

“Midwives of Compassion”
Exodus 1:1-2:10
Pollocksville Presbyterian Church
Sermon #67
12th Sunday After Pentecost
24th Sunday in the COVID-19 Pandemic
8.23.20

Exodus 1:1-2:10

1 These are the names of the Israelites who came to Egypt with Jacob along with their households: 2 Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, 3 Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, 4 Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. 5 The total number in Jacob’s family was seventy. Joseph was already in Egypt. 6 Eventually, Joseph, his brothers, and everyone in his generation died. 7 But the Israelites were fertile and became populous. They multiplied and grew dramatically, filling the whole land.

8 Now a new king came to power in Egypt who didn't know Joseph.
9 He said to his people, "The Israelite people are now larger in
number and stronger than we are. 10 Come on, let's be smart and
deal with them. Otherwise, they will only grow in number. And if war
breaks out, they will join our enemies, fight against us, and then
escape from the land." 11 As a result, the Egyptians put foremen of
forced work gangs over the Israelites to harass them with hard
work. They had to build storage cities named Pithom and Rameses
for Pharaoh. 12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they
grew and spread, so much so that the Egyptians started to look at
the Israelites with disgust and dread. 13 So the Egyptians enslaved
the Israelites. 14 They made their lives miserable with hard labor,
making mortar and bricks, doing field work, and by forcing them to
do all kinds of other cruel work.

15 The king of Egypt spoke to two Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah: 16 “When you are helping the Hebrew women give birth and you see the baby being born, if it’s a boy, kill him. But if it’s a girl, you can let her live.” 17 Now the two midwives respected God so they didn’t obey the Egyptian king’s order. Instead, they let the baby boys live.

18 So the king of Egypt called the two midwives and said to them, “Why are you doing this? Why are you letting the baby boys live?”

19 The two midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because Hebrew women aren’t like Egyptian women. They’re much stronger and give birth before any midwives can get to them.” 20 So God treated the midwives well, and the people kept on multiplying and became very strong. 21 And because the midwives respected God, God gave them households of their own.

22 Then Pharaoh gave an order to all his people: “Throw every baby boy born to the Hebrews into the Nile River, but you can let all the girls live.”

2 Now a man from Levi’s household married a Levite woman. 2 The woman became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She saw that the baby was healthy and beautiful, so she hid him for three months. 3 When she couldn’t hide him any longer, she took a reed basket and sealed it up with black tar. She put the child in the basket and set the basket among the reeds at the riverbank. 4 The baby’s older sister stood watch nearby to see what would happen to him.

5 Pharaoh’s daughter came down to bathe in the river, while her women servants walked along beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds, and she sent one of her servants to bring it to her. 6 When she opened it, she saw the child. The boy was crying,

and she felt sorry for him. She said, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children."

7 Then the baby's sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Would you like me to go and find one of the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?"

8 Pharaoh's daughter agreed, "Yes, do that." So the girl went and called the child's mother. 9 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I'll pay you for your work." So the woman took the child and nursed it. 10 After the child had grown up, she brought him back to Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I pulled him out of the water."

The Word of the LORD. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I've been itching to preach from Exodus, especially this passage, for some time. Over four years ago, I took a class at Union Presbyterian Seminary called *Women as Preachers, Prophets, and Priests* taught by Professor Emerita Beverly Zink-Sawyer. The women in today's story were some of the first women from the Bible we talked about in the class in order to set us up for the discussion of women in North America who had to constantly work within

constraints in order to push the envelope for the next generation of women. Then, the next generation continued the work of their elders and passed on the same fervor to the next generation of women and it has continued today.

Shiphrah and Puah.

Growing up in a fundamentalist background, we didn't focus too much on the women characters in scripture. There was an occasional Mary the Mother of Jesus or Martha or Mary Magdalene. Usually, when women were mentioned in scripture it was to point out their place from scriptures like 1 Timothy 2:12: Silent. Behind the men. Obeying the law. But, early on in Dr.

Beverly Zink-Sawyer's class back in 2016, I was introduced to Shiphrah and Puah for the first time. These two critical actors set up a precedent for others to follow and I wish I had known them earlier in my life. I was cheated out of a relationship with them because I was taught to focus on Moses. And don't get me wrong, Moses is great and all, I mean, I used to dress like him on Halloween, but he's not the first Hebrew to stand up to tyranny in Exodus. Shiphrah and Puah are.

So, my question to you who are listening right now, have you noticed these two women before? There is no shame if you haven't because I guarantee you aren't the only ones. If you have known these two for some time, then consider yourselves in a small group of fortunate people who have had the time to learn from these two

midwives. The good news is for those who have not known about these two women, the LORD will use them to bless your lives.

