

The Ark of the Covenant, v. 1.0
Exodus 1:1-2:10
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The Book of Exodus does not tell us how long Moses was in his pitch-covered basket floating amongst the reeds of the Nile River, but my guess is that his trip lasted just about forty minutes. We learn from our reading that Moses was crying when Pharaoh's daughter opens the basket, and forty minutes is long enough for a baby to get hungry, but that's not why I think it was forty minutes. We learn from the text that Pharaoh's daughter doesn't soil her own hands on the pitch-covered basket, and so calls for her maid to come and do her dirty work, and that could have taken a while, but that's not the reason I think it was forty minutes. We learn from the text of the proximity of Moses' sister, presumably his sister, Miriam, who not only stood at a distance to see what would happen, but was also mysteriously close enough at hand to make just the right recommendation for a nursemaid, and so we also might speculate about a benevolent conspiracy based on the observed customary length of the morning bath of Pharaoh's daughter, a plot to place the lad, but that is not the reason I think it was forty minutes.

No, the reason I think Moses spent forty minutes in his little watercraft is that everything important that happens in the Bible takes forty units of time to occur. How long were Noah and his family in the ark? Forty days and forty nights. How long was Moses up on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments? Forty

days and forty nights! How long did the Hebrews wander in the desert before coming into the promised land? That's right, forty years! I know I've mentioned this Biblical code before, but forty is one of those key numbers to understand the mind of the Bible. You see, whenever the word forty occurs, it means something momentous and transitional has occurred, that what comes after the forty is radically different than what came before, that God's hand is at work in the story of God's people in wonderful ways. And that, of course, is exactly what happened in our story tonight, and *that's* why I think he was in there for forty minutes.

As we heard at the beginning of the reading tonight, things are vastly different from the situation in which we left Joseph and his brothers at the end of Genesis. You will remember how Joseph was second in command only to Pharaoh himself and how Pharaoh opened the vault for Joseph's family, and how everything was going just great down in the land of Goshen. God's people flourished. But times change and Emperors change. Instead of giving the Hebrews carte blanche, the new regime wants to take away life and liberty; first the tax collectors are brought in, and when they failed to stem the rising tide of people, they bring in the slave masters, and when they failed to slow down the population boom, Moses' mother finds herself on the wrong end of a truly awful imperial edict designed to slow down the growth of at least half the population; all of the male children of the Hebrews shall be drowned in the Nile. And so her only recourse to preserve this "fine baby" is to use the same river to save his life that

was decreed to end it. And so the plot is hatched to manipulate Pharaoh's daughter, and she takes the bait, and the baby too. "She named him Moses, 'because,' she said, 'I drew him out of the water.' " We can only imagine what might have happened had Moses been an ugly or scrawny baby, but I suppose that vanity too has its place in God's scheme of things, and the thought of having a very good looking son must have been too much for the princess to pass up.

Now, this is a very cute story, but we should not allow that feature to obscure what has just happened: the Savior of God's people has survived the first challenge. The road to liberation has opened. The end of the empire is in sight. What comes after Moses' forty minutes will be ever so different than what came before them. The stakes in the keeping of God's promises have been raised. No longer simply a nomadic family trying to avoid famine, God's people find themselves far more numerous and up against far greater odds. Jacob, fearful after tricking his brother out of a birthright, pales in comparison against making bricks night and day, and having one's babies drowned in the river. There is seemingly no one to lead them, and no hope in sight. There is no savior, not even Moses, on the horizon. And then God, with a little help from midwives with the fear of God, does something remarkable in a simple basket on a mighty river.

We shall read the rest of the story in upcoming weeks, and in it we shall hear once again of the escape from Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the gift of the manna, water from the rock, and of course, the Ten Commandments for which

Moses is most famous. All of this drama takes place because of what happens in tonight's story. It is the Old Testament's version of another famous forty, Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, not that Moses was tempted by the devil in his little basket, but that the story hangs in the balance while his sister watches on and Pharaoh's daughter bathes, just as we read breathlessly to see if Jesus survives his test in the desert. The future of the Savior in each Testament is assured, but not first without a little suspense for the story. Of course, I am not the first, nor will I be the last, to observe some parallels between Moses and Jesus. Various voices in the New Testament, especially that of the book of Hebrews, make this comparison explicit. Indeed, the whole of the Jesus story is an echo of what happens here in Exodus, from miraculous beginnings to divine salvation. Clearly what is different is that Moses was not himself God, as we understand Jesus to be, but the stories and their emphases are too similar for us to believe that God composed a completely new story from scratch. Unlike all but the rarest of Hollywood endeavors, the remake was actually better than the original! All of this is to say that God's methods hold up to the test of time, so why go messing with a good thing?

