

Exodus 2:1-10

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months. When 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. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

The 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. When 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. Then 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?' Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Yes.' So the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh'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. When 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.'

Matthew 2:13-15

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

"It's A Close Call"

Rev. Charles Schuster

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Children. She went to the hospital to give birth to a baby and came back from the hospital with triplets. Her four-year-old son took a look at his three sisters and told his parents, "We'd better start it right now, calling the neighbors because it's going to be a lot harder to get rid of these thing than it was the kittens." We have no desire to get rid of the children. We want them with us, and we're glad they're with us today as they are the first Sunday of every month, but especially today.

A child came to church, went to Sunday school, heard things that he had never heard before, told his parents, "I learned last Sunday, it's in the Bible, that the children of Israel built the temple, that the children of Israel crossed the Red Sea, that the children of Israel battled the Philistines, that the children of Israel made many sacrifices, and my question is, didn't the grownups do anything?" Well, the grownups here have done significant things. I had never been in a church that celebrated Children's Sabbath. This has gone on for a number of years, and it's a good thing. Why do we do it? We do it because they melt our hearts, because they turn us around, and because they give us a sense of perspective.

Since we've been having children in the worship service the first Sunday of every month, we've learned some things from the children who are attending. Like the little girl who

was critiquing the worship service and said, "The music was nice, but the commercial was too long." I'm in charge of the commercial this morning. I'll try to get to the point. By saying the reason we have Children's Sabbath is best explained by an old man. George Burns lived to be a hundred. When he was ninety-eight, he said, "I am in love with the future." That's why we have Children's Sabbath here. We are in love with the future, and we are aware of how important the children are, because we understand what happens when they are protected, and we understand what happens when they are not. So I want to share with you three stories, legends. Three children who were saved because somebody cared. And if they had not been saved, it would be very different for us in our spiritual journeys today.

It was a close call. If it hadn't been for Miriam, there would have been no sense that God is the God of all people. Have you ever felt left out? Have you ever felt ignored or forsaken? It's an old story. Merilee Zednick in her book *Catch the Wind* tells the story. It's a beautiful parable. Everyone was happy at the birthday party except this one little boy. He had all the usual problems shy little boys have. He wanted to be part of everything and have fun, but he just couldn't. He got himself all tied up inside. He couldn't bring himself to reach out to the others. So even at times when he should have been happy, he wasn't. He wanted to reach out, to be part of things, he just didn't know how. At the birthday party, one of the other boys picked up a balloon and tapped it to one of his friends, but balloons don't always go where they're tapped, and the wind took the balloon on its way until it touched the shoulder of the shy little guy. He didn't know the balloon wasn't tapped for him and for the first time in his life, he felt like he was part of something, and really thought someone had tapped the balloon to him. He took the balloon and with great excitement, he tapped it back. Soon he was playing with the others. The balloon that really wasn't meant for him meant the world to him. Have you ever felt left out?

Moses was an infant. Pharaoh was the king, as the story goes, who wanted to kill the Habiru babies. Moses' sister, when they put the baby in the basket in the water, Moses, his sister Miriam watched, and Miriam got him out of the water, saved his life. Habiru means left over. A derivative of that word is Hebrew, it means left out. Moses grew up. Moses led his people, helped his people to discover Yahweh, God. "I am that I am" God. "I am with you" God. "You are my people" God. "I am your God." God is the God of all people. If it hadn't been for Moses, we wouldn't know that God is the God of all of us. If it hadn't been for Moses, there would have been no Job to show us that bad things happen to good people and God doesn't cause them. If it hadn't been for Moses, there wouldn't be a Jonah, who from the belly of a fish directed care and concern for the enemy. If it hadn't been for Moses, there wouldn't have been a Mound Sinai or the Ten Commandments. If it hadn't been for Moses, there would have been no "unto us a child is born." No Isaiah, no Messiah, no Hallelujah Chorus, and the people would have been left out. Moses, in effect, was the balloon that reached the little boy at the party. God, the God of Israel, is the God of all people. Almighty God. All-powerful God. God of the Ten Commandments. God of Justice God. The God, Rabbi Sasso said, who paints leaves bright colors in the fall and makes the sun warm in the spring because God likes changes.

