

The Birth of Moses: Children at Risk

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, August 22, 1999. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 1:8-2:10.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

“A new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” No longer could the Children of Israel claim privileges as they had when Joseph was alive. No longer could Egyptians remember Joseph and all he did for their nation. No longer did they remember the special privileges given to the Children of Israel by a Pharaoh who had long gone the way of all flesh. *Yes, and a new culture has arisen in the United States.* No longer can the Christian church claim privileges as we once did. There was a time, not too long ago, when our culture paid deference to the Christian church in general and the Protestant church in specific. *The Bible was read* in Public schools and it was nearly always the Protestant Bible, the King James Version. We began the school day reciting *the Lord's Prayer*. And Christians had advantages over non-Christians when it came to hiring and firing. Christians usually got the nod over Jews, and Protestants got the nod over Catholics. There was a time when Protestant Christians had privileges: we could join country clubs and service clubs and fraternal organizations from which Catholics and Jews were excluded. But a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph and a new culture has arisen in the United States which no longer gives Christianity, let alone Protestant Christianity a privileged place.

Some of us can remember when this began to happen. There was a time when the only show in town on Sundays was the church. We had the *Pennsylvania Blue laws* which kept the town shut up on Sundays, except for the church. The *movie house* was locked up on Sunday. The *grocery stores* were closed. ^{*There were no Malls.*} No Sunday morning and afternoon soccer and baseball and football. The church had a monopoly on Sunday. *In my own home the monopoly came an end when we got our first TV around 1955.* On Sunday evening, the same time as church and youth group, *Lassie* was on the TV. For some strange reason I found *Lassie* far more interesting than Sunday evening church and youth group. I begged my mom and dad to stay home on Sunday to watch *Lassie*. My mother turned to my father and said, “What do you think Clarence?” Since my dad never did go to church on Sunday evening he said, “Let him watch *Lassie*.”

But the times have rapidly changed. Look at a week in the life of many a young person. It's *Monday* and Lindsay has just left school. She hurries through her homework before *ballet lessons*. After

ballet she takes tap and jazz dancing classes. Tuesday is piano lessons. Wednesday, Girl Scouts. Thursday, swimming. Friday, a movie with friends. Saturday morning is soccer. Saturday afternoon she works in a Convenient store to make a little money. When Sunday comes, it's nice to be able to sleep in. Sunday School and worship is optional. But Sunday afternoon there will be swimming and soccer and baseball. It doesn't take long for our children to learn what we value. And what they learn is that Christian faith no longer lays claim on us or our culture.

We're losing our sons and daughters to the Christian faith. We can't blame it all on our culture. We can't blame it entirely on parents. The church itself has to bear some of the blame. In a recent book reviewed in the August issue of *Presbyterians Today*, Leonard Sweet says that when children and young people tell us church is boring we ought to listen to them. The way we've always done it before isn't cutting it today. In the good old days we could count on our culture and the public schools to help us do what God has called the church to do. *We've got to find creative new ways, experiment...*

The average child spends over 900 hours a year in public school. They watch TV 1500 hours a year. They view 20,000 commercials. By the time they get to middle school they've witnessed 8,000 murders on TV. When they graduate from high school they will have seen 200,000 acts of violence. If those children are lucky, and they don't get sick, and they don't miss a Sunday, and their parents make them get up on Sunday morning they'll spend about 40 hours a year in Sunday School. How can we ever pass on the Christian faith to our children when we face those kinds of odds?

Friends, our sons and daughters are in acute danger perishing. Like those Hebrew babies, they're in danger of drowning. We're losing them. The cultural forces at work against us seem insurmountable. We need midwives like Shiphrah and Puah. We need people who dare to rebel against culture. Like what Melissa Claypoole was saying several weeks ago when she spoke to us. Rebels for Christ - like those Hebrew midwives who practiced civil disobedience to save Hebrew children. We need parents, like the parents of Moses, who will find creative ways to resist the culture of death that threatens our children.

In a few minutes (hours) the Gundrum family will gather in the chancel of the church. We will re-enact the miraculous deliverance of Moses from death and drowning. Like Moses, Eric will be taken to the water. Like Moses, Eric will be raised up from the water with the promise of new life and a new birth and with the hope of growing up to know, love and serve Jesus Christ within the church. After Eric

is ^{take} taking from the Nile, Bill and Cheryl will carry Eric down the center aisle where you will be invited to welcome him into the family of faith. You will become his nurses. You will become his teachers. He will grow up in the courts of Pharaoh, but he will remember what we have taught him here. We pledge by word and deed, with love and prayer, to raise him immersed in faith until he comes to confess Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. The gates of hell will never be able to prevail against that kind of rock bottom faith.

A young minister fresh out of seminary went to his first small town church. He knew just about everything there was to know about the Bible and theology and psychology and contemporary culture. At his first Christian education committee meeting he announced to the committee that he wanted to make some changes. "We're no longer going to teach young people to memorize the catechism and Bible verses." He talked with contempt about mindless memorization. "I want teachers to explain what those verses mean. If the children know what the verses meant they won't have to memorize." Margaret, one of the elders, interrupted him. She was a good woman and one of his strongest supporters. She said, "Pastor, we're not going to do what you want." He was shocked by the firmness of her resistance. "But Margaret, this is what's being recommended by leading experts in the church." "I don't care. We're not going to do that." "Why?" "Look, pastor. We love you. But there's something you need to understand. Most of our children drop out of church when they become teenagers. They get confirmed and we don't see them again. We lose them. Then they graduate from high school. They go off and get a job or join the service or go to college. Eventually, most of them get married and have kids. We hope that when that happens our young people will bring their children back to church. But from the time they leave this church until, we hope, they return, the only Bible they'll have is the one in their heads. That's why we're going to teach them to memorize the catechism and Bible verses. If it's in their minds and memories, someday it might get into their hearts. They might survive spiritually. They may even come back to the church when they realize how important faith in Christ is."

Eternal God, at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan you proclaimed him your beloved Son, and anointed him with the Holy Spirit. Grant that all who are baptized into his name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.