

WGUMC August 17, 2014 "A Basket Case"  
Exodus 1:8-14, 1:22-2:10

"They don't look like us. They don't talk like us. And they're going to overrun us. Boy, you give them an invitation and you wind up with an invasion. And it's only going to get worse, what with all those children. What are we going to do them? More to the point: how are we going to get rid of them?"

Now you might think that I've just been describing the current crisis on our southern border: the 57,000 unaccompanied minors who have crossed over into this country after fleeing violence in Central America. But I'm not. What I'm really talking about is the crisis in imperial Egypt, a long way away and a very long time ago.

Here we are at the beginning of the Book of Exodus. It's odd that the word *exodus* means "moving out" when the book starts with the Egyptians' fear about who has moved in. That would be Jacob and all his kin. Remember what happened in

Genesis, how Jacob's son Joseph got sold into slavery in Egypt. He eventually became Pharaoh's right-hand man. And in the midst of a great famine, Joseph sent word to his father in Canaan and begged him to move to Egypt.

In the Genesis story, Jacob agrees to go down to Egypt for much the same reason that immigrants come up here: He was desperate to provide for his family, and he heard that there was food and the prospect of a better life in a foreign land. Fortunately for him, Jacob didn't have to apply for a visa. He didn't have to pay a coyote or hide in a cattle car. Joseph had connections. And when Jacob and all his family arrived from Canaan, they received a royal welcome.

That's where Genesis ends. Then four hundred years pass by, and we're in a very different place as Exodus begins. Joseph's generation had long since died out and their welcome had worn out. As the Bible says, "a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph," and he feared the Jacob clan.

The clan had grown both in numbers and in strength, and the king was rightly worried about the possibility of armed rebellion. So he did what the Powers That Be always do. To keep these immigrants under control, he exploited their labor. And what was the Hebrew response to all this oppression? More and more procreation! Then the king got desperate and he had to decide. Let's try infanticide: "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile."

Now during this time, there was one Hebrew woman who gave birth to a boy and managed to keep him hidden for three months. Then she did exactly what Pharaoh commanded. She threw him into the Nile. But not without first putting him in a water-proof basket and setting him in the reeds close to the royal bathing beach, hoping against hope.

Sure enough, Pharaoh's daughter came down to take a dip. She must have been a teenager, because she jumped at the chance to break her father's rules by bringing that little

boy up out of the river. Can't blame her. She could never have known that the greatest threat to her father's throne was not an armed rebellion but a baby hiding in the bulrushes.

Moses' sister, possibly Miriam, was yet another rule-breaker at the river that day. She was standing at a distance, watching out for an opportunity to save her baby brother. And when Pharaoh's daughter brought Moses out of the water, Miriam jumped into action. Before you know it, she had arranged for their mother to nurse her brother. Not only that, she also got her mom on the palace payroll.

Oh how we love this story! It gives us a little of everything. We've got an evil villain: the king. We've got an oppressed people: the Hebrews. We've got the incredible beginning of a long fight for freedom. We've got secrecy, suspense, and a cute baby! In fact, I think we love this story most because the heroes in it are children. I know that I love how these two girls break the rules and outwit the system. I

love how they do it even though they don't really understand the system and aren't fully aware that it is stacked against them. And I love that they don't lose hope even in hopeless situations. Don't we all wish that we were more like them!

We are, in fact, more like baby Moses. We are all basket cases! Like baby Moses floating along in his basket, we can be pretty oblivious to what is going on around us. Oftentimes, we don't know and don't really want to know what kind of danger we are in. And so we choose to stay here in the river we call Denial (d' Nile).

On the plane to Colorado I was reading Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*. It's a book about industrialized agriculture, the feedlots and the meatpacking plants that supply the nations' fast food chains and school lunch programs. I won't go into any gory details, but it's hard to imagine how anyone can read that book and not decide to become a vegetarian. So my

advice: you better not read it. Stay in the basket. Don't get out of d' Nile.

Here, in the rushes by the river, we don't have to think about things like meatpacking plants or what's happening in the Middle East. The river is calm, our blanket is warm and dry, the basket is gently rocking, and we are falling asleep. So we can forget, for a while, the financial crisis we're in, the job stress we have, the parenting problems we face, the diagnosis we got, and the pain we feel.

Because we are basket cases, we can be like a baby, blissfully unaware of a lot of things, until something suddenly goes Bump! Something big and terrible makes our basket jump. We wake up and frantically look up. And what do we see? One of those infamous Nile crocodiles!

You know, I never thought about there being crocodiles in that river with baby Moses. But I shouldn't be surprised. There are plenty in the river of life. Now before we all panic, there's

something we need to know: there is Someone on the bank of the river, and that Someone is standing there, watching us and waiting for the opportunity to dive in and pull us out of d' Nile, so that we can live a new life. There's rebirth waiting for us on the far bank of the river.

I am so sorry that Robin Williams was unable in the end to see that Someone standing there ready to rescue him. But that's the evil of depression: it makes you incapable of seeing any better option. Which is why we need to surround ourselves with children. They help us see the options.

Moses' sister stood on the bank of the river long after her mother had gone home to grieve. Miriam kept standing there because she was still holding on to hope. Unlike her mother, she was not giving up on the situation. Because she was a child, she was better able to keep herself open to future options.

Now you know why the Bible says that we have to be a child in order to enter the kingdom. We have to be open, and for that, we need to learn from our children. Our kids are heading back to school, and as they do, they teach us that there are always options.

Do you remember what it felt like to start a new school year? You didn't know how it would go, but you knew it wouldn't be the same as last year. You'd get a new teacher, new classmates, new textbooks, and at the end of the year, you'd be a new person: older, maybe taller, definitely smarter. And every new thing you learned would give you new options.

We want every school kid—even the undocumented—to start out the new year with a backpack full of options and a basket full of hope. But why only school kids? Why do grownups and the long since graduated settle for anything less? O I know, there are lots of crocs that you can see that kids can't see, at least when you're paying attention to reality.

But remember that your vision is better only if your faith sees farther. By faith, you can just make out that there is Someone standing on the river bank who is watching you from a distance and has a smile for you, one that is even bigger than a crocodile's.

As I was finishing up the sermon last night, I called to talk to Atom Yee. Tomorrow he starts chemotherapy and radiation for the cancer in his neck and throat. Still thinking about what I was writing, I told him that he was a basket case, but that that wasn't such a bad thing. That just means that there is Someone watching him and even now plotting how to get him out of the river. In the meantime, there is danger. Oh yes, the risk is very real. The river can be awfully rough. But remember that the basket we are all in is full of love and hope, and as long as we are in this life, I promise you that it won't leak. God is good! All the time!