

Title: Letting Go and Hanging On
Text: Exodus 2:1-11
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Who would be a mum?

The hours are endless and the pay non-existent. The demands are broad and complex. Often your efforts go unnoticed, and can even sometimes be rejected. With the joy that comes with motherhood, there is also a bucket load of anxiety, worry, pain, sleepless nights and crowded thoughts.

Who would be a mum?

The role of a mother is consistently undervalued in our society, especially that of the so-called 'stay at home' mum. Tony Campolo, who is a University Professor, prolific author and very popular speaker, tells one of my favourite stories about motherhood. Sometimes his wife Peggy would attend University functions with him. At the time she was a 'stay at home' mum. In the small talk of those functions, as she was introduced to people, they would ask her what she did. Her response is classic:

I am socializing two Homo sapiens into the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition in order that they might be instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia that God willed from the beginning of creation.

Then she would look at them mischievously with the question, 'And what is it that you do?'

A recent survey of 7000 American mothers revealed that the average mum rates her stress level at 8.5 out of 10. That's high! What has got them so stressed? Here's the confronting thing for we men; for 46% of the mothers surveyed, husbands are a bigger source of stress than their kids. Too often, they say, the fathers of their children are more like big kids than equal partners.

One of the mothers interviewed for the survey was Deno Fleno – what a great name. When people ask her husband Phil how many children they have, he says he has two, and she has three – their seven year old, three year old and him. It's a family joke, but with an edge.

Deno went on to say:

A 7-year-old is going to be a 7-year-old. But a 35-year-old acting like a 7-year-old is more stressful, because they should know better.
(Deno Fleno)

This chart may not be true in many households, but it certainly has been in ours in many ways...

Again I ask – who would be a mum?

And yet, motherhood is one of the highest and holiest callings a person can be called to. The bond between a mother and child – whether a birth-child or adopted – is wholly unique.

Mark Buchanan was watching a science program on television where the host was interviewing a University Professor in Germany whose research focussed on Speech and Pre-Speech development disorders in children. The Professor was excited about a new discovery they had made through their research.

She'd recently published results from a research project comparing the cries of newborns in Germany with those of newborns in France. The research involved extensive and precise recordings in maternity wards of babies.

The researchers digitally graphed the pitch and cadence of those cries, and then painstakingly compared, baby for baby, those cries along ethnic lines.

What they discovered stunned them: babies cry with an accent. In France, babies consistently inflect from a low to a high pitch. It's a wah-ayyy! In Germany, it's the opposite, high to low. It's an ayyy! wah. The revolutionary element in this discovery is that the intonation pattern exactly mimics the "melody" of the mother—or, more precisely, the patterns of speech characteristic of the mother's national language The womb-bound baby hears this, and copies it at birth.

Buchanan goes on to say this, and it's beautiful:

A baby eavesdrops on its mother for nine months. It puts its ear to the rail of her bones and listens to the train of her sorrow and gladness coming for miles. The child emerges from its mother's insides with her voice ringing in its ears, her music echoing in its own bones [As a result, the baby's] first instinct is to sing its mother's song.

Our first instinct is to sing our mother's song – the song we overheard even in the womb.

The truth is I am my mother's son. She has shaped me in ways I'm still blind to. But I what I do see are the similarities I have inherited from her, like:

My fair skin and freckles
My extroverted personality and competitive spirit
My capacity to start a diet on Monday...and finish it on Tuesday
My genuine fascination with people and my natural propensity to worry, and worry really well

For these reasons and so many more, I sing my mother's song.

But it is not just her genes that shape me; it is her ever-present influence. It is not just nature; it is also nurture.

I have learned from my mother many things like:

Anticipation:
Just wait until your father gets home.

Logic:
If you fall out of that swing and break your neck, you're not going shopping with me.

Humour:
When the lawnmower cuts off your toes, don't come running to me!

Genetics:
You're just like your father.

Justice:
One day you'll have kids, and I hope they turn out just like you...then you will see what it's like.

Hypocrisy:
If I've told you once, I've told you a million times—Don't exaggerate!

Circle of Life:
I brought you into this world, and I can take you out.

There are thousands of books that address the topic of motherhood. There are hundreds of theories about what are the essential attributes of a good and healthy mother. I am going to focus on one – not drawn from any of those books, but from this book – the bible.

Here is what I would say; a key attribute of a good, healthy, God-honouring mother is this:

A mother learns to let go and hang on.

To explore what that means we are going to spend some time in the story of one of the mums in the bible. She is famous, although you may never have heard her name. Her son is far more famous. Her life is full of pain and heartache, but also joy and triumph. The writer of Hebrews celebrates this mother's example when he says:

By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.
(Hebrews 11:23)

This mother's fame was not in her name, but in the name of her far more famous son. Like so many mothers before and since, her identity is secondary to that of her child. But here her and her husband are commended as examples of God honouring faith, not for some great act of religious service, but for the way they lived as parents in tumultuous times.

