born to a Levite couple—those were the priestly people. The mother hid him for three months but eventually she could hide him no more. The Bible does not record the anguish and worry and tears of that woman, when in desperation she fixed up a papyrus basket, sealed it to make it float, and put the baby in it and put it among the reeds on the bank of the river. Words should not be necessary. Maybe there are no words for it.

Her daughter, the big sister of that baby, stood at a distance, to see what would happen.

Just then, Pharaoh’s daughter came down to bathe in the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to get it. And when she opened it, there was the baby.

And he was crying, and she took pity on him, and she said, presumably to her attendants, “This must be one of the Hebrews’ children.” I imagine the tone in her voice to be one of concern—“Look what Dad’s insane policy made somebody do.”

Then the big sister came up to Pharaoh’s daughter and, in one of the cleverest maneuvers of all time, said, “Shall I go and get you a nurse

from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?” And Pharaoh’s daughter said, “Yes.” So the girl went and called her mother—the baby’s own mother.

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

And when the child had grown, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and she took him into the palace to cherish as if he were her own son. She named him Moses, “because,” she said, “I drew him out of the water.”

God’s spiritual sovereignty extends over and throughout all physical reality.

We are like a fountain. A fountain of water looks solid, but you can put your fingers right through it. We are not just physical beings taking up space. We are forces of God.

There is an emotional thunderstorm at the core of the story of God’s love for humankind, and these girls and women tapped into it.

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”, asked Jesus.

And they said, “John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the prophets.”

“But who do you say that I am?”

And Peter said, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

And Jesus said, if that’s who I am, let me tell you who you are:

You are the rock upon which I will build my church, and not even Hell itself can stand in your way.

How amazing to consider that the axis of the history of God's salvation of humankind rests on a mother's broken heart, and a crying baby, and God's hope and expectation that somebody, anybody, will be like those girls and women living in the heartless, gutless, cowardly machinery of Pharaoh's cruel, exploitative, artificial world.

And that the ongoing story of salvation rests on the faithfulness of those who will follow Jesus into the world and respond as a human being ought to respond to the crying of the helpless ones in our midst.

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ⁱ I had gone to Wikipedia to see what it said, since all of these terms and more had occurred to me. I'm glad to see I wasn't the only one who needed more than one descriptor for it.

ⁱⁱ Li-Young Lee, *Book of My Nights* (American Poets Continuum #67. BOA Editions, 2001)