Today we continue our series

“Unraveled: Seeking God When Our Plans Fall Apart.”

This is a series about who we become

when the plans we’d had –

or in the case of today’s story –

the plans we inherited from others –

start to come apart.

All summer long we’ve been discovering

how the story of God with us

doesn’t end when our tightly knit lives

come unraveled –

in fact, sometimes,

even if we don’t know it at the time,

the story God has for us

is really just getting started.

More about that in a minute…

first…let’s pray:

God of unending surprises,

this life is a tapestry of moments woven together,

and we long to be weavers of love.

Today we gather and pray

that you would unravel our bias.

Unravel our assumptions.

Unravel whatever it is that

keeps us from you.

And as you do,

clear space in our hearts

for your Word.

We are listening.

We are praying.

Amen.

The story told

in the book of Exodus

is one of the best stories

that’s ever been told.

I’m serious.

Folks at my church will tell you

that I often say

“this is one of my favorite stories

in the Bible” - -

but –

this is one of my favorite stories

in the Bible.

Many of you probably

know some of the highlights –

they are real crowd pleasers –

God speaks from burning bush,

summons Moses to set God’s people

free from slavery in Egypt.

Moses is all “I can’t do that”

and God is all “you WILL do that –

take your brother, he will help.”

Moses engages in some tense confrontations

with the Pharaoh.

Pharaoh doesn’t listen,

God sends plagues.

Pharaoh still doesn’t listen –

God sends more plagues.

Finally the Hebrew people are freed,

but then Pharaoh changes his mind

and sends his army after them.

Moses parts the Red Sea.

The people wander in the desert –

lots of complaining.

God sends manna from heaven

for the people to eat

and the 10 commandments

on Mt. Sinai.

Moses dies and the Hebrew people

eventually arrive in the Promised Land.

It’s a great story.

It’s actually the story of stories –

the story that gets told and retold

and passed down

generation to generation

for all of God’s people.

It’s the prototypical liberation story - -

when God saves God’s people

*this is what it looks like.*

AND –

it all starts here –

on the mucky, muddy,

slippery, slimy

edge of the Nile river.

It starts with two girls –

prototypes of their own –

the beautiful princess

and the responsible older sister.

We don’t know how old they are –

maybe they’re kids,

maybe they’re teenagers.

We do know that

these girls are

strangers to each other.

And yet.

On this day –

at the start of this story –

they both find themselves

on the bank of the river –

and – importantly –

as preacher Anna Carter Florence

(who this sermon owes a LOT to)

reminds us –

they are on their own - -

their parents aren’t around.

This, Florence says,

creates the possibility

of an interesting

interpretive lens for hearing this story –

“read Scripture as if

your parents aren’t watching” –

we could all stand to do that

now and again.

So the story begins

on the edge of the Nile –

well – sort of.

The story begins in an Egypt

which is among the most powerful places

in the world –

where the Hebrew people

are the Egyptian’s slaves.

But – the population of Hebrews in Egypt

is growing –

growing all the time –

you go downtown

and you can hear Hebrew

almost as much as you hear Egyptian.

And Pharaoh does not like it –

not at all.

So he comes up with

a truly horrendous and unspeakably evil plan –

he will order the Egyptian midwives

who help the Hebrew women give birth

to kill every baby boy

that is born to a Hebrew woman.

Awful, right?

The thing is,

Pharaoh didn’t count on

the midwives – Shiphrah and Puah.

They came up with a plan

where they went to Pharaoh and said

“we can’t do it, Pharaoh –

it’s not that we don’t WANT to do it,

we TOTALLY do - -

it’s just that these Hebrew women

give birth so quickly

that we don’t have time

to kill the babies.”

Also a very good story - -

first chapter of Exodus –

check it out.

So Pharaoh’s Plan A was foiled,

but he came up with

an equally evil Plan B.

This time he ordered all Egyptians

to throw every Hebrew baby boy

into the Nile River - -

to drown them.

ALL Egyptians received this order –

not just the midwives,

not just the palace guard,

everyone. Anyone.

In the midst of all of this,

a woman named Jochebed

becomes pregnant.

It’s worth pausing for a second

to talk about Jochebed,

Moses’ mother.

In her book, *Womanist Midrash*,

Wilda Gafney imagines

what Jochebed’s life

might have been like.

