



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **Fierce Protection**

Exodus 2: 5-10

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The Maasai tribe of East Africa has a rich culture, and they are known for their fierce warriors. These warriors protect a valuable culture that has shielded itself as western governments attempt to end their traditional way of life. The traditional greeting of Maasai warriors is “And how are the children?” If a whole people and whole culture is to be protected, it must start with its children.

Today we hear a story of fierce warriors. A diverse collection of women, working to protect the children. When the Pharaoh tried to destroy the Hebrew people by destroying their children, Moses’ mother hid him for three months, then “followed orders” by throwing him into the river, just perhaps not the way the Pharaoh intended. Instead, she threw him in, safely guarded by a basket she made to protect him. She threw him in just when she knew the women of the Pharaoh’s court would be bathing in the river. His sister watched to make sure that basket reached its intended destination and went over to follow up.

Pharaoh’s daughter, knowing that what she was doing went against her powerful father’s orders, saved and protected a Hebrew child. Moses’ sister slyly asked if she should find a Hebrew nursemaid for the child, and under the protection of the princess, his sister returned baby Moses to their mother, who would now not only be reunited with her son in safety, but would receive pay from the enemy to care for her child! Then, when he was older, she returned him to the Pharaoh’s daughter, knowing he would be safe, cared for, and protected within the walls of the Pharaoh’s court. Not only was he safe and protected, he gained enough standing in the enemy’s court to eventually save his entire people from slavery.

Often when we think of what it means to care for children, we think of the sweet, the tender, the mushy. Perhaps we think of Sunday School songs like the one we just sang, “Jesus Loves the Little Children,” a song that is nearly so saccharine-y sweet it almost hurts your teeth.

But there is nothing saccharine about protecting children. Not when Moses was a baby, not at any point in history, and certainly not now, in the midst of a pandemic and a movement for justice. No, protecting children is not saccharine-y sweet. It is the job of fierce warriors.

My grandfather is buried in Andersonville cemetery in Georgia, a former prisoner of war camp where Union soldiers were captured and held by the confederates. What is now a place of rest was once a place of torment. But the soldiers captured there had a song of hope they liked to sing. It declared their current pain, but also their assurance that their fellow Union soldiers were coming to their aid and would rescue and protect them. Take a listen and see if you recognize the tune:

“Tramp, Tramp, Tramp the Boys Are Coming” was a militaristic song of fierce protection, not a saccharine, sweet song about gentle love. Why use that tune for such a sweet little text like “Jesus Loves the Little Children”? Well, maybe it wasn’t such a sweet little text.

The text “Jesus Loves the Little Children” was written by Clarence Herbert Woolston, a Baptist minister in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. He lived from 1856-1927. Those were tough years for children. Those are the years of the child labor movement, when, in this country, people began to think that perhaps we should celebrate childhood rather than exploiting the labor of children.

It was not an easy fight. Being a child in church was different in those days, too. Children in the church were to be silent and still. “Time for Sharing” was not likely to appear in the order of worship. You can look at hymnals from those years and you will struggle mightily to find a children’s hymn.

But Clarence Herbert Woolston had a heart for children. He wrote books about using object lessons that have influenced the way churches do Time for Sharing, or the Children’s Sermon, today. In *Seeing Truth, A Book of Object Lessons with Magical and Mechanical Effects*, Woolston says, “The kingdom of heaven is coming in on the run, and the children are in the lead.”

He was concerned for the souls and the safety of children. He felt this was the age of children and that the future of childhood was up for grabs. His original text for “Jesus Loves the Little Children” was not some saccharine, sweet lullaby. It was a battle cry for the wellbeing of children. He included a verse directed at the

adults that said, “I am coming, Lord, to Thee, And Your soldier I will be, For You love the little children of the world; And Your cross I’ll always bear, And for You I’ll do and dare, For You love the little children of the world.”

Some of you are having to be fierce warriors for children right now, whether you are parents yourself or not. You are planning for virtual learning. You are feeding the hungry. You are making difficult decisions about your children’s care. You are weighing risks and benefits. Will there be lasting social implications if your child is too isolated? Will there be devastating consequences if your child is exposed to the virus? What is the right way to protect a child right now? How do we protect children from the evils present in our world right now? How do we teach them about racism and violence? What do we say about guns and climate change? How do we explain the violent words and actions of politicians? How do we feed the children who are sitting at home hungry? How do we protect the children who are trapped in abusive homes without the respite of the school day?

I don’t know. But I do know that we have to be fierce protectors of one another right now. Whether we are parents or teachers or grandparents or friends. There is no perfect way to protect each other, but we have to do our best. We have to be as creative as Moses’ mother and sister, fashioning whatever basket we can to ensure that our children are preserved and protected. We have to be like the Pharaoh’s daughter, willing to protect children we aren’t supposed to work to protect. These fierce women set Moses up to free his people from slavery at the hands of his adoptive family. Who knows what the children whose lives we are creatively protecting today will do?

When a Maasai warrior is greeted with, “And how are the children?” the traditional response is “all the children are well.” Children, we are here to make sure all of you are well. We are here to keep you safe as you go back to school, whatever that looks like: for some of you, virtual; and for others, in person. We are here to encourage you when it gets difficult, to keep you healthy, to dry your tears if it’s all a little overwhelming. We are your people and you are safe with us.

As we sing “Jesus Love the Little Children” again, children, hear this as a promise from your church family to fiercely love and protect you with the fierce love and protection Jesus showed when he said “Don’t stop the children. Let them come to me. The kin-dom of God belongs to the little ones.”

May God bless each of you as you begin a new school year full of challenges and possibilities. You are so loved and we've got your back.