

SERMON TITLE: "Vigorous Women of God"  
SERMON TEXT: Exodus 1:8-10, 13 – 2:10  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: May 9, 2021 (Mother's Day & UMW Day) at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

Last Sunday I was gone from you because I was in Montana visiting my mom. I had to wait until both of us had our COVID vaccinations plus two weeks, but then it was high time for me to get up there to see her. It had been nearly two years since we were last together, so you can imagine how many good, long hugs we needed and gave each other.

At first, the visit was just going to be Mom and me. But then my older brother from North Dakota and my younger brother from Washington decided to come. In pretty quick order, we ended up having a family reunion of 41 people eating tacos in my cousin's large garage. I met one cousin I had never met before, and saw a couple of cousins that I hadn't laid eyes on in probably 40 years. Plus, of course, there were some spouses and children and grandchildren. I have to give my older brother, his wife, and my cousin a good deal of credit for instigating the taco dinner party. But it was my mom and my aunts who were the strong and determined ladies who organized the dinner and spread the news about the event. Even as I can see them aging and slowing down, those women in our family still had the vigor to bring us together in a powerful way.

Because today is Mother's Day and United Methodist Women's Sunday, I want to talk about strong women. I invite you to consider our scripture reading from Exodus chapters one and two and think about what it might mean to be "vigorous women of God."

### **1—HEBREWS HAD VIGOROUS WOMEN OF GOD**

The Bible story spells out this theme most clearly in Exodus 1, verse 19, where the Egyptian midwives are explaining to Pharaoh that "the Hebrew women . . . are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." Yes, the Hebrew women likely were vigorous in giving birth. Exodus 1:7 tells

us that “the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.” That’s why the new king was worried that the Israelites might become more numerous and overpower the Egyptians. That’s why the pharaoh ordered the Israelites into forced labor and oppressed them ruthlessly. And that’s why the pharaoh ordered the Egyptian midwives to kill the Israelite baby boys. No doubt the Israelite increases in population and strength all began because the Hebrews had so many vigorous women of God.

Exodus 2 gives a clear example of such a vigorous Hebrew woman. Moses’ mother, from the tribe of Levi, gave birth to a son during Pharaoh’s oppressive regime. Moses’ mother did what she could to save his life, hiding and caring for him for three months. When it was impossible to hide her baby any longer, she plastered a papyrus basket with waterproof pitch, and she placed the basket in the reeds on the bank of the river. We assume that Moses’ mother instructed Moses’ older sister to stand watch over him. Later, when the daughter of Pharaoh found baby Moses, his sister offered to find a Hebrew wet nurse, and Moses’ very own mother was able to raise him through his early childhood. When she finally had to give up her son, where did he go, but into the privileged family of a princess!

Moses’ birth mother was quite a vigorous woman of God! She outsmarted the cruel and inhumane system that was meant to oppress and destroy her people. Not only did she give birth and early life to the man who would later deliver their people from slavery, she also raised a vigorous and strong daughter, don’t you think? Can you imagine how much courage it would have taken for Moses’ sister to approach the Pharaoh’s daughter along the river and have that conversation? For sure, the Hebrew people produced and reproduced vigorous women of God.

## **2—EGYPTIANS HAD VIGOROUS WOMEN OF GOD**

I have to say, though, that it wasn’t only the Hebrews who had vigorous women of God. Obviously, the Egyptians had some pretty great and strong women too. When the pharaoh ordered them to kill the Hebrew baby boys at their birth, the Egyptian midwives resisted. Exodus 1:17 indicates

that the Egyptian midwives feared God more than they feared Pharaoh. They were willing to disobey their king's commands in order to do what they believed was right in the eyes of God. While they "blamed" the vigor of the Hebrew women for their inaction, the story makes it quite clear that the Egyptian midwives were not passive bystanders. They were intentionally and courageously heroic in their resistance to their government's oppressive and genocidal policy.

Exodus 1, verses 20 and 21, tells us that God blessed the Egyptian women for their positive behavior. "God dealt well with the midwives . . . and because the midwives feared God, [God] gave them families" too. Those Egyptian women were strong not just because they delivered their own babies into life, but because they used the power they had to resist evil and injustice on behalf of other people's children too. Because they refused to cooperate with a ruthless and cruel leader and his policies, the Egyptian midwives were vigorous women of God.