She writes:

*[Jochebed] would have watched*

*the material circumstances of her people change*

*from abundance, to sufficiency, to lack.*

*She would have lived through*

*the edicts restricting and oppressing her people*

*until the pharaoh happened upon*

*his final solution.*

*I see Jochebed prefiguring European Holocaust victims,*

*watching the governments and people they knew*

*turn into monsters whom*

*they no longer knew*

*or even recognized.*

When Moses was born,

Jochebed did what she could

to hide him

for as long as she could.

But babies grow.

And when she can’t

hide him anymore,

she does the only thing

that she can think to do - -

she takes a bunch of papyrus,

weaves it together,

reinforces it

with the ancient equivalent of Kevlar,

and makes a snug little basket

for her three-month-old son.

It’s an act of desperation –

but,

as the Somali-born British poet

Warsan Shire tells us –

“you have to understand,

that no one puts their children in a boat

unless the water is safer

than the land.”

Jochebed’s act was an act

of desperation,

but also a way of bearing witness.

As Anna Carter Florence writes,

“anyone who finds him

will get the mother’s message, loud and clear:

*This is what we’ve come to, in Egypt.*

*Take a look.*

*It’s all I could do for my child.”*

Jochebed puts Moses

and his basket

into the river and walks away.

Maybe she didn’t want

to draw attention to herself there –

maybe she figured Moses

would have a better chance

without a mother-type hovering around.

Maybe she just couldn’t bear

to see what happened next.

Whatever the situation,

it’s Moses’ sister, Miriam

who takes over from here.

This is the job

of the older sister –

take care of the younger ones

when the parents aren’t there.

Report back.

But don’t get too close –

find a good hiding spot

a safe distance away

and see what happens

to your baby brother.

And then here comes

Pharaoh’s daughter –

unnamed in the story,

but Wilda Gafney names her Sheshan –

a name which is the Egyptian word

for “lotus.”

In ancient Egypt, the lotus flower

symbolized life, fertility, and resurrection.

Sheshan was the quintessential princess –

the beautiful flower –

everything that anyone could ever want to be –

that’s the princess’ job.

And so here she comes –

down to the river with her maids –

to bathe and to beautify

and possibly get a few moments alone

to herself.

So here they are –

these two girls

whose lives could not be

more different –

Miriam and Sheshan –

each of them had a job to do –

each of them had a plan to follow.

Except - -

you know,

down in the muck and the mud,

in the slippery, watery, slimy,

in between sort of place

where it’s hard to find your footing

and you’re not sure where

the muddy bank ends

and the deep water begins - -

anything can happen

in a place like that –

even the best laid plans

can come unraveled there.

You know what happened.

Sheshan found the baby.

The EGYPTIANprincess

found the HEBREW baby.

You know what she was

supposed to do with it.

*She* knew what she was supposed to do.

So did Miriam.

I wonder how long

Sheshan stood there looking,

trying to figure out

what on earth to do next.

Knowing what her father

would have done –

or at least what his law was - -

tip over the basket

and let that baby

tumble into the water.

Or –

maybe just close the lid?

Give the basket a little push?

Send it down the river

for someone else to deal with?

*Miriam* knew

what her mother would have wanted.

Stay and watch –

no matter how awful

things might get.

Stay hidden until it’s over

and then report back

everything that happened.

It’s horrible –

but there is no choice –

this is survival.

They knew

what the plans were.

And so what did they do?

Not that.

They didn’t.

They couldn’t.

Things look different

when you’re standing there

on the river’s edge

with a baby in between you.

You have to think for yourself.

You have to look for yourself.

Finally, Sheshan speaks -

“this must be one

of the Hebrew’s children.”

It’s so matter of fact.

Such a funny thing to say

after staring at

a baby in a basket in a river

as the moments tick by.

But sometimes –

in some circumstances –

the only thing to say

is exactly what’s in front of you.

Sometimes you just state the obvious -

name the situation -

say it out loud –

let it reverberate off the water

and the grass and the trees.

*This must be one of the Hebrew’s children,*

*because no one puts their child in a basket*

*unless the water is safer than the land.*

And then something in that moment –

in the gentleness of Sheshan’s voice,

or the clarity of her words,

or the way she’d paused so long

watching the baby,

something in that moment

made Miriam take a step –

one step –

out of her hiding place

and then she said it –

“Do you want me to find a nurse

among the Hebrew women?

