

“A Hebrew Son Cast into the Nile”

Exodus 1:22-2:10 (text); Matt 1:18-23; 2:1-2, 10-16; Acts 7:17-22; Heb 11:23-26

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Beloved congregation of Christ: Every Advent season, Christians usually think of an endearing image of baby Jesus sweetly sleeping in a lowly manger. But another cute baby image that comes to mind is baby Moses in a basket floating along the River Nile.

Yet, these two images are brought together as great markers in redemptive history. Today, we begin our 2013 Advent series, “Christmas in Exodus,” as a follow-up from last year’s “Christmas in Genesis.” The Book of Genesis ends with the death of Joseph, who became the second most powerful leader in Egypt. In his last words, Joseph was hopeful that his Hebrew family will return from Egypt to the Promised Land, *“I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob... and you shall carry up my bones from here”* (Gn 50:24-25).

The Book of Exodus continues with confidence from Genesis, *“But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them”* (Ex 1:7). But verses 8-14 follows with ominous words, *“Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, ‘Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us’”* (verses 8-9). So this king enslaved the Israelites even more ruthlessly, and made their lives bitter with hard service. Worse, this Pharaoh schemed to control the number of Israelites in Egypt by ordering the Hebrew midwives to kill their infant boys as soon as they were born (verses 10-21). But the midwives refused to kill them, and the Hebrews continued to multiply, so Pharaoh commanded all the Egyptians, *“Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live”* (verse 22).

In the midst of these fearful events, Moses was conceived and born (Ex 2:1). Our text says, *“when they saw that he was a fine child,”* the parents devised a way to save his life. They hid him for three months, then made a water-tight basket, put the infant in it, and floated it down the Nile. Eventually, Pharaoh’s daughter rescued the baby from the river, and she adopted him as her son, naming him *Moses*, saying, *“Because I drew him out of the water”* (Ex 2:10).

This Lord’s Day, our theme is, **“A Hebrew Son Cast into the River Nile,”** which we will meditate upon in three points: (1) **“Conceived and Born of a Woman”**; (2) **“A Fine Child, Beautiful in God’s Sight”**; and (3) **“Drawn Out of the Water.”**

“CONCEIVED AND BORN OF A WOMAN”

In God’s providence, Pharaoh was concerned mainly with many Hebrew boys growing up in Egypt to be able-bodied men forming a great army against Egypt (Ex 1:10). He allowed the Hebrew girls to live, but ironically, women—the Hebrew midwives, Moses’ mother and sister, and Pharaoh’s own daughter—figured prominently in saving Moses from death. These women were not afraid of

defying Pharaoh's order. The midwives devised a clever reason why they did not kill the male infants. Moses' mother was courageous in hiding her baby for three months. And Moses' sister, a slave girl, was bold enough to speak presumptuously to Pharaoh's daughter. All these women became part of God's preservation and then redemption of his people from slavery in Egypt.

Even more ironic is the involvement of Pharaoh's own daughter in rescuing Moses from the river and raising him as an Egyptian (verses 1-10).

Verse 1 only says that Moses' parents were from the tribe of Levi. But Numbers 26:59 names them Amram and Jochebed, the daughter of Levi – through many generations – who was born in Egypt. Their children were Aaron, Moses and Miriam. Jochebed *“conceived and bore a son,”* a term frequently used in the Bible for the birth of important men – good and evil – in redemptive history. For example, Sarah conceived and bore Abraham's son Isaac (Gn 21:2), Hannah conceived and bore Samuel (1Sm 1:20). All of them were conceived and born of human parents, parents who bore the mark of sin from our first parents Adam and Eve.

But our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was born of a human mother, but not of a human father. In the account of the birth of Jesus, Luke says the angel Gabriel announced to Mary about an infant son, *“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus”* (Lk 1:31). But how, Mary asked, would she conceive when she doesn't have a husband? And the angel assured her, *“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God”* (Lk 1:35). Jesus' father will not be a human father, but the LORD God himself, through the Holy Spirit.

