

Howard Rutledge was an American fighter pilot. He was shot down and captured by the North Vietnamese in 1965. They threw him into a prison in Hanoi. What was the prison called? Heartbreak Hotel.

Howard Rutledge writes, “When the door slammed shut, a feeling of utter loneliness swept over me. I was locked in a six-by-six cell. It’s hard to describe what solitary confinement can do defeat a person. There are no books, no magazines, and no newspapers. The only colors you see are drab gray and dirt brown.”

Many of us know what it feels like to be in Heartbreak Hotel. Our country entered the hell of Heartbreak Hotel on January 22, 1973. That’s when the United States Supreme Court legalized abortion. Since then, over sixty million American children have died in their mother’s womb. According to a United Nations 2013 report, only ten countries in the world have a higher reported abortion rate than the United States.

The book of Exodus begins with its own version of Heartbreak Hotel. The first two chapters of Exodus take us on an epic journey—from a family to a nation, from an arrogant pharaoh to some bold women, and from state-sponsored killing to the God of all power and compassion.

You remember the story. Because of a famine in 1847 BC Jacob and his family—seventy people in all—traveled from Canaan to Egypt. That’s described in Exodus 1:1–7.

Fast forward 300 years and the nemesis is no longer a snake in the grass or an older brother named Cain or a nephew called Lot. No. This time the problem is a new pharaoh who doesn’t know Joseph. He notices that Israelites are becoming too numerous and too powerful for his comfort. So what does the pharaoh do? He creates his own version of Heartbreak Hotel.

Stage One: State Slavery. Exodus 1:11 says: “So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh.” Every Israelite slave was required to produce hundreds of bricks a day. And you think you have a tough job? Try this. Get water from a canal. Pour the water into a mud pit. Step up and down in the mud pit. Add straw to some mud. Let it dry in the sun. And voilà! You’ve got a brick! Now make hundreds of those a day—every day—with no time off. Ever!

Stage Two: Private Infanticide. Exodus 1:15–16 describes it this way. “The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, ‘When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.’” Shiphrah and Puah obey God and disobey the pharaoh’s command. God puts their names in the Bible. But Pharaoh, the most powerful man on the planet? His name isn’t in the Bible. Why is that? God does big things with small stuff.

The book of Exodus doesn’t mention God until Exodus 1:17. “But the midwives feared God.” Shiphrah and Puah to the rescue! Their bold witness testifies that God—the God of the Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—knows all about the Hebrew Heartbreak Hotel.

Stage Three: Open Genocide. Exodus 1:22 describes Pharaoh’s decree. “Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.” The pharaoh has moved from keeping the Israelites from fighting against Egypt and escaping (Exodus 1:10) to the horror of killing Hebrew baby boys. His policy becomes one filled with brutality, violence, and public slaughter. It’s against this backdrop that Moses is born.

“Now a man of the house of Levi [Amram] married a Levite woman [Jochebed], and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son” (Exodus 2:1–2). This son is Moses. Moses is the

couple’s third child. There is an older sister, whose name is Miriam, and an older brother, whose name is Aaron.

“When she [Jochebed] 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” (Exodus 2:2–3). This word, translated “basket,” is the same word that is translated “ark”—as in Noah’s Ark—in the book of Genesis. This ark in Exodus, just like Noah’s in Genesis, is coated with tar and pitch. You say, “What a minute! Noah’s ark was so much bigger!” Why is that? Because in the book of Exodus, God does big things with small stuff.

This baby boy is placed in the Nile River, and Miriam runs along the river’s edge. She watches as Pharaoh’s daughter bathes with her servants in the Nile River. “She [Pharaoh’s daughter’s servant] opened it and saw the baby. He was crying and she felt sorry for him” (Exodus 2:6). Moses is crying. This changes everything! In the book of Exodus a baby’s cry changes everything? Of course! God does big things with small stuff.

“When the child grew older, she [Jochebed] took him to Pharaoh’s daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, ‘I brought him out of the water’” (Exodus 2:10). Just like the midwives in chapter one, these women engage in civil disobedience. Moses’ mother and sister--as well as the Egyptian princess—all three align themselves with life instead of death. All for Moses.

Moses is an Egyptian word that means “bring out of water.” Finally! Someone who will bring Israel out of Pharaoh’s Heartbreak Hotel! And Moses will do it through what? Water! Moses will part the water of the Red Sea with a wooden staff. A wooden staff? God does big things with small stuff.

Hebrews in Egypt aren't the only ones who know what it feels like to be locked up in Heartbreak Hotel. You and I know all about drab gray and dirt brown. The problem for us, though, is that at first it didn't look like Heartbreak Hotel. It looked like the Promised Land! And it even was the Promised Land—at least for a while. That moral indiscretion? “No big deal!” That financial dishonesty? “No big deal!” That little lie? “No big deal!”

Sooner or later, though, “no big deal” becomes a really big deal! What we thought was the Promised Land becomes the death of a job, the death of our hope, the death of our dreams. Satan slams the door shut and says, “Welcome to Heartbreak Hotel! You can check out anytime you like. But you will never leave!”

I've got really bad news. We can't fight our way out. We can't think our way out, buy our way out, educate our way out, vacation our way out, or blast our way out. We're all stuck in sin—call it Heartbreak Hotel.

I've got some really, really good news for you! God does big things with small stuff. Two pieces of wood, three nails, a crown of thorns, and six God-forsaken hours. Jesus doesn't recoil, run, or retreat at the sight of our ugly prison. Instead, Jesus sheds His blood for us and for our salvation. That includes anyone in worship today who is grieving over aborting their own children. If this is you, then hear the Gospel that is for one and all. Jesus does really big things (sets us free from sin and shame and guilt and death), with what looks like really small stuff (His Word and Sacraments).

Howard Rutledge has more to say about Heartbreak Hotel. He writes, “I prayed for strength to make it through the ongoing night. Then, one day, a glimmer of light dawned through the bottom of my prison door. I knew that God would set me free!”

There is a glimmer of light dawning through the bottom of our prison door. Can you see it? It’s Easter light. It’s resurrection deliverance! Christ is alive! Christ’s resurrection victory empowers us to take a bold stand for life. How?

Supplication. We may think our prayers are small in relation to the magnitude of the problem of abortion. Not so! Education. Educate yourself, your children, and the people you know about Lutherans For Life. Legislation. Support leaders who embrace these words, “All men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Proclamation. We have the most hopeful message the world has ever heard. You know it. God does big things with small stuff. How can we be so sure? Shiphrah and Puah, Jochebed, Miriam, and Moses ... and especially Jesus. Amen.