

## **“Following our Faith”**

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Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and faithful unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

“Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the LORD. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug...I will bring near my deliverance swiftly, my salvation has gone out and my arms will rule the peoples.”

This reminder that God promises deliverance and salvation is a good way to start our week, especially for those deeply concerned about justice. Isaiah reminds us that, particularly when we are concerned about justice, we should look to our God, to the rock that we can all count on. But the fact that the lectionary combines this passage with the story we heard from Exodus puts a different spin on this call to “look to the rock from which you were hewn.” On Mother’s Day, Linda asked us to think about the women in our lives who have been our rocks—the firm foundation on which we stand, the solid presence in our lives when everything starts to crumble. I still have the rock that I went out and found after that sermon; it sits on my altar at home.

So having had that experience of thinking of women as my rock, I was struck to be reminded to look to my foundation stone this week as I consider both the anniversary of women gaining the right to vote and this story of our female ancestors of faith. It seems that Isaiah is asking us to look to our foremothers, to the women rocks from which we were hewn, when we wish to pursue righteousness. They can teach us a lot.

The women in this story are remarkable, not because they were leaders, or warriors; they were mainly just regular people, following their faith. Let us set the stage: At that time, the Israelites lived in Egypt. But the Egyptians had become nervous about the number and strength of the Israelites. And so, the Egyptians oppressed the people they feared. But since the human spirit is strong and God supports the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized, the Israelites actually grew stronger under this oppression. So, the Egyptians enslaved them, beat them, and treated them with cruelty. When even that did not break their spirit, their tyrant leader, the Pharaoh, demanded that all of the first-born male children be slaughtered by the midwives. And this is where the women of our story come in.

The first two women I have preached about before: the midwives Shiphrah and Puah. They are Egyptians, so they have more power than any of the Israelites. But they are women in a male-dominated society, and their leader is cruel and unstable. If they don’t follow his orders, they could be beaten, enslaved, or killed. They could be ostracized by the rest of their society (remember, the story tells us that the Egyptians in general dislike and fear the Israelites). But Shiphrah and Puah feared God, meaning they knew and understood God’s laws. And so they quietly followed their faith and rebelled. They even lied to Pharaoh’s face, telling him that they couldn’t kill the babies because they Israelite women gave birth before they arrived. They cleverly used the little power they had—knowledge of how women give birth, knowing that this man wouldn’t know that they were lying—to do what is right. Thus, they saved an entire nation of children. Shiphrah and Puah are two of my rocks.

So, the Pharaoh goes even further over the edge of sanity and now enlists the help of his entire nation, telling them that every one of them is responsible for finding and murdering Israelite baby boys. Thus, he makes his entire nation culpable for murder. The mother of Moses, Jochebed, like all the Israelite mothers, is guided by love. Somehow, she is able to hide her baby for quite

some time. You can imagine the terror that she lived with every day, constantly wondering if she will be found out. With every sound that he made, she would start up and run to the window to see if an Egyptian was near. And you can imagine the terrible pain she felt, as she finally decided that her only hope would be to lay him in a basket in the river, and hope that he would float away to a more caring people—to people who valued life, no matter the ethnicity or race of the child. Her faith and hope in God and in the goodness of humans, despite constant evidence to the contrary is amazing. Jochebed is one of my rocks.

Now Moses does float down the river and is indeed found by a merciful woman. That woman turns out to be Pharaoh's daughter. She knows her father's decrees and she knows her people's hatred for the Israelites. Seeing a child in the Nile, she immediately recognizes that he must be an Israelite. She doesn't have a huge amount of power, even as the daughter of the Pharaoh, but she uses the power that she does have. Women's main role was to raise children, and so she uses the role society gives her and her power as the daughter of a leader to save this child. Not only does she save him, but she is willing to actually pay an Israelite woman to nurse him for her. Her mercy, her sense of justice, her willingness to use her privileges for justice are all models for those of us in a more privileged place in society. Pharaoh's daughter is one of my rocks.

But we can't forget Moses' sister, Miriam. In the hopes of bringing back good news to her mother and worry for her brother, she had hidden in the reeds to watch what happened to him. And when she sees that Pharaoh's daughter is willing to save him, she cleverly offers her mother as a nurse for the baby. Thus, mother and baby are reunited; the faith and hope of Moses' mother are answered and she is able to care for him a while longer. Miriam's cleverness and quick-thinking comfort mother and child and help to undermine a tyrant's orders. Miriam is one of my rocks.

Together, these women form a conspiracy that saves the life of Moses—the man who eventually becomes a prophet and helps lead them all to freedom. Most of them don't know that they're working together. They all simply do what is right and they follow their own rock—their faith in their God. Perhaps importantly for us, most of them are ordinary women, rebelling quietly against the hatred, fear and division of their country by choosing love and life.

These are powerful lessons that can guide all of us. You may not feel that you have much power, but you do have some. Look at your own spheres of influence—what knowledge do you have that you can use? What gifts of mind, heart or body? What rights as a citizen or green card holder can you use to make our world more just and whole?

“Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the LORD. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug...” The quarries of courage, love, faith, hope, mercy, justice, and cleverness. Let them remind us that we are made from hard stuff and, no matter how small and insignificant we may seem, our small acts of faith can be enough to change the world. Amen.