Someone to nurse that child - -

for YOU?”

How quickly plans unravel

as another one is formed.

A plan to save a life –

a ridiculous plan –

take baby Moses

back to his mother for a couple of years

and tell everyone it’s okay

because it was on the orders

of the Pharaoh’s daughter.

Who would buy that?

How could they possibly pull this off?

But they did.

When Moses was three years old,

Sheshan adopted him –

she actually TOOK HIM TO THE PALACE

and raised him there –

sitting in his little booster seat

at the royal table –

riding his Toys-R-Us chariot

through the palace halls.

Scripture never says

what the Pharaoh thought about it –

although I would *LOVE* to know.

But this isn’t a story about him –

this is a story of what happens

when the plans unravel

and young people get together

to do whatever crazy thing

they can come up with

to move bodies out of harm’s way.

So what about you?

How about where you live,

in your neighborhood, in your family –

during one of the most surreal years

any of us have ever seen.

*WE ARE THERE –*

standing at the river’s edge –

in that muddy, slippery, in-between place

where everything unravels –

the virus, the shootings,

the protests, the division –

forcing us to face the reality

that we are not as in control

as we like to think we are,

bringing up things

so many of us

have swept under the rug,

exposing inequalities,

bearing witness to human heartbreak,

demanding accountability.

*How do we do this?*

How do we begin

to address the things

this year demands of us?

How do we talk to each other

without shutting one another down?

And how on earth do we

stay hopeful and faithful

and prayerful through all of this?

This is what I think

Miriam and Sheshan would tell us

if they were standing here

on OUR river’s edge with us.

First and foremost –

as we learned at the very beginning –

*we don’t have to read the world*

*the way our parents read it.*

There comes this moment -

when we are in the muck and the slime

at the edge of the river

and we have to decide for ourselves

about what we are going to do

about *this* situation,

*this* interruption,

*this* baby in the basket,

*this* immigrant girl in the cage,

*this* black boy in the street,

*this* body right here that matters.

And if the way we’ve been taught

to read the world

tells us that

it *doesn’t* matter,

that we can turn and walk away,

that we need not sacrifice our comfort

for another person’s survival - -

then something has to change,

and it is up to us.

Sometimes

things

unravel

for a

reason.

I think maybe they’d also say

*when you’re in the muck and mud,*

*and you don’t know what to do next,*

*start by telling the truth*

*about what you see.*

Sometimes the faithful answer

is to tell the truth

about that body in front of us.

“This is one of the Hebrew’s children.”

Say it.

Even if you’re unsure –

even if you don’t know what comes next -

even if your voice shakes.

You never know who may be listening.

You never know who may be waiting

for a reason to come out from their hiding place

and make a plan with you.

And maybe the other thing

they’d want you to know,

these two girls,

is that this is how liberation starts.

God’s liberating work

starts at the river’s edge –

in the muck and the slime

and the tall grass and the slippery footholds –

with an interruption we didn’t expect,

with a body we have to acknowledge,

with suffering we cannot deny.

God’s liberation of a people

can start

with two girls

and one crazy idea.

That’s it –

that’s all you need.

Because whenever the children of God

claim the freedom

to let the plan unravel

and imagine a new way –

a different way –

Moses gets to grow up.

The Exodus out of slavery can begin.

Unraveling can lead to liberation,

to the transformation of the world –

if we let it –

if we’re willing to step out

or step up.

It’s the story of stories.

This is our chapter.

Let’s join together in affirming our faith:

I believe in God, the Great Sewer—
Who weaves us together in community,
Collecting our loose ends and turning them into belonging.

I believe in the Holy Spirit—
Who hems us in before and behind,
Catching us when we fall and writing us into God’s holy narrative.

And I believe in Jesus Christ—
Who loved and claimed the people society had thrown out, refusing to disregard

anyone as scrap.

I believe God has woven part of God’s self into the fiber of our being, Making us inherently worthy of love and belonging.

I believe the fabric of my life is weak,
That I am prone to error and need God’s handiwork to remind me of love.

I believe in the Church, and that like a quilt of different fabrics, She is designed to be as diverse and beautiful as God’s creation.

And I believe that when life unravels,
God is there to stitch my wounds together,
To hold me in the palm of God’s hand, to tell me of love, And to invite me into a new journey.
Amen.