

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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August 27, 2017
21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
Exodus 1:8 - 2:10

Thanks to Shiphrah and Puah

Let me begin by acknowledging the Bible's origins in a patriarchal culture. We believe that the Bible was inspired by God's Spirit, AND written by people. It is uniquely authoritative in our lives and in our world, it is God's Word to us, and like Jesus, it is fully human. So you've probably noticed that most of the Bible's stories are about the men, even though it's a good bet that in those days, 50% of the population was female. Of course, our own history books have a similar bias, which we are only recently recognizing.

That means that when a woman is referred to by name in the Bible, it's worth paying attention. When a woman speaks in the Bible, pay attention to her words. She must have said something important, to be remembered. And since Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives of God's salvation story are both named and have a voice in the Bible, pay attention to them. We remember them today because something like 3400 years ago, they were clever enough, bold enough, and faithful enough to play a part in God's holy history. Thank you, Shiphrah and Puah!

The story begins with the rise of a new king. It is an ominous beginning, for despite the power inherent in being king, this new king is insecure and anxious. He doesn't know how the Israelites came to be living in Egypt. He is fearful, he is paranoid, and he is a tyrant—a dangerous combination for the common people. And like many before and many after him, he finds a target for his anxiety. The Israelites are multiplying too quickly. They are the "other" whom he fears and blames. They become the scapegoat, and they must be oppressed. Make them work harder. Make them suffer. Make their lives bitter. And be ruthless in enforcing this new order of enslavement.

However, the king's plan doesn't entirely work. The monuments to his greatness as Pharaoh get built, but that's not enough for this king. That's not enough for his people, who have adopted his dread of these Israelites. The Israelites continue to multiply. The king is frustrated, and his oppression turns murderous, even genocidal. It makes no sense that he would want to kill all the male slave children, his future workforce, but wise policy is not this king's goal. And so he identifies the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, as the ones who will be in the right place at the right time to quietly carry out his plan for genocide.

Now, a midwife does have power. Think about it—childbirth is fraught with danger to both mother and child. Midwives are there to increase the chance of life, and reduce the risk of death. The king was ordering them to violate their calling as those who usher new life into the world. What he didn't know was that their obedience to God exceeded their fear of any human ruler. Shiphrah and Puah conspired together for life, for God, and for the Hebrew people. Their plot for life was more ingenious than Pharaoh's plot for death, and apparently he was fooled by their little lie. Or perhaps he was blinded by his conviction that the Hebrews were so different, so "other," that the story that Hebrew women were "not like Egyptian women" seemed plausible to him.

It is interesting to note that the word "Hebrew" comes into the story here, and is repeated many times as this plot unfolds, rather than the clan name "Israelite." Scholars identify the origin of the word "Hebrew" in many languages of the Near East, *'apiru*. It refers to any group of marginal people who have no social standing, own no land, and who are considered disruptive to society. The word implies that these people are low-class, feared, excluded, and despised. (Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of

Exodus," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994, p. 695) In many European countries, the word "Gypsy" has been used in the same way to describe the Roma people. In our country, calling native people "savages" did the same thing. And today the phrase "illegal alien" carries similar freight. Scapegoating denies the full humanity of its target. The name "Hebrew" began as a demeaning label for people on the margins.

So since plan A, oppress the people, and plan B, have the midwives murder the baby boys, didn't work, the king orders his loyal Egyptian subjects to be the instruments of plan C. "Throw the Hebrew baby boys into the Nile." We'll get rid of these unwanted, multiplying-like-rabbits others.

If you know other parts of the Bible's salvation story, you can hear all the irony in this command. These are some of the ironies. Baby Moses will be put into the Nile, but then drawn out of the river to be the leader of his people's liberation. In the Passover story, the tenth and final plague will be the death of all the Egyptian baby boys, and the Hebrew babies will live. The Hebrew people will pass through water safely, and the Egyptian army will drown in the Red Sea. After Jesus' birth, another jealous and murderous king will order the death of Hebrew baby boys, but Jesus will live because his parents will take him to, of all places, Egypt! The Bible's drama is unsurpassed, and while our modern sensibilities might be offended by all this killing and threats of killing, there is still much to learn in these stories about God's will for life and partisanship for the oppressed. God is at work for the most unlikely people and despite all the evil intent of powerful humans. God has more power.

