

## **“Mother River”**

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Texts: Exodus 2: 5-10 and Amos 5: 21-24

Once in a while, a person reads a chapter of a book and wants to just share the chapter as it is. Daniel Cooperrider in his book, *“Speak with the Earth and It Will Teach You”*, writes a most excellent chapter he calls “Mother River” in the book. He weaves beautifully the connection between life, river, biblical interpretation, resistance, and the power of women all in a few short pages. So, rather than quoting him at every turn, just know that Daniel Cooperrider is behind most of what I must share with you this morning. It’s a powerful chapter and I hope someday you read it for yourself. The main actor in this chapter is just any river, but the river Nile, the source of life for many, and the beginning of our Judeo-Christian story.

“River is our most natural, ready-to-hand metaphor for the journey of life because like our lives, river names that part of the flow of water that is between the beginning and the end. Derived from the Latin *riparia*, meaning the bank or the shore on either side of the river, river is at heart a liminal phenomenon, an in-

between things. The river separates the two banks, making room for the water to flow between them...carrying nutrients to the earth as arteries carry blood and energy in our bodies.” Did you ever think about a river that way? Like arteries, bringing life to wherever it goes. Sharing nutrients, and connecting one part of the body to another. To put it directly, rivers are life just as blood is life.

“Given the deep connection between rivers and life, it is not surprising that when we look at the cultures and languages that have been born along the banks of the world’s mighty rivers, in many of them, we find traditions and myths referring to river as mother – the Yellow River in China, known as “Mother River”; the Volga River in Russia, known as “The Mother of the Land”; the Rio Madre de Dios, the River of the Mother of God in the Andes. The Thai word for river in general, *mae nan*, translates as “water mother.” The Danube, the second longest river in Europe, has long been linked to the sacred feminine. Known as “Mother Danube,” she is associated with the Celtic Goddess Danu, the maker of creation itself and source of the river from which all life comes.”

Now we move to our scripture lesson from the book of Exodus, where Moses is also tied to a river. This time it is the Nile River. It is either the longest or the second longest river in all the world. It begins in the mountains of Burundi

or Rwanda, depending on which source is acknowledged as its headwaters. It flows for over 4,000 miles before emptying into the Mediterranean Sea. Today along the banks, over 300 million people from eleven nations find life. Nile is actually not the river's given name, but a Greek name. Originally, the river was revered in prayer, evoked as a goddess with the title "The Mother of All Humanity."

There is much to the Biblical story that precedes our chapter. It's important history, but after many good years of relationship between Hebrew and Egyptian, suddenly a "new king" (Exodus 1:8) comes on the scene and this person is afraid of the Hebrews and a possible uprising. "Wishing to secure his nativist base of support the new ruler identifies a common enemy, a scapegoat on which to focus society's fear and insecurity. In this case, it is the Hebrew immigrants farming the land. Out of fear, he first orders the workload of the Hebrews increased, and second, he orders their male children slaughtered, drowned in the Nile. Why is it that humans are so easily fearful of the other? Why do we need scapegoats, as we have throughout history – including in our own time? You can go through history and find numerous people along the way who really have done nothing, who have been slaughtered, maligned, persecuted, jailed – you name it – in the cause of protecting a fragile leader, dictator, or human subgroup. Why even

today we have scapegoats in the persons who are immigrants, LGBTQ+ folks, especially those transgendered.

How can Christians, a people whose faith finds its roots in this story of the people of Moses, or in the story of Jesus himself, or a host of other biblical stories of tribulation, martyrdom and other violence, how can we scapegoat others? And yet we do. Not just in Nazi Germany, or other “far away” places, but even here. Scapegoats for what purpose? To assuage an unfounded fear. We look with disgust at people like Pharaoh and Herod, and then in the blink of an eye are willing to do the same thing.

But as in every human story, amid genocide, humans find ways to resist. In the story of Moses, it is the women who lead this undercurrent of resistance and civil disobedience, beginning with Hebrew midwives and mothers who find ingenious ways to resist and defy the decrees of Pharaoh, and then ending with Pharaoh’s own daughter who secretly adopts the Hebrew child, Moses. “There is as rich irony here. While it’s men and male babies that the Pharaoh seems to fear the most, it’s the women and mothers who are actually the powerful, revolutionary players here.” That, too, repeats throughout history. Even in the Civil Rights movement, we often mention the work of the men, and their work

was important, but you can't tell me that without the strength of women, particularly in the black church, that the Civil Rights movement would have turned out the way it did.

As an aside, Exodus is the first time when matriarchal power rises up in resistance and gifts us with an alternative way of being. Genesis wasn't that way. "The Hebrew women confound the Pharaoh's fear and power with creativity and compassion. 'We weren't able to kill the babies like you've asked, dear Pharaoh,' they say with a wink. 'Hebrew women aren't like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive'" (Exodus 1:9).

Into the current of women-led political resistance baby Moses is born. Exodus 2 describes how, right after Moses was both his mother looked at him and she saw that he was a fine child. "The Hebrew reads more like, "she looked at the child and saw that it was good." Sound like anything you've heard before? Yes, it's the same words that are used by God in Genesis 1 to describe each of creation.

I'll invite you read the story for yourself, but Moses' mother then does many things to keep her child alive from hiding him, to making the basket, to – you guessed it – putting the basket into the arms of "The Mother of All Humanity", the Nile. Moses gets found by Pharaoh's daughter, and with the help

of Miriam, Moses' mother is chosen to nurse the child. "And so it was that Moses the great prophet was born from many mothers, including from the wide, dark, rich, life-giving tears of Isis, the River Nile, the mother of all Humanity."

What will be the story of this point in history, when we have a new set (or the same set?) of scapegoated persons? Will it again be the mothers and midwives, and other women who resist and eventually overcome the fearful, reactionary, destructive actions of men? Will people of faith honor our own traditions that have always been on the side of the scapegoated, the left behind, the hunted? Or, will we given into baseless fear, like Pharoah (and others like him) have done throughout history? What will be the American story? The 21<sup>st</sup> century story? Will Amos vision given to us in our other scripture today be fulfilled? Will there come a day when "justice and fairness will run like a river that never runs dry?"

Time will tell. But two things are true: 1) Faith history is on our side. It may take a while, but justice, mercy and love will prevail, and 2) This cannot happen without the faithful action of those with power, but even more importantly, with those whom society believes have little or no power. God is now, and has always

been, on the side of those persecuted, left out, left behind, cast aside... And in God's name that is where we must be as well.

Let justice roll, and the river never runs dry.

In the many, blessed names of our loving, merciful, rescue us from the bullrushes God. Amen.