

Lucia Lloyd's sermon

Gayl Fowler sent me an e-mail last week that said, "Lucia, I am doing an exhibit on Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth and saw a reference that they are in the Episcopal book of saints for July 20th. I would like to see it if you have a copy at the church and would appreciate any comments from you on how it is used." I wrote back and said "yes, indeed!" As I mentioned to Gayl, the Episcopal book of saints contains a one-page biography of each saint as well as a prayer and some scripture readings related to the saint. They can be used either in a worship service or in private devotions. Before I showed the book to Gayl, I reread the biographies of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. It notes that Harriet Tubman was called "the Moses of her People." It notes that Sojourner Truth was called "Miriam of the Later Exodus," a reference to Miriam's role in leading people through the Red Sea and rejoicing with them at their escape as she leads the singing and plays the tambourine. I thought of the two of them as I read the Old Testament passage for today.

Today's passage from Exodus 1 and 2 features five people who are in one way or another practicing resistance to oppression. All five of the people who act in this passage are female. Even in the middle of the horrifying slaughter of these babies, we get the midwives Shiphrah and Puah, who have been commanded by the king of Egypt himself to kill every boy at birth, and who are summoned by the king when they do not obey him, and even when the king knows they have disobeyed him and asks why, Shiphrah and Puah have enough courage and enough chutzpah to say to the king, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." They disobey the king and then lie to his face and get away with it. And, verse 20 tells us: "So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families."

Moses' mother benefits from the courage of these midwives who risk their lives to preserve the life of her son. She sees that he is a fine baby and watches him grow for three months. When she can hide him no longer she makes the basket for him out of

papyrus, plastered with bitumen and pitch and puts him among the reeds. It is a desperate measure, but also a hopeful one, to risk what she loves so dearly for the slim chance that he might have a better life.

Moses' sister Miriam, the fourth actor in this passage, is at this point watching to see what will happen. When Pharaoh's daughter finds the child and takes pity on him and says, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," the young Miriam seizes the opportunity. Plenty of people can feel sorry for the suffering of the oppressed, and sigh, and go back to their regular lives. What Miriam does is make the connection that pushes Pharaoh's daughter to actually do something about the suffering of the oppressed. Miriam pipes up and says, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" Miriam is asking the Pharaoh's daughter to act in direct defiance of her own father. Her father has commanded that these babies be killed, and getting a Hebrew nurse for the baby is about as disobedient as she could possibly be. And Pharaoh's daughter says, "Yes."

What we have in this passage is five women who refuse to be intimidated. The Harvard history professor Laurel Thatcher Ulrich says, "well-behaved women seldom make history" and she's right. We can add to that: "well-behaved women seldom make scripture." There are plenty of people who talk about this passage in Exodus as a myth. But as I read about these five women with Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth in my mind, I realized that if I heard the story of Tubman's life in another context, it would also sound like a myth. If I heard the story of Sojourner Truth's life in another context, it would also sound like a myth. Their stories and the stories of these five women in Exodus have a lot of similarities. Their stories and the story of Moses' life have a lot of similarities.

Here's the life of Sojourner Truth, as recorded in the Episcopal book of saints, Lesser Feasts and Fasts.

Isabella was the next-to-youngest child of several born to James and Elizabeth, slaves owned by a wealthy Dutchman in New York. For the first 28 years of her life she was a slave, sold from household to household.

She fled slavery with the help of Quaker friends, first living in Philadelphia, then New York, where she joined the Mother Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church when

African-Americans were being denied the right to worship with white members of St. George's Church in Philadelphia. Belle (as Isabella was called) became a street-corner evangelist in poverty-stricken areas of New York City, and quickly realized people needed food, housing and warm clothing. She focused her work on a homeless shelter for women.

When she was about 46, Belle believed she heard God say to her, "Go East." So, she set out for Long Island and Connecticut. Stopping at a Quaker farm for a drink of water, she was asked her name. My name is "Sojourner," Belle said. "What is your last name?" the woman asked. Belle thought of all her masters' names she had carried through life. Then the thought came: "The only master I have now is God, and his name is Truth."

Sojourner became a traveling preacher, approaching white religious meetings and campgrounds and asking to speak. Fascinated by her charismatic presence, her wit, wisdom, and imposing six-foot height, they found her hard to refuse. She never learned to read or write, but quoted extensive Bible passages from memory in her sermons. She ended by singing a "home-made" hymn and addressing the crowd on the evils of slavery. Her reputation grew and she became part of the abolitionist and women's rights speakers' network.

During a women's rights convention in Ohio, she had listened for hours to clergy attack women's rights and abolition, using the Bible to support their oppressive logic: God had created women to be weak and blacks to be a subservient race. Sojourner gave the speech for which she is best remembered: "Ain't I a Woman."

Here's the book's biography of Harriet Tubman, "Moses of her People."

Harriet Ross, sometime during 1820 on a Maryland Chesapeake Bay plantation, was the sixth of eleven children born to Ben Ross and Harriet Green. Although her parents were loving and they enjoyed a cheerful family life inside their cabin, they lived in fear of the children being sold off at any time.

Harriet suffered beatings and a severe injury, but grew up strong and defiant, refusing to appear happy and smiling to her owners. To cope with brutality and oppression, she turned to religion. Her favorite Bible story was about Moses who led the Israelites out of slavery. The slaves prayed for a Moses of their own.

When she was about 24, Harriet escaped to Canada, but could not forget her parents and other slaves she left behind. Working with the Quakers, she made at least 19 trips back to Maryland between 1851 and 1861, freeing over 300 people by leading them into Canada. She was so successful, \$40,000 was offered for her capture.

Guided by God through omens, dreams, warnings, she claimed her struggle against slavery had been commanded by God. She foresaw the Civil War in a vision. When it began, she quickly joined the Union Army, serving as cook and nurse, caring for both Confederate and Union soldiers. She served as a spy and scout. She led 300 black troops on a raid which freed over 750 slaves, making her the first American woman to lead troops into military action.

In 1858, she moved to upstate New York where she opened her home to African-American orphans and to helpless old people. Although she was illiterate, she founded schools for African-American children. She joined the fight for women's rights, working with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, but supported African-American women in their efforts to found their own organizations to address equality, work, and education.

When you read the life story of Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, the stories of people in Exodus don't seem so hard to believe, do they? Was God at work in the lives of Saint Sojourner Truth and Saint Harriet Tubman? Yes indeed. Was God at work in the lives of Shiphrah and Puah, Miriam and Moses' mother, and Pharaoh's daughter? Yes indeed. Is God at work in our lives? Yes indeed.