Why is this important? God promised Adam and Eve a Seed, who, in the fullness of time, will be *“born of woman, born under the law”* (Gl 4:4) to crush the serpent's head (Gn 3:15). This Seed will be fully man, so a man himself could bear the sin of the man Adam. He will be fully God, because the Eternal Son of God is the only One who could bear God the Father's eternal wrath against man's sin. As a man, Jesus the Seed of the woman will be *“made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people”* (Hb 2:17). He will not be *“a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin”* (Hb 4:15).

Could Moses' parents have seen him as “a fine child” because of his future role as Israel's savior?

“A FINE CHILD, BEAUTIFUL IN GOD'S SIGHT”

Exodus 2:2 tells us that the reason why they hid him for three months was because they saw him as “a fine child” (KJV: “goodly”; NASB: “beautiful”). What did they see in him that they would risk their lives in defiance of Pharaoh's decree?

Maybe he really was a beautiful baby. In the opening verses of Exodus 1:7, the Israelites in Egypt were described as “fruitful” and “multiplied,” echoing back to the Genesis creation account. And after each creation day, God pronounced what he has made as “good.” Therefore, some scholars believe that Moses, just like God's original creation, was “good” and “beautiful.”

Calvin thought that they saw something in the infant that was different, “there was some mark, as it were, of future excellency imprinted on the child, which gave promise of something extraordinary.” Maybe they thought, like all the other Hebrew parents, that their baby might be the one promised by God to Joseph who would redeem them from slavery in Egypt.

King Saul was also physically “beautiful,” the most handsome, tallest man in all of Israel (1Sm 9:1-2). So the people chose him as king, much like how most Filipinos choose their leaders. But when God rejected Saul after he violated God's commands, he told Samuel, “*Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart*” (1 Sm 16:7). What is most important to God is the goodness of the heart, not the good looks.

Our Lord Jesus Christ as a young man was also a “fine child.” Luke describes him as he grew up in Nazareth, “*And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him*” (Lk 2:40). Later, Luke says “*And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man*” (Lk 2:52). Surely, these words not only describe his favorable spiritual and intellectual growth, but also his physical appearance. When Stephen preached the gospel, he also described Moses as “*beautiful in God's sight*” (Ac 7:20; cf Hb 11:23).

But as our Suffering Savior, was Jesus “beautiful”? Isaiah's descriptions are not very pleasant:

“As many were astonished at you – his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind” (Is 52:14).

“he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Is 53:2).

As beautiful as Jesus was during his youth, he had no beauty before man and God as he suffered during his earthly ministry. He was “despised” by his neighbors, and his gospel was “rejected” by his fellow Jews. God himself made him undesirable before men, “*we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted*” (Is 53:3, 4).

Yet after he has finished his atoning work of “*offering for guilt*” on the cross, he will again be beautiful in God's sight: “*he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied*” (Is 53:10-11). After he arose from the grave, he ascended into heaven, and awaits his return to gather the church, his Bride, to heaven. There, Christ the Bridegroom will shine in glorious splendor:

*You are the most handsome of the sons of men;
grace is poured upon your lips;
therefore God has blessed you forever.
Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one,
in your splendor and majesty! (Ps 45:2-3)*

It was Jesus' mission to redeem his people from sin. It was also for the purpose of redeeming his people from slavery in Egypt that Moses was “drawn out of the water,” the River Nile.

“DRAWN OUT OF THE WATER”

After Pharaoh's daughter drew the basket out of the river, she named the infant child “Moses,” which in Hebrew sounds like the verb *mashah*, which means “to draw out.”

Because of Pharaoh's edict that “*every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile*,” the river must have been a graveyard of so many Israelite infant sons. This is also why Pharaoh's daughter knew that the baby in the basket was a Hebrew baby boy. Why then would the parents of Moses put him in a basket to float down the river to preserve his life? Surely, if Pharaoh's men found the basket, Moses would surely have been killed.

The best possible explanation would be that the mother knew where and when Pharaoh's daughter usually bathe in the river. And she planned to float the basket near where the princess bathed in the river. This is also why she sent her daughter to spy on the baby, and even instructed her what to say to Pharaoh's daughter when the baby is found.