### **3—PHARAOH'S DAUGHTER WAS VIGOROUS WOMAN OF GOD**

Of course, among the Egyptians, it wasn't only the midwives who were vigorous women of God. The Pharaoh's own daughter also fits that category. When she saw baby Moses floating in the basket, she could have easily pushed him under the water and drown him—as her powerful father had ordered. But, like the midwives, the Egyptian princess resisted his murderous command.

These Bible verses don't mention that Pharaoh's daughter feared God like the midwives did. Maybe she was simply a rebellious teenager or a young adult who was asserting her independence from her father. Maybe the daughter of Pharaoh was operating out of a heartfelt sense of ethics that came from a different generational perspective or from her Egyptian culture. Maybe she had been raised and encouraged by a strong mother who had her own ideas, separate from her husband's. And/or maybe Pharaoh's daughter did have a spiritual sense from God about the value of *all* people—that even Hebrew lives mattered.

Whatever her reasons, the princess certainly did the right thing. Not only did she not drown baby Moses, Exodus 2:9 tells us that the princess even paid wages to Moses' birth mother, so she could afford to take good care of him! Talk about progressive economics and pro-family values! One of the greatest leaders of the Judeo-Christian faith, one of God's greatest servants ever, was thus nurtured and shaped by this Egyptian princess who not only refused to participate in genocide but also was willing to shift resources from her wealthy household to the working-class people of her land.

It's hard to tell how old Moses was when he finally came to live with the princess, but Exodus 2:10 tells us that she eventually took him into her household as her own son. She did not discriminate against him because he came from a foreign people. She adopted him as her own child, no doubt giving him an education and societal training that helped him become the strong leader of the Hebrews. The years he spent in her royal household helped give Moses the courage and access to speak truth to power. A significant reason why God was later able to use Moses to command Pharaoh to "let my people go" was that the Egyptian princess was a vigorous woman of God.

#### **4—VIGOROUS WOMEN OF GOD TODAY**

All of these wonderful examples from Exodus 1 & 2 certainly raise for us the question of what vigorous women of God might be like today. In April, I read an article in *The Christian Century* magazine that asked why the good Christian women of Germany in the 1930s didn't resist Hitler's rise to power. Why were those church-going and praying women willing to go along with the horrors of the Holocaust?

A few decades ago, a researcher interviewed a large number of German women to hear their perspectives and reasoning on that issue. Some of them had resisted the Nazi Party in large or small ways, but most of those Christian women had either supported

the Third Reich or passively upheld it by conforming to its norms, staying silent, and focusing solely on their own families. The truth is, good Christian women supported Nazism because it benefitted them, and it seemed to reinforce the cultural values that gave meaning and purpose to their lives. They believed God was in control and had blessed their culture and their leader for special greatness—and that outsiders and

foreign influence needed to be subjugated or eradicated in order for Germans to protect themselves.

The author of *The Christian Century* article contrasted those Christian women who supported Hitler with Corrie Ten Boom, a Dutch woman who, with her family, resisted the evil of the Nazi expansion. Corrie Ten Boom gave credit to “her father’s love for all people,” and to her brother who urged “her to break evil laws in order to save people’s lives.”\* With those influences and her Christian faith, Corrie was a vigorous woman of God who led a resistance to authoritarian cruelty and genocide.

If we are going to be vigorous women of God today, we can’t passively go along with a culture that tells us it’s OK to treat other people as second class and unworthy of human dignity. Even if we are afraid of losing some benefits and status in our culture, it’s not OK to hurt, deprive, and allow other people to die. It’s not OK to bury our heads in the sand and focus only on what’s best for our own children and families. Vigorous women of God in the style of Exodus chapters one and two are women who are willing to stand up and speak out for the rights of those who are different from us. Vigorous women of God are ones who will sacrifice some of our own safety and privilege so that others can also participate in God’s blessings of life and strength and vitality.

### **CONCLUSION**

So, on this Mother’s Day and United Methodist Women’s Sunday, I challenge you—men, as well as women—to ponder these questions: Which underprivileged group is God calling you to care for and protect today? Who is God calling you to adopt as your own children? How will you resist and counter the life-denying narratives in our culture today? How will you claim your role alongside and among the vigorous women of God?

\*D. L. Mayfield, “The ones who didn’t resist,” April 7, 2021, pp. 32-35, referring to Alison Owing’s 1993 book *Frauen* of oral history and interviews of German women who lived through the Third Reich.