A little child, her father was a TV announcer, she was invited to say a prayer at a friend's house for a meal, to say the blessing, and she gave a blessing that would have made God and her father the TV announcer proud. She cleared her throat, she looked at her watch, and she said, "The food, friends, is coming to you through the courtesy of Almighty God." It was a close call, but Moses was drawn from the bulrushes by Miriam his sister. And because of her, we know that God is the God of all people. She cared about the child.

Secondly, there were three wise men, the Magi, they came to see the Christ child. Herod had sent them. Herod was jealous and threatened, and he wanted to kill two-year-old babies, so the story goes. "Find the child and come back and tell me where the child is." It was a close call. I think it was the Magi who first told the parents to take the child to Egypt. Then the angel appeared and they did. The Magi went back to Iran, but they went a different way. They didn't tell Herod. It was a close call, but they saved the child. Have you ever needed God? Have you ever felt the need of the love of God? Have you ever felt the need of forgiveness from God?

Like the child, the junior-high girl, asked in Sunday School, "Would you rather be good, or would you rather be beautiful?" and she said as she thought about it, "I'd rather be beautiful and then repent." She believed in the God of forgiveness, not the God of law. Not the rigid God who demands, but the God who understands. A God who sent a child, a son, to run with us and to see what it is to be human. A God who knows temptation, who knows sin, and who understands and is with us.

Dan Clark wrote a book entitled *Puppies for Sale*. It's a book of stories. One of the first stories is the one he wrote, and it's entitled "Puppies for Sale." That's the title of the book. you probably read it. A sign goes up in the window: Puppies for Sale. A little child sees it. "How much are those dogs?" And the owner looked at the kid and said, "Well, I won't take anything less than a hundred and fifty dollars." He reached into his pocket, he pulled out some cash, he looked up at the man, he said, "I've got twelve dollars thirty-seven cents. Can I look at them?" and the man whistled. And then from the kennel came these dogs running, one big dog and five little balls of fur. And one little puppy that was lagging and limping. "What's wrong with that puppy?" "The vet says he has no hip socket, and he will always have to limp." "I want him," said the boy. "No, you don't want that dog. I'll just give him to you, you don't have to pay." The boy walked up close to the store owner, there was passion in his voice and anger. He said, "I don't want you to give him to me. He's worth as much as any of the others. Tell you what I'll do. I'll give you what I have, and I'll give you a dollar a week until I have him paid for." "Listen, son, you don't want that dog. He's never going to be able to run and jump and play like the other dogs." The child pulled up his pantleg and it revealed a badly twisted leg, two of them, and two steel braces. "See mister, I don't run so well myself, and that little dog needs someone who understands."

You know, one child was saved because he grew up to preach the Good News to the poor, and release to the captives. Because he brought the Beatitudes, because he said, "Happy are those who mourn, and blessed are those who do what is right," and he said,

"Happy are the merciful." Because he showed us a God of mercy and a God of love. Because he believed he was God on earth, and we come to see that now. We understand, because we've seen him, what God is like. Forty years ago, Malcolm Boyd wrote a book, *Are You Running With Me, Jesus?* That translates into, "Are you running with me, God? When I fall down, are you there to help me up? When I fail, are you there to remind me to try again? And when I grieve, are you there present with me to shed my tears and share them? And when I die, will you show me that there's nothing to fear? And that there's more to life than death?"

It was a close call, but had the Magi not been wise men, and had Mary and Joseph not taken their son to Egypt, there would have been no Sermon on the Mount. There would have been no Parable of the Prodigal Son. There would have been no *agape* love that is unconditional. God loves us when we're good and God loves us when we're not. It was a close call. If some hadn't cared about a child, Moses would not have lived and there would be no sense of God Almighty, the God of all of us. And if someone hadn't cared about a child, Jesus would not have lived and there would have been no sense of the God of grace, and the God who loves us. So we have God Almighty, and the commandments, and the God of Law. And we have the God of *agape*, we have the God of the Beatitudes, and we have the God of love. And that can be confusing, because these are two sort of separate Gods. The God of Law and the God of Love. And religion can be confusing. Some still think that Noah's wife was Joan of Arc. And some still do think that an epistle is the wife of an apostle. And some still think that the fifth commandment is "Honor your mother and father." So it can be confusing indeed.

