

Who you are

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About 150 years ago, Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard observed, "There is nothing with which every man is so afraid as getting to know how enormously much he is capable of doing and becoming." The biblical texts for this Sunday all have something to do with being and becoming, with living as you are, in who and how you are, whatever the circumstances, and in so doing, contributing to something far greater than yourself.

In the Exodus text, women take center stage simply by being themselves, by acting with integrity and by meeting the challenges of the moment with wisdom and compassion. Times have changed for the worse: after living in the golden glow of Joseph's successes in Egypt, "a new king arose over Egypt who didn't know Joseph" (Exo. 1:8). The Hebrews' increasing numbers have become a threat, so the Egyptian king not only oppresses them with ever greater work, but also requires that the midwives kill infant babies. These midwives are named in the story, an unusual specification. Shiphrah and Puah may or may not themselves have been Hebrew—the text is ambiguous. Whatever the case, they are midwives first. They help bring babies into the world, and apparently they aren't about to let anyone, even a king, tell them that they should do otherwise: that bringers of life should deliver death. The narrator explains that the midwives "feared God," something that other biblical writers attribute to wisdom (see, e.g., Prov. 1:7; 9:10; 15:33).

Among the babies they simply refuse to kill is the one who will save the Hebrew people. Through him an unprecedented relationship between people and God will be mediated. How could the baby's sister and the pharaoh's daughter, even the mother who sent her infant down the river and saw him returned to her breast, know these things? They couldn't. But each of them did what was right for and in that moment. Each acted according to her ability and her heart, no matter the pressure to conform or the danger of contradicting the mighty and powerful. Because of them, Moses

survived.

In Romans, Paul asserts that people are different from one another, and this is both good and necessary. When my dad worked downtown, he often took the bus to work. Several adults with Downs syndrome were also on their way to work. The work they did was menial, uninteresting and dead-end by our estimation, but he said that every morning they were cheerful, proud and delighted to participate as employees in the community. Paul instructs members of the congregation to be like this: to cheerfully and humbly accept the particular task or role for which they're suited, knowing that the congregational body is healthy only when each member serves according to his or her disposition and gifts. Rather than blindly adopting expectations for a certain way of being or doing, Paul counsels personal discernment by a radical openness to God's intentions. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern. . ." (Rom. 12:2).

The eastern sages talk about "beginner's mind" as an ideal state of being. At this moment, the learner is without enough experience and success to harden a sense of what she can and cannot do, what is and isn't normal. The beginner assumes and predicts nothing. He is open, unselfconsciously available to novelty and every possibility. Peter is like this in the gospel text. The other disciples answer Jesus' question "Who am I?" according to what they have heard. By contrast, Peter speaks from the heart: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

You can (must!) be who you are. God will take care of the rest. Who knows what extraordinary role your ordinary self will play?