The Exodus narrative does not say anything about how Moses was raised by Pharaoh's daughter, but Stephen the deacon says that he was “*instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds*” (Ac 7:22).

So then all of Pharaoh's wicked schemes backfired against him, because this Hebrew son who was cast into the Nile became the Hebrews' redeemer from Egypt. Throughout Biblical history, wicked kings have always plotted and raged against God and his Anointed Son. They persecuted and martyred God's faithful servants with all kinds of savagery:

Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated... wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth (Hb 11:35-38).

When this brutality did not work, the devil uses false teachings and deception. The psalmist saw all of these, “*Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?*” But the LORD laughs and ridicules Satan and his evil people, “*He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.*” In the end, God in his wrath will command his King to utterly destroy his enemies, “*You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel*” (Ps 2:1-9).

This is why King Herod also schemed against God as he tried to thwart God's salvation plan for his people. After he was tricked by wise men from the East who came looking for the One “*born king of the Jews*,” Herod ordered the slaughter of Bethlehem's infant boys two years old and younger. Like Pharaoh, Herod raged and plotted in vain against God's Anointed. But the LORD preserved his Son by sending an angel to lead Joseph and Mary and their Son Jesus safely into Egypt.

Ironically, the ancient *house of bondage* of Jesus' forefathers had become the *house of refuge* of his family. And when the baby Jesus returned from Egypt to Nazareth, Matthew calls the event a fulfillment of Hosea's prophecy, “*Out of Egypt I called my son*” (Hos 1:11; Mt 2:15). Jesus is now the

true Israel, the true Son of God who came out of Egypt, this time to rescue his people from another kind of slavery: spiritual slavery to sin.

This image of redemption from sin goes all the way back to two events in mankind's story in which salvation is pictured as being saved through water. The first is Noah's ark during the great flood, *"in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water,"* which Peter compares to a "baptism" (1Pt 3:18-21). If Noah and his family were saved through water by the ark, the baby Moses was saved through water by the basket. In Hebrew, the same word is used for Moses' basket and Noah's ark! ¹

The second event of salvation through water is the crossing of the Red Sea, during which Paul says, *"our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea."* Like Peter, Paul calls the crossing through water as a baptism, *"and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea"* (1Co 10:1-2).

In these two great events, the ark and the basket are foreshadows of our Lord Jesus Christ, who offered his body and blood to save his people from slavery to sin. Those on whom water was poured out or sprinkled were saved, while unbelievers were immersed in the waters of the flood and the sea and drowned. Baptism is the sign and seal that Christ has washed and cleansed our conscience from the guilt of sin. Our Trinitarian God saves us *"by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior"* (Tit 3:5-6).

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Brothers and sisters: What a comfort for all of us who are in Christ! All over the world—in Asia, Africa and the Middle East—Christians are being persecuted and martyred. Like Christ, they suffer in silence. And where there is no persecution and martyrdom of believers in the West and most parts of the world, believers are harassed, ridiculed and not tolerated. Unbelievers demand tolerance from Christians, but they do not want to tolerate the Christian faith. Preaching is more and more restricted by the day. Negative preaching against certain anti-Christian groups might mean closure of the church or lawsuits against the church and its pastor for "hate speech."

And we Reformed Christians face ridicule and scorn when we preach the importance of doctrine, Christ-centered preaching, church membership, fencing the Lord's Supper, and Biblical worship. Instead, false teachings of health and wealth, signs and wonders, new revelations and prophecies, social gospel, feminism, gay acceptance, pluralism, and other heretical and liberal views abound and are popular in evangelical churches.

But Christ has promised that the gates of hell, which bring death, shall not prevail against the church. Because he will destroy Satan and his kingdom in his wrath. As Martin Luther writes, "were not the right man [Christ] on our side... and he must win the battle... one little word shall fell him."

¹ The Hebrew word for Noah's ark is **תבה** (*tebah*), which occurs 23 times in Genesis, e.g., Genesis 7:1. The Hebrew word for Moses' basket is also *tebah*, occurring twice in Exodus (Ex 2:3, 5).