But while there's a big part of religion that we have to confess we don't understand, there is a need to make sure there is something that does make sense to us. Something about the grace of God and the judgment of God. Something about faith that leads to good works and good works that lead to faith and relevance to life, to real life. Down-to-earth life. It was Gandhi who said, "Faith is not something you grasp, but it is a state you grow into." And Sally Quinn put it his way, she said, "I have faith that it's not what you believe, but how you live your life that matters." There was someone who helped bring us together, the God of judgment and the God of grace. The God of law and the God of love. But it almost didn't happen. Again, it was a close call. There was a fire. It was a five-year-old. He was the son of a preacher. We're not sure what happened or how it happened, but there was a fire in the parsonage house. It isn't clear how it started. Now, his daddy the preacher was not popular. Hard sermons, you know. Did you ever want to get at one of the preachers? You know they did. May the congregation members started the fire, we just don't know for sure, but members of the family were able to escape, and it was a big family, except for one, the five-year-old boy. Legend has it that a farmer came over with the others to help put the fire out, and this one farmer happened to see the little five-year-old in the window on the second floor. Several neighbors then climbed on each other's backs and reached up to the second floor, and one of them put out their arms and pulled that little boy out of the fire to safety. Moments after the rescue it is said that the fire blew up and exploded, and the house exploded in flames. It was a close call, but that five-year-old, John Wesley, he was saved. He was saved, and he grew up and became a preacher in the Church of England, and then his idea to wake up his own

church, the Church of England, led to our church, the Methodist. He thought you could believe in God Almighty and you could believe in the God of grace. He thought you could have strong convictions, but other people could have strong convictions, that we could think and let think, as long as you understand that God requires social holiness. As long as you understand and believe that God is present to us, and not distant from us, and as long as you believe that you do not have to look at your life as if it's pre-destined, that we are in charge of our own spiritual destiny. Let us think and let think. Let us work together to transform the world. Let us move on to perfection. Let us be enthusiastic about God, but let us channel our enthusiasm to do some good.

John Wesley's mother never forgot that event when her son was five years old and the neighbors saved his life. Susanna would quote frequently that passage in Zephaniah that says, "Is it not a brand plucked from the fire?" It was a close call. But if it hadn't been for John Wesley, there would have been no balance between Scripture and tradition on one hand, reason and experience on the other. There would have been no taking our spiritual life seriously, but taking our religious life joyously. There would have been no focus on prayer in the quiet times, but action in times when our creed must match our deed. John Wesley, Methodist. That was a close call. And you know, when you think about it, as Judeo-Christian Methodists, it was a close call because we would be very different people. You know if you think about it, if it hadn't been for a young woman who helped pull Moses out of the basket in the water, there would never have been the idea of God Almighty, the God who judges all of us.

And if it hadn't been for the wise men who protected Jesus from the contract on his life made by Herod, and hadn't gone back a different way and urged his parents to take him to Egypt, there would never have been the idea of the God of compassion and love. And if it hadn't been for a farmer who saw a five-year-old in the window, in a fire in England, there would not have been John Wesley to bring together the God of love and the God of mercy, the God of justice, faith and action. And so this morning, you and I will come to the table to receive Communion, and we may remember the child when asked, "Why do you believe in God?" who said, "I don't know. I guess it's just something that, you know, runs in our family." And we can be thankful, over the years past, that people have cared about children when it was a close call. And now we have Children's Sabbath, to remind us how important our children are for what they will be able to do with their faith and the future. We have Children's Sabbath. And we lift up the importance of children. Because like George Burns, we Judeo-Christian Methodists, we are in love with the future, and these are the children who will make it. Let us pray.

O God, who so loved the world that you gave us your child, we who love the future, may the children come to us as they came to him, and may they have their chance to build their future, just as we adults have had our chance to build ours.