



People Like Us

Call the Midwives: Shiphrah and Puah

Exodus 1:8-21

June 26, 2022

Let us pray. Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief. Amen.

You've just heard a reading from the second book of the Bible, Exodus. That's the name we use for this story of God's people called out of captivity in Egypt by divine power and grace, God's mighty arm and outstretched hand. Exodus. Exodus is a Greek phrase given by those who translated the narrative from its original Hebrew. In Greek, the title Exodus means "a way out," appropriate for the story of liberation and wandering in the wilderness along the way for at least a generation. Exodus, a way out.

But the book has a second title. In Hebrew, the titles for books in scripture are taken from the first words of the book itself. And so, the second book of the Bible is given the name *Shemot*, for Exodus' first verse reads, "These are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt."

Shemot, these are the names.

Exodus, a way out.

Liberation requires community. There is no other way out.

Last week, some of you remember, we explored the story of Joseph and his brothers that brings the book of Genesis (or in Hebrew, *Bereishit*, "in the beginning...") to a close. Perhaps you remember how Joseph rose to power in the land of Egypt and saved the lives of his people by bringing them into this new land, where he had stockpiled enough food to last them through the famine in Canaan. Well, Exodus opens with an ominous observation. It goes like this: "Now a new king arose in Egypt who did not know Joseph." And so, the trouble begins. You see, Joseph is dead and gone, but his people have multiplied and filled the land. And this is a problem

for the new Pharaoh, the king. He is threatened by the growing number of Hebrew immigrants in his midst. He is afraid that their allegiance to his authority is not absolute. He is worried that they may turn against him if given the opportunity, fight against him if given the chance. And so, Pharaoh is afraid, and fear invested with unchecked power quickly turns to oppression. And so it is in Egypt. Pharaoh clamps down on the Hebrews. He forces them into hard labor. He constructs systems and policies designed to suppress their growth and drain their energy. But Pharaoh's schemes are failures, for the more the Hebrews are oppressed, the more they multiply, the deeper his fear grows. A concern becomes a crisis for the powerful king. And so, he devises an even more heartless plot, a plan for absolute extermination. "Call the midwives and give them this command: *If a Hebrew woman gives birth to a baby boy, you shall kill him.*"

Now before continuing, I want to pause to name the dramatic contrast in power here, which is essential to understanding the story. Pharaoh is in every way an authoritarian dictator. He is the *sole* source of supreme control in the Egyptian Empire. The Hebrew midwives were as far from Pharaoh as could possibly be imagined. His power is without limits; they have no formal power. His status is at the very top of the structures of society; they have no status. His voice alone matters, and they have no voice in the decisions that impact their work. And yet—and yet—the author of Exodus interrupts the narrative to introduce two of them by name.

Shemot, these are the names. Shiphrah and Puah. Exodus. *Shemot*. These are the names. A way out. Shiphrah and Puah, remember them.

What happens next is entirely unthinkable given the constructs of the age. These two women, completely lacking formal authority, exercise the one power they *do* have. Honoring God and defying Pharaoh, they allow the boys to live. It is a stunning act of resistance against the unjust and immoral demands of a ruthless king.

Of course, Pharaoh's reaction is predictably cruel. After questioning the midwives—who show both wisdom and shrewdness in creating an explanation for the birth of Hebrew boys—he simply orders the systematic killing of all Hebrew baby boys. And, again, the women resist, creating a subversive movement inspired by Shiphrah and Puah.

And perhaps you know the rest of the story. One of those Hebrew women seeks to save her newborn son by placing him in a basket and hiding him in the bulrushes on the edge of the river. Shemot. That boy's name was Moses, and he would grow up to be the great liberator of the Hebrew people. Exodus, a way out of captivity.

This summer at Second we're exploring the stories of Biblical characters—people like us—from whose witness we might draw strength and inspiration. This morning we consider the example of two women whose courageous and defiant act of love becomes the catalyst for a movement that leads to liberation.

Shemot, these are the names. Shiphrah. Puah. Exodus, a way out.

Now, I want to acknowledge that you may be thinking something along these lines: Shiphrah and Puah are *not* people like us. They are people of extraordinary, death-defying boldness, their names preserved in the pages of holy scripture. And not only that. They lived in a very different, very scary, time. Theirs is a tale of heroism meant to inspire, perhaps, but surely not intended as an example to be followed. They are not people like you and me.

Just in case anyone is feeling that way, allow me to push back a bit this morning. The story of the

Hebrew midwives is, I believe, recorded and passed on as a direct admonition to people of faith in every age. People whose love of God transcends their fear. People who have agency and ability, capacity and a call to *do something* to resist powerful forces that aim to thwart the movement of God's Spirit toward liberation for all creation.