And because they are working on God's side, so do some additional unlikely women. Now the story gets personal. In one household, a baby boy is born. His mother is clever enough, bold enough, and faithful enough to preserve his life. Then his sister is clever enough, bold enough, and faithful enough to speak to the Egyptian maid and the Egyptian princess with a plan that is clearly God's plan to save this baby for a future that is also God's plan. What a triumph of the oppressed it is when Moses' mother is actually PAID to raise her own son. The boy who lives will grow up to foil all Pharaoh's plans, right under his murderous, evil nose!

Thanks to these clever, bold, and faithful women: Shiphrah, Puah, Moses' mother Jochebed, Moses' sister Miriam, Pharaoh's daughter, and even Pharaoh's daughter's maid. The arc of history bends toward God's will as they turn their lives in the direction of their faith.

We might be asking ourselves to what degree are our lives clever, bold, and faithful enough to bend history in the direction God desires. Are we alert to scapegoating in our world, or are we caught up in the anxiety and fear which seek a target for blame? Who do we think of as "other" than human, so different from ourselves that we label and exclude and dehumanize them? And could we possibly be instruments of God's will for justice, freedom, and peace?

Earlier this week at the MSU Convocation, inspirational speaker Bryan Stevenson challenged the entering class, telling them, "You can change the world." He is inspirational because in his life, anyone can see that one person CAN change the world. As an attorney, he has devoted his life to justice and mercy for those on death row, the poor, children, people of color, and anyone else treated unfairly by our nation's justice system. "You can change the world," he told 3000 young people and everyone else listening in the packed MSU field house. And then he told us how, beginning with words which come straight from a Biblical world view.

To change the world, he said, you have start by getting close to the poor, to those who are struggling, to those who are needy and hurt and disabled, those who are addicted, homeless or in

prison. “Get proximate to poverty,” he said, and I heard in his vision the foundational Biblical story of the people of Israel enslaved in Egypt, the *’apiru*, the people on the margins. I heard the Christian story of God coming to be with us in Jesus Christ. I saw Jesus hanging out with the lepers, the sinners, the outcasts, the disabled, the poor. Get near to the poor, for that is where God’s intentions for justice and mercy are most needed.

His second point was just as Biblical. “Work to change the narrative,” and the dominant narrative he described is the story motivated by fear and anger that keeps us all oppressed. We live in a post-genocidal society, he said, built on centuries of slavery, and we haven’t owned up to the truth about that. And until we do, we won’t achieve reconciliation and justice. The dominant narrative teaches us to presume the dangerousness and guilt of people of color, while the Bible tells us that all are made in the image of God and when God looks at us, he sees Christ in us. For “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Godself, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. . . . So we are ambassadors for Christ.” (2 Cor 5:18-20) We need to change the narrative, by telling the truth.

Stevenson’s third piece of advice was also straight from the Bible. “Stay hopeful,” he said. For “hopelessness is the enemy of justice.” It’s no secret that the African-Americans enslaved in our country drew their hope from the Exodus story, for when Israel was in Egypt’s land, God was at work to “let my people go.” We have to believe, Stevenson reminded us, in what we haven’t yet seen. Earlier in the afternoon, he responded to the question “how do you keep your hope?” by acknowledging the people on whose shoulders he stands. “If my great-grandmother, who was born a slave, could have the courage to learn to read, if my grandmother could have the courage to teach children to read, if they could do what they did, with what they had, I have to do what I can with what I have.” Stay hopeful. That is the way of faith.

And finally, he said, “Be willing to do uncomfortable things.” Oh, you mean be like Shiphrah and Puah, and tell fibs to the Pharaoh? That’s uncomfortable. Oh, you mean hide your baby for three months in defiance of unjust government orders? Oh, you mean have compassion for someone you’ve been told you are to despise? The Biblical story gives us plenty of examples of people willing to do uncomfortable things, but we don’t need to put it all back on history. Oh, you mean challenge a racial slur or prejudice, dare to reach out to someone who society considers lower than me, do you mean examine myself to see how I’ve absorbed the dominant narrative and benefitted from privileges denied to others? Do you mean really be willing to do uncomfortable things—like Jesus did?

That, my friends, is the story of salvation. That God did uncomfortable things to change the narrative and heal our deepest wounds. That God used clever, bold, and faithful people to move the story along, unlikely people, undervalued people, who had power the world didn’t recognize as power. For God is moving the universe toward justice, freedom, peace, and reconciliation, and to get there, truth must be told to power. But—this is the good news—God loves this world so much that through Jesus Christ we can change it, and be part of God’s story.

What does the Lord require of us? To do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. May we be clever enough, bold enough, and faithful enough to live up to this call.