

Call the Midwives: A Story of Courage and Faith

Exodus 1:15-21

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The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.

Exodus 1:15-21

In the Bible, the book of Genesis provides the family stories of Israel. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his eleven brothers. The stories point to God's persistent blessing. God selected an old couple named Abraham and Sarah and said, "You and your children are mine, all mine!" Just to prove it, God gave them a son.

Whatever happened after that, God had a family, one generation after another. The family grew. This was God's original promise: "Abraham, look into the sky and count the stars, if you can. So shall you descendants be!"

But, there was a reaction to the promise. God's family grows, now many of them in Egypt, so many that the new Pharaoh gets nervous. This Pharaoh didn't know Joseph. All he could see were Joseph's children, and grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. The Hebrews were not from there. They were immigrants. And now there were so many of them, they were taking over the land!

Pharaoh says to his court, "As long as they stayed a minority, we could keep them out of the way. We could give them menial jobs. They could be cooks in Egyptian country clubs and domestic servants in the Egyptian homes. They could shine our Egyptian sandals and clean our Egyptian bathrooms." That's where we want them to stay, said Pharaoh, "but there are just too many of them. Too many of these immigrants. So we have to deal shrewdly with them, lest they take over what we have..."

Wow, that's some story, isn't it? Some might say it's the kind of story that repeats itself over and over again. I think it's the kind of story we can interpret a number of different ways, depending on where we stand.

Maybe you have seen the newspaper cartoon. A blustering white American in a suit and tie yells, "It's time to reclaim America from illegal immigrants!" The Navajo next to him says, "I'll help you pack."

Pharaoh reacts out of anxiety and fear: he enslaves the Hebrews for the sake of his economy. He didn't know about Joseph, didn't care about Joseph – all he wants is "those people" under his thumb, and while he's at it, he will build an empire on their broken backs. Twice in two sentences, the Bible calls him "ruthless."

We cannot handle these matters lightly. This is ancient story that rings true. We know today - Racism is an issue. Immigration is an issue. Exploitation is an issue. Fear and violence -- these issues are with us every day.

What is fascinating about our Bible story is that in that patriarchal culture, we hear the story of two brave and faithful women. Pharaoh forces the Hebrew slaves to build entire cities out of bricks and mortar. And yet this biblical story says is that some women stood up to Pharaoh. They refused to go along with his brutality.

It's a remarkable story. Rather than be robbed of dignity, there are women who find ways to resist, to push back, to stand up for themselves.

Here's the thing about Shiphrah and Puah, the two women who are heroes of this Bible story: they changed the narrative and they resisted power. The story goes like this: Shiphrah and Puah were midwives, Hebrew midwives. Pharaoh called them in, and said, "Now, when you are delivering babies for the Hebrew women, if you see it's a boy, get rid of it; if it's a girl, that's OK – no threat to me."

Well, these two women, Shiphrah and Puah, ignored him. They paid no attention to Old Mister Pharaoh. They honored God, and so the boy babies kept coming.

Old Mister Pharaoh kept seeing little boys, and called in the midwives. "Why have you done this? Why are you letting the little boys live?" The Hebrew midwives said, "Well, Mister Pharaoh, you have to understand. Hebrew women are sturdy and vigorous. They're not like the delicate flowers of Egypt. Those Hebrew Mamas pop those babies out and we don't even know about it." A lie? A fib? A new narrative? It did not matter.

Old Pharaoh didn't know what to say. Shiphrah and Puah bowed dutifully, slipped out of the palace, gave one another a high-five, and started having some babies of their own. (1)

So what do we do with Shiphrah and Puah? They tell a story to Pharaoh that is not true in order to save the children. For them, it is a matter of civil obedience, in the most extreme and

necessary of circumstances. I can only imagine the campfires as the Hebrews told this story over the years, laughing at Old Mister Pharaoh as their tribes increased.

But Pharaoh's cruelty is no laughing matter. He's still out there, you know. He goes by different names, but he's still out there. Pharaoh is still wherever women are put down, wherever children are endangered, wherever strangers are feared and immigrants enslaved. And when we see him, we have to stand up to him. That's what the Bible is teaching us here. We do not answer to a human authority who claims to be all powerful – the Hitlers, those who abuse their power for their own greed or ego.

In the words of Psalm 2, God looks down upon the tyrants and bullies of this world and laughs.

As people who seek to listen to the biblical prophets and follow the ways of Jesus, we do what we can, in the places where we live, to declare that the God of Abraham and Sarah is a God of love, of compassion, of justice for the vulnerable. That is the power we know is true and eternal.

The text says the midwives feared God – a fear that is respect, awe, a higher power, a truer power than Pharaoh.

The story of amazing women who defy Pharaoh's edicts of fear and death and live into a bigger story of life and liberation continues in Exodus.

During the time the midwives were delivering babies, a baby boy was born to a Hebrew woman. She hid him for 3 months and then did what she could to save him. She found a basket and covered it with pitch and put into in the reeds on the river and then he was found by a woman who love him and raise him as her own.

The Spirit moved in the lives of many women. Choosing the way of life and hope and not fear and hate and death often comes not in dramatic, sweeping events, but in small ones - the birth of a little baby, the cleverness of midwives, and a tiny basket boat floating on the water.

Courageous women are throughout this and the early stories in Exodus. The midwives evade the order of Pharaoh out of compassion for the Hebrews and a fear or awe of God. The mother hides her baby and then entrusts him to God in a carefully prepared little boat, a big sister watches over her baby brother as he floats along, and an Egyptian princess has mercy on a child she surely recognizes as a Hebrew baby, condemned to death by her own father and the very power structure that shelters her. She names him Moses, a Hebrew name.

Courageous women, courageous people, each doing something small that helped God give birth to a people, a vision for all people of freedom and hope.

What does it mean for us to say yes to God and no to powers of evil in large and small ways? How do we live our faith in business, in school, at home, in our neighborhoods, on line? In what ways do our acts of resistance change the world for those around us?

Along with many in our congregation, I have recently been reading and discussing White Fragility by Robin DeAngelo. She looks deeply at the system of racism and our complicity as white people. We did not say no because we were oblivious to so much that was going on economically and socially. Now that our eyes are opened, what is our responsibility? I am aware of many next steps people are working on – text books that need to be rewritten to reflect facts and stories of black history; voting rights; lending practices for homes and businesses to black people and people of color; policing practices that changes the use of unnecessary force and profiling against black people and people of color. One thing we can do is refusing to laugh at a racist joke. Angelo calls that interrupting racism. It seems small but it matters. We need to learn what it means to be allies to large and small ways with black communities, Latino and Latina, people of color. We need to choose to see people, listen, learn their names.

This midwife story was written down 300 years after it happened. By then the Hebrew people were safely delivered into the Promised Land and beginning to write the oral history of their ancestors. In 300 years they'd forgotten some of the details. They'd forgotten, for instance, the Pharaoh's *name*. Imagine that. The most powerful man in the world and the descendants of *slaves* had forgotten his name. But the two midwives who'd safely delivered their nation, *their* names they'd remembered. (2)

I close this morning with a Franciscan blessing that reminds us of the courage and faith of Shiphrah and Puah.

May God bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your hearts.

May God bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really CAN make a difference in this world, so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done. Amen.

1) & 2) Rev. Bill Carter, "Lying to Pharaoh, Truthful to God," 8/23/14

<https://billcartersermons.blogspot.com/2014/08/lying-to-pharaoh-truthful-to-god.html>