Against expectations, this story insists that each of us has an indispensable role, a part just for us, to play in bearing God's salvation into the world. It insists that we can do that no matter who or where we are, no matter the conditions of our lives. That we can do that with every single word of courage, every last act of compassion. It insists that we can do that, no deed too small to contribute to God's work in the world. The story reminds us that catalytic actions come in all shapes and sizes. Simply refusing to join in mean-spirited laughter or joy at someone else's expense. Walking away from a toxic or damaging situation. Listening closely to a viewpoint other than your own. Building bridges of understanding across chasms of conflict. Speaking your truth with love in a tense moment. Ending cycles of abuse and hatred. Each one an opportunity to bring forth light and life and hope and peace in a world desperate for these simple and profound gifts. Each one an invitation to create a ripple of impact that might just lead to a tidal wave of possibility.

This week, more than 170 children will spend each morning here at Second Church as part of our annual Vacation Bible School. This year they will be "on the road with Jesus." They will be learning the stories and songs of the faith. They will make new friends. They will create beautiful art. They will eat delicious snacks. They will play all kinds of games, and (I am praying) they will sleep very well each night this week. I speak from experience when I say it's the best week for any of us who have the privilege of working at Second Presbyterian Church, for this week our building will be filled with the sounds and sights of the sacred. But here's the most important thing that will happen this week: 170 children and 70 volunteers (teenagers and grown-ups) will hear

again and again that they are loved—by their church and by God. They will hear stories of scripture that will be shared in compassionate and grace-filled ways. They will hear their own names, beloved child of God. This week, seeds will be planted that are sure to bear fruit in months, years, or even decades yet to come. Never underestimate the power of these simple moments that shape lives of faith and purpose.

But that's not all that will happen in this space this week. This week, on Wednesday evening, we will host a meal for our neighbors, many of whom receive groceries from the Northside Food Pantry here at Second. The idea for this community meal surfaced well over two years ago. We've been praying and hoping and planning for the opportunity for a long, long time. In that time, the harsh realities faced by many in our community have only been made more difficult. In that time, the inequities in wealth and income have increased in our city and in our neighborhood. The needs have grown exponentially. On Wednesday evening, our hope is to deepen relationships with our neighbors by doing what Jesus did—by breaking bread together, by sharing tables and conversations, by listening to the stories and learning the names of the people with whom we share this community. Our hope is to break down barriers that divide and separate us, to learn not only the faces, but the names of our neighbors. Shemot, these are the names. Exodus, a way out. It's such a small thing. One simple meal. A few new relationships. Hardly even noticeable. *Except.* Each word spoken and every story heard can be a catalyst, the beginning of a chain reaction that leads to change. That's how the Spirit of God works in our lives and in our world.

Friends, I don't need to tell you this, but I'm the one standing up here and so I will. We're living in times that strain and threaten to sever the ties that connect us to one another. The carved-up tribalism. The legitimate fear. The lack of trust in each other or concern for the common good. This week, I read the analysis of one scholar who suggested that we are now two fundamentally different nations uneasily

sharing the same geographic space. Friends, we have scriptures that describe such situations, and I assure you that they do not end well. In such a time as this, it strikes me that one of the most difficult tasks before us, at Second Presbyterian Church and as followers of Jesus Christ, is this call placed upon us to listen with compassion, to respond with grace. This can seem so small, so insignificant. I don't know about you, but sometimes I feel as if I'm dropping water on a raging fire, one eyedrop at a time. But then I read this story of two courageous and powerful women in the Bible's second book, who bear witness to a deeper truth, and I pray with all my soul that their witness will be ours as well.

Simple acts of grace that grow and spread. Letters sent to leaders expressing our concern for those in need in our city. Meals prepared for one another with love. Prayers offered for one another with compassion. Defiant hope in a desperate world. Courageous faith that counters fear-fueled hatred.

Shemot, these are the names. Shiphrah. Puah. Haven Elizabeth. Arlo Michael. MacKenzie Mary. You. Me. All of us invested with power and given opportunities every day to use that power for God's grace. Never underestimate the power of these simple acts.

Exodus, a way out. Liberation from every Pharaoh that attempts to keep the Spirit contained. Liberation from every Pharaoh that seeks to drive us apart for the purpose of maintaining control.

Together, people like us can be a movement of the Spirit.

By God's grace, we can point the way out, the way to a better place for all God's beloved children. Amen.