While the writer of Hebrews does not give us her name, we do know it from the Old Testament book Exodus. This is what we read:

Amram married his father's sister Jochebed, who bore him Aaron and Moses.
(Exodus 6:20)

Jochebed is the mother of Moses, and whose story we will explore a little bit more in just a moment. But before we rush past this little verse I want us to note a little detail we can easily miss, 'Amram married his father's sister.' In other words, Amram married his aunt. Leaving aside all Tasmania jokes, even allowing for cultural and historical differences, this is not the picture-book perfect model of a marriage you would expect.

It is not as if there was a shortage of marriage partners – Israel's population was so large in fact it had become a threat to Egypt, as we shall soon see. The point I am making is this; sometimes we labour under the illusion that our family is so weird, so dysfunctional, has so many skeletons in the closet – that nothing good can come from it, that God can't write a new and better script for us. But the bible would say otherwise; God it seems does some of his best work in the midst of family pain and dysfunction.

For example, Adam and Eve began their family with blame that ended with murder when one of their sons killed the other.

Abraham pretends that his wife, Sarah, is his sister and later has a child by another woman, causing all sorts of issues.

Isaac loved his son Esau more than his younger son, Jacob. Which may have been OK or not for the fact his wife Rebecca loved Jacob more than Esau, and so they conspired to rob Esau of his inheritance.

Then there was Jacob, who had thirteen kids, which in itself is not dysfunctional, but is when you consider those thirteen children came from four different mothers, causing all sorts of sibling rivalry and jealousy.

That is just a few of the less than picture-perfect, more than a little dysfunctional families the bible highlights. And yet, in every one of them, without exception, God moved powerfully. In every one of them God's grace was experienced in such a way, hope was found in the midst of despair. And what was true then, can be true for you and your family now. No family is beyond the reach and work of God's grace.

Let's get back to Jochebed's story. Jochebed was mother not just to Moses, but to three remarkable children, all of who became revered prophets – Miriam, Aaron and Moses. Miriam was also a song writer and Aaron a priest. By any measure this was an overachieving family. Such was the success of her offspring; the Jewish Rabbi's associated this Proverb with Jochebed:

The wise woman builds her house.
(Proverbs 14:1)

In investing her life wisely and well in her children, Jochebed built not only her family – her house – but also her nation, the House of Israel.

Let's go a bit deeper to the most famous incident in her Jochebed's life:

Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman, and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.

Then Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants were walking along the riverbank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her female slave to get it. She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him. "This is one of the Hebrew babies," she said.

Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?"

"Yes, go," she answered. So the girl went and got the baby's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So the woman took the baby and nursed him. When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, "I drew him out of the water."

(Exodus 2:1-10)

The baby Moses here is described as a 'fine child.' Tradition has it that Moses was the author of the Torah, the first five books of the bible – which includes Exodus. This would mean the person who describes Moses as a 'fine child' was Moses himself. Now Moses had no baby photos to look at on which to base this judgement – all he would have had was the words his mother later told him, perhaps something like this, 'Moses – Moses – what a beautiful, special, anointed boy you were. I just knew that God had something special planned for you!'

The writer of Hebrews described Moses as 'no ordinary child.' Here's the truth, would any new mother describe their child as 'ordinary'? We might look at a baby and think, but not say, 'Yep, pretty ordinary'. That's why we have sayings like, 'He has a face that...'

While it is true we might see another's child as ordinary, a mother will gaze at her nursing child, or her growing toddler and her heart will sing, 'Extraordinary!'

But what, apart from a mother's love, made baby Moses special? Israel's Rabbi's offered various explanations, including that the moment Moses was born, the room flooded with light. When our children Joel and Emily were born, the only thing the room was filled with was screams – mostly mine! Another explanation was that Moses was born circumcised – which is some feat. Whatever the explanation, Jochebed knew that she knew that she knew God had set him apart for something special. And that presented a problem - a big problem.

Israel had lived in Egyptian captivity for generations and their population numbered in the tens our thousands. So large had they become, Pharaoh feared an uprising, and so ordered effective genocide by killing every boy at birth. When the midwives didn't carry out his order, he went a step further:

Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: "Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."

(Exodus 1:22)

And so Jochebed hides Moses for the first three months of his life, but then for his own sake, she has to let him go. She prepares a raft of reeds, places him inside it and launches it gently amidst the reeds. With her heart heavy with grief I can barely comprehend, she sends Miriam to follow the raft's progress from the bank of the Nile.

Then the miracle happens. No less than Pharaoh's daughter finds Moses and the raft. Miriam is on hand, and with uncommon courage, suggests that she get a Hebrew woman to be the wet nurse to the baby. And so the unimaginable happens – Moses is returned to his mother Jochebed and for the next two years she nurses him under the protective covering of Pharaoh's daughter. Her Hebrew son is now an Egyptian prince! He really was special!

