



August 13, 2017

Resilience is Thinking Creatively During Hard Times
Exodus 2:1-10 NRSV
Pastor Shelley Cunningham

EXODUS 2:1-10

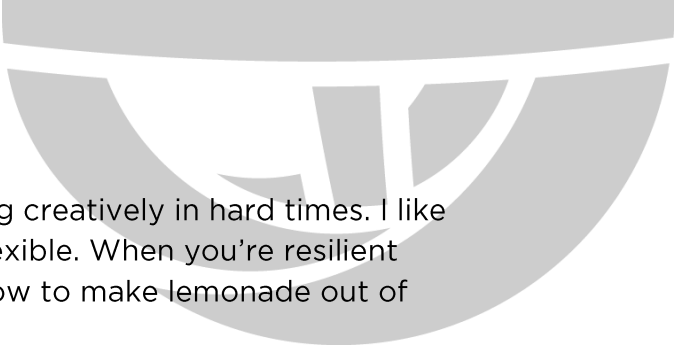
NRSV

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. ²The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months. ³When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. ⁴His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

⁵The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. ⁶When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. ⁷Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" ⁸Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. ⁹Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. ¹⁰When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

When I was in high school I spent four years on the speech team. I was awful. Seriously. I talked too fast. My eye contact was terrible. I couldn't pause for dramatic effect to save my life. And I truly believe the only reason I never tossed my cookies out of nervousness is because God took pity on my teammates. So why did I keep at it? This sounds funny, but speech was the one thing I did that I was really bad at. Which means, there was no pressure to succeed because I knew I wouldn't. I could safely show up and just be terrible. I had nothing to lose.

There's something freeing about believing you have nothing to lose, isn't there. You're free to be yourself. To take risks. To make it all up as you go along. In a weird way, that can give you the fortitude you need to just keep going. This



week's Big Idea is that resilience comes from thinking creatively in hard times. I like that. It underscores the value of being nimble and flexible. When you're resilient you're able to deal with curveballs. You figure out how to make lemonade out of all the lemons that life keeps giving you.

Our story from Exodus 2 certainly shows creative thinking at work. It's easy to see this as a charming little tale – the pampered princess finding a cherubic baby fussing in a basket; the quick-witted Hebrew girl stepping in to offer help; the delicious irony of the mother getting to raise her child right under the Pharaoh's nose and get paid for it. It's easy to forget that there was plenty at stake. The child was in the basket because the Pharaoh had ordered all Hebrew baby boys be murdered. The girl who spoke up was way out of line addressing Egyptian royalty. Even the princess herself was taking a risk by going against her father's wishes and bringing a Hebrew child into her own home.

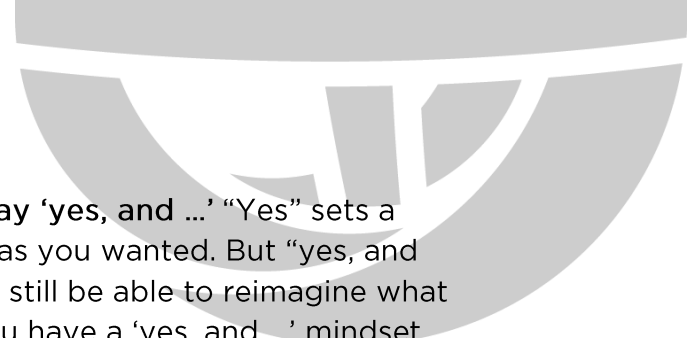
Indeed, this story reminds us that when we are faced with challenging situations, we need all the resources we can muster if we're going to make it through. Thinking creatively might involve being quick on your feet, or taking a different perspective, or putting yourself in someone else's shoes. It might involve trying a new way of doing something or making do with whatever is at hand or believing you have nothing else to lose.

One of the things researcher Diane Contu has identified as a key characteristic of resilient people is a willingness to improvise. So have you ever watched an improv troupe perform? It's kind of amazing. The ideas fly fast and furious, each one seemingly more random than the rest. The actors are certainly making it all up as they go along. But most improv actors would tell you that's only possible because they follow a few basic guiderules. Those rules set the tone; they give a foundation to build on.

That can be true in the business world as well. One of the core values at UPS is: do whatever it takes to deliver packages on time. Its former CEO, Mike Eskew, once said: "We tell our employees to get the job done. Just think of what could go wrong on any given day: a busted traffic light, a bridge washed out, a flat tire. Our drivers have to be able to think fast, and they have to be able to adapt." But here's the secret: they're able to do this because UPS is a company of precision. Drivers are trained to always put their keys in the same place. They close the doors to the truck in the same order. They wear their uniforms the same way. Not having to think about those things means they have margin to improvise when challenges arise.