Now, if there are parallels forward from Moses to Jesus, there are also parallels extending backwards, particularly to the last time the story of God's people hung in the balance floating on water, to Noah and his family in their ark, a little larger, mind you, than Moses' basket, but surely a lifesaving boat. Now, I

warn you, I'm going to play a little game of Bible word association to get from here to my main point, but I think it will be worth it in the end. There is also good Biblical precedent for doing so. After all, Moses received his name in a play on words, "mashah," meaning "drawn out." And so, here goes. In the original Hebrew, the word used to describe Moses' basket is the same word used to describe Noah's ark, and it is a word applied elsewhere only to Noah's ark, a point made to drive home the similarities. Both boats ferried God's people to safety. Both boats carried the presence and promise of God. Both boats were temporary vessels for eternal purposes. Now, if the same Hebrew word can be applied to two very different, but similar containers, I think it is fair game to apply the same English word to two very different, but similar containers, namely Noah's ark, and the Ark of the Covenant, and that is just what English translators have done in trying to render the word for the acacia wood box that held the Ten Commandments. But here is where I would like to stretch that wordplay to include calling Moses' basket an ark, indeed to go so far as to call it the first version of the Ark of the Covenant, even though it was just a basket with a baby. You see, both Moses' basket and the Ark of the Covenant ferried God's people to safety. Both Moses' basket and the Ark of the Covenant carried the presence and promise of God. Both Moses' basket and the Ark of the Covenant were temporary vessels for eternal purposes. Moses' basket was a little ark, a downpayment, so to speak, on

the great Ark that would lead the Israelites through the wilderness to the promised land. But it was an ark of the same order.

We probably know more about the Ark of the Covenant from watching Indiana Jones rescue it in “Raiders of the Lost Ark” than we do from reading about in Scripture, but so be it. It still remains the symbol of the presence of God’s law and grace to the Israelites. It was where they believed God’s very presence resided, and in a sense they were right, for the Ten Commandments, properly understood, were the very grace of God put in a form to bring about the human community God intended, and the grace of God is the presence of God, is it not? In my word association, I have been focusing on the arks, but of course, what is more important is what is inside them, their precious cargo. And in the Ark of the Covenant, we find the covenant, the promise of relationship that reminds us that the Lord is our God, and we are God’s people, come hell or high water. And in the ark that Pharaoh’s daughter pulled from the reeds of the Nile River we find the covenant, in human form, the foreshadowing of the relationship that reminds us that the Lord is our God, and we are God’s people, come hell or high water.

The Ark of the Covenant will not be the last time in Scripture, or the history of the Church that we find grace in a vessel. Remember that the remake was better than the original, and that Jesus is the vessel of God’s grace and covenant. Like Moses’ ark, he ferried God’s people to safety. Like Moses’ ark, he carried within himself the presence and promise of God. Like Moses’ ark, his life on earth was a

temporary vessel for eternal purposes. And in him, we find the covenant, the promise of relationship that reminds us that the Lord is our God, and we are God's people, come hell or high water. But the story doesn't end there. What I want you to see is that just as Moses' basket was the first Ark of the Covenant, the holder of grace and promise, and that the acacia wood box was the second, and that Jesus was another, we are the latest such version of a very valuable container. Within us, as individuals, and as the church of Jesus Christ, is God's covenant lived out and shared. All the same things that the first three arks contained, we contain now. We hold promise. We hold liberation. We hold community. We hold grace. All of those things have been entrusted to us to share with the world. It was not merely good architectural design that lead many a church to construct their roof structures to resemble the hull of a great ship. Indeed it was the symbol of the ark, and the church's role of carrying the message of hope that lead the congregational section of those churches to be called the nave, that upon looking up to heaven, worshippers might be reminded of all of the great arks of the covenant that brought their ancestors to that place and time, and motivate them to do the same.

Most of our lives will last longer than forty years, thanks be to God, but let us hope that no matter how long they last, let us hope that what comes after our lives, in terms of the world, is much different, much better, and much more reflective of God's dream for the world, than what came before them. We are each little arks of the covenant, each of us bearing within our lives of faith and witness

the promise God gave the world. May God help us to be that presence and promise in whatever we say or do. Amen.