The Hebrews had grown in number since Joseph's death. Then there came a pharaoh who never knew Joseph and his paranoia took over. He gave into fear simply thinking that because these people were more numerous than the Egyptians, the Israelites would join their enemies and conquer them. The Hebrews were forced into slavery, but they still grew in number. Harsher measures were taken. Genocide was law. Shiphrah and Puah, two Hebrew midwives, were commanded to murder every infant boy they came across when Hebrew mothers gave birth to their children. Their response is in verse 17:

Now the two midwives respected God so they didn't obey the Egyptian king's order. Instead, they let the baby boys live.

That took courage knowing they weren't following the narrative of "law and order". Instead, Shiphrah and Puah within the constraints of the moment trying to avoid danger, undermine Pharaoh's law and he's dumb enough to believe them when the midwives claim that the Hebrew women give birth much faster than these two can reach them.

Because these two women followed the Law of the LORD and disobeyed Pharaoh, the LORD dealt kindly with them and gave

them families which contributed to the growth of the entire Hebrew people.

As midwives, Shiphrah and Puah lived into their call to protect life by all means necessary. They were compassionate. They didn't give into fear and they didn't give into the excuse "I was just following the law". These two women knew there were costs for their disobedience of a law that deemed genocide legal. It was "law and order" and God gave Shiphrah and Puah the courage to fight that law with everything they had. Sometimes, the law is not good. Sometimes, the law is not as clear as we believe it to be.

Sometimes, the law is morally offensive and must be stopped at all costs and Shiphrah and Puah knew that. No matter what Pharaoh or his own agents thought they could do to intimidate an ethnic

group, God used these two women to thwart morally bankrupt plans.

On February 19th, 1942, just over two months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Empire of Japan, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066.¹ Fearing Japanese sympathizers with the Empire of Japan who were citizens in the United States, this order made Japanese internment camps legal in our nation. Those who were of Japanese descent were rounded up and placed in isolated camps around the country. Obviously, this was not FDR's greatest moment. He and many others gave into fear and that fear led to a morally repugnant law that was not overturned until the mid-1940s. It wasn't until 1988 and 1989 that

¹ <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/japanese-american-relocation>

Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush respectively issued formal apologies and financial reparations to the survivors and families of this horrible time in our nation's history.

There was a man living in one of the camps in Manzanar, just 220 miles northeast of Los Angeles, CA named Harry Yoshio Ueno (oo-AY-no).² He was one of nearly 120,000 Japanese Americans who were forced to live in these camps. Born in Hawaii and of Japanese descent, the 30-something Ueno, his wife, and their three sons were subjected to this horror. Eventually, he was assigned to work the mess hall in Manzanar and noticed that prisoners “were getting short-changed in sugar, meat, and milk rations”.³ It turns out that the camp officials were selling food and equipment in the

² <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2004-dec-21-me-ueno21-story.html>

³ *ibid.*

wartime black market. Ueno consequently formed a union and became a popular figure in the camp as they addressed their grievances with the camp officials.

Ueno was not liked by the corrupt authorities and was eventually jailed and kept in isolation for a crime he didn't commit for a year when he was finally reunited with his family where they lived in another camp until the end of WWII. In 2004, Mr. Ueno died at the age of 97. Until the end of his life, he taught the horrors of what happened so today we wouldn't repeat the mistakes made nearly 80 years ago.

Ueno, like Shiphrah and Puah, was a midwife of compassion. He had to work within a corrupt system in order to bring about a bit of dignity and sanity that prisoners desperately needed. He had to use whatever means necessary to fight against an evil law.

Shiphrah and Puah were midwives of compassion and the first heroes in Exodus. The LORD has used them to frame the story of Exodus that continues throughout scripture. We will hear this echo again and again in other Bible stories, especially as we journey through Exodus during the Fall. Shiphrah and Puah loved the LORD their God with all their hearts, minds, souls, and strength, and they loved their neighbors as they loved themselves. They did not give into fear, but they respected the LORD. Because they respected God, God increased their Jewish family despite slavery and genocide under an oppressive regime. As they were slaves in

Egypt and as they faced extermination, they stood up against tyranny. They set the story up for the one who would lead the Hebrew children from bondage into freedom.

Like Shiphrah, Puah, and Harry Ueno, we are called to be midwives of compassion despite the acceptable behavior around us that is harmful. May the Holy Spirit overcome us with courage in the midst of chaos and faith in the midst of fear. May we follow the example Shiphrah, Puah, and Harry Ueno who were not driven by fear, but a respect of the LORD who commands us to love the LORD our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Beloved in Christ, believe this Good News!

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the
Sustainer. Amen.