Two of those basic improv rules speak right to this week's theme:





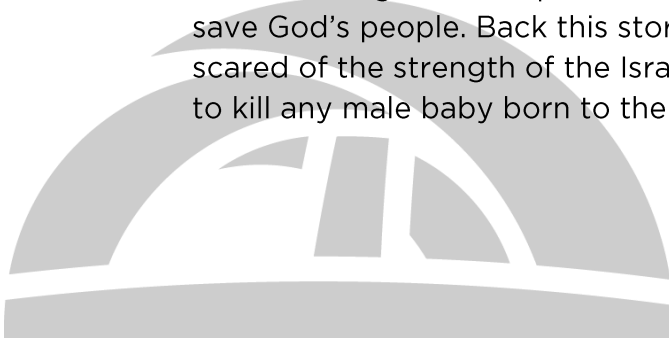
The first basic improv rule is: **Don't just say 'yes;' say 'yes, and ...'** "Yes" sets a direction, which might not turn out to be as fruitful as you wanted. But "yes, and ..." means you can take what you've been given and still be able to reimagine what comes next. You can rewrite the storyline. When you have a 'yes, and ...' mindset, you give yourself options. That's important when you feel backed into a corner - in improv, or in life. A little crack of light is all it takes to chase away the darkness. A little glimpse of possibility is all it takes to keep you moving forward instead of feeling stuck.

And the second improv rule is: **There are no mistakes - there are just opportunities to learn.** That one can be a little harder to adopt. After all, as I mentioned earlier, thinking creatively means not relying on the tried-and-true. Making it up as you go along inherently involves risk. Which means you have to be willing to fail. And how many of us like to do that?

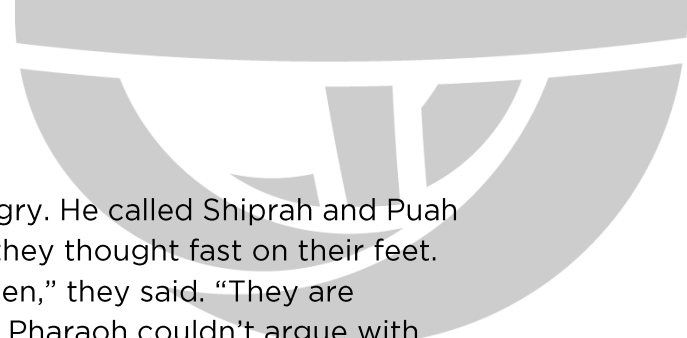
It's been said that children are more resilient than adults. One reason is that kids fail all the time - that's part of growing up, whether you're learning how to ride a bike or tie your shoes or remember how to multiply by 7. But the more you master, the less you like the thought of not being able to do something. And so as adults, too often we stay in safe spaces, where we know we won't look silly or get embarrassed or worse.

But the most resilient kids - the ones who keep getting back on that bike - are the ones who know that even if they fall someone will be there to dry their tears and give them a hug and tell them it will be ok. Great risk takers often have a safe place to retreat to, a place of confidence and security that enables them to dare greatly. That confidence and security comes from knowing that even if you fail you are not alone; even if you fail you are still loved unconditionally.

Do you see where I'm going with this? People of God, you have this in the bag. You have the blessing and acceptance that comes with being God's child. If you believe that God really loves you, then you have the freedom to fail, the freedom to take risks, the freedom to improvise because no matter what you are not alone. Now I realize that 'if' isn't always a given. Doubt, pain, grief, self-loathing, depression, exhaustion... there are a lot of things that keep us from hearing Christ's tender voice saying, 'you are my beloved child.' But we have a promise that in all things Christ will give us strength. And we have a community that gathers to remind us of that promise, again and again.



You know, Miriam wasn't the only creative thinker in this part of Exodus. She was following the example of other faithful women who used their quick wit to save God's people. Back this story up a bit, and we read that Pharaoh was so scared of the strength of the Israelites that told two midwives, Shiprah and Puah, to kill any male baby born to the Hebrew women. But the midwives feared God.



They let all the Hebrew babies live. Pharaoh was angry. He called Shiprah and Puah to him and demanded an explanation. Like Miriam, they thought fast on their feet. “The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women,” they said. “They are vigorous and give birth before the midwife arrives.” Pharaoh couldn’t argue with their logic. And God blessed them for their ingenuity.

My friends, the ability to think creatively in the midst of hard times can be life-giving for us as individuals. But they’re important for us as a country too. Our nation is facing the threat of nuclear conflict. Partisan grandstanding is putting the economy and the well-being of our poorest citizens at risk. Groups spewing hate and division are boldly showing their faces.

These are hard times. But there are signs of creative thinking all around us. When stickers advocating for a white nationalist group showed up on Rochester power poles and boxes earlier last month, local arts activist Chad Allen organized a photo shoot to highlight Rochester’s diversity, and posted the pictures with the hashtag #NotInMyTown. This weekend in Charlottesville dozens of clergy lining the streets peacefully locked arms to proclaimed that the church stands with our brothers and sisters of color. Across the country communities are making the most of scarce resources as they provide food, clothing, and school supplies for families in need.

That, friends, is how we can rewrite the storyline. We can say ‘yes, and ...’ as we live out our faith. We can say, ‘there are no mistakes, only opportunities,’ as we resolutely move forward instead of getting stuck in the past. We can take risks for the sake of the gospel because we know that no matter what God will love us unconditionally. What can you do think creatively in the face of hard times this week? You have nothing to lose ... and only resilience to gain. Amen.