Not only does Jochebed nurse Moses as his mother, she is paid for the privilege! Who would have thought? Don't you love the God who could orchestrate such a story?

And it is a story made possible because Jochebed was prepared to let go – literally let go of her son – and not just let go, but to hang on the promise that her baby was safer in God's hands than in hers. For three precious months Jochebed has nursed her precious, special son – but exactly because he was special, for his sake, he had to let him go – to literally launch him into the unknown – at the same time, hanging on to God and his faithfulness no matter what.

Now let me state the bleeding obvious; I am not a mother. I'm a dad, and while that makes a big difference, there are some challenges parents share together as they raise their children. Not least of these challenges is learning the art of letting go. Raising children involves negotiating one transition after another. Often those transitions are hard.

I remember Sue's sadness when Joel went from breast to bottle-feeding.

Then there is transition from home to school – often a transition harder for mums and dad than the child.

We survived the bumpy ride from childhood into adolescence. We survived that one.

Finally, our kids grow up into what we hope will be fully formed adults.

Each of these transitions can only be negotiated successfully if we learn and practice the art of letting go. Which is easier said than done, because to let go, specifically we are to let go of any illusion of control we might have.

I used to labour under the illusion that as your kids got older, the parenting gig got easier. And in some ways that is true. But in other ways it's not.

Our two wonderful, special, one-of-a-kind, extraordinary kids are now 20 and 18. I tell Emily she will always be my baby, but the truth is she is now a beautiful, confident young woman who does not need Sue or me the way she did when she really was a baby. I am barely coping with this fact. You see, I hate letting go – hate it!

Last year Emily spent a month in Europe with her friend Amelia. She turned 18 in Italy and celebrated Bastille Day in Paris watching the fireworks from the base of the Eiffel tower. Amazing. It was a trip she planned and paid all on her own. I was and am so proud of her. But I was also terrified.

While she was away I struggled. I worried. Every day, actually sometimes a few times a day, I would text her. She was very patient with me at first. But eventually, gently but firmly, I got a short text back from her. We searched for it this week, but it has since been deleted. It went something like this.

'Dad, can you not text me every day? I'm on a holiday. I'm ok. I'm safe. You don't have to worry.'

I learned then, and am still learning now, I cannot forever be a helicopter parent, constantly hovering over my kid's lives, always protecting, ever ready to swoop in and rescue them. Eventually, for their sake and mine, the helicopter has to land.

Jill Briscoe is a grandmother. She tells a story of babysitting one of her grandchildren:

Not too long ago I was babysitting one of our three, 3-year-old grandchildren. In our family, we had twins and a single birth all within 24 hours. We call them Search, Destroy, and Demolition. I was to baby-sit Demolition. As I waved good bye to his parents, he looked perfectly all right. We had a little story out of his favorite book *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. I put him to bed and went to sleep.

In the middle of the night, I felt a little hand, and I turned on the light. I looked at Drew: chicken pox from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. "Nana," he said, "Me's having a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. Why should some things like this happen to I?"

I thought how like Drew we all are. Why should something like this happen to me? We cannot believe it. As Miss Piggy says, "Moi? Not moi." We cannot believe that God would allow something to happen to such nice people like us.

I gave Drew a bath in porridge--oatmeal. It's a wonderful remedy. It takes away the itch. He swam around in this porridge bath, and then I took him out and wrapped his bumpy, little body in a great, big white towel. As I held him against my heart, he just kept saying, "Hold me, Nana. Hold me, Nana. Hold me, Nana."

Every parent wants to hold their child when they hurt. But the hard truth is that sometimes the best way to love our kids is not to hold them, but to let them go, trusting they are safer in God's keeping than ours.

In that heart wrenching, gut-churning moment, driven by desperate circumstances, Jochebed let go of her son Moses far earlier than any mother should. But she did not just let go. This was no blind act of desperation. It was a powerful exercising of faith.

Jochebed let go of her son, at the same time hanging on to the promise that her son was far safer in God's hands than in hers. When it comes to our kids, God calls us to progressively let go, always hanging on to the faithfulness of God.

So here is my question, for all mums and dads, grandparents and carers - what is God calling you to let go of today as an act of faith?

Perhaps like me it is control? The belief that you can live your kids lives better than they can.

Do you need to let go of any hidden desire to live your life through your kids, weighing them with a burden their shoulders were never designed to bear?

Some of us have become an overbearing, overprotective, overwhelming presence in our kids lives simply because we are seeking from them meaning and purpose that only God can give.

Perhaps it is anxiety – the constant worry about whether they are safe?

Perhaps it is fear – the question what will happen if...?

Perhaps God is calling you to let go of regrets about past mistakes? I wish I had that, done that...

Perhaps it's guilt? I should have, could have, never did...

Perhaps it's the pain of rejection, past or present?

Love, true love, learns to let go. In fact love is in fact exactly that – being prepared to let go.

And you can, I can. We can let go as we hang on to the God who hangs on to us.