



United Methodist Church OF GENEVA

Faithful Women in Fearful Times

An Eastertide sermon delivered on May 8, 2022
on Exodus 1:15-22 NRSV

15 The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, 16 “When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.” 17 The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. 18 Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, “Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?”

19 The midwives answered Pharaoh, “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.”

20 So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. 21 And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.

22 Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: “Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”

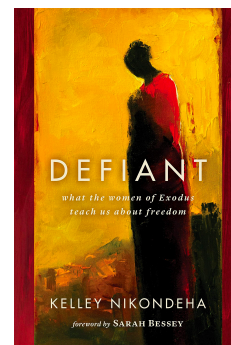
Prelude

Hi! I am Rob Hamilton. Senior Pastor here at UMCG. If this is your first time worshipping with us on Hamilton St or online or first time in a while - again we're glad to share in worship together.

As I begin today, I want you to know that we are sensitive about Mother's Day which is a day of celebration, honor and brunch for some while others today can be painful for a whole host of reasons. While I am featuring the faith of women today in my message, I do not seek to spend the next 15 minutes or so making the pain worse for those who find this day painful. We live such complex lives with complexity of emotions and relationships I realize it all wears on us differently. I just want you to know that I honor that and I feel it too. I believe God does as well.

In this preamble, before I pray today I also want to note the inspiration for this message which comes from the book **Defiant: what the women of Exodus teach us about freedom** by **Kelley Nikondeha**- which has been inspiring and encouraging to me. Early in reading it I knew the book's influence on me would find its way into my preaching, especially as we continue to see the bravery of women facing fearful times all around the world.

In a moment, I am going to take us into the Old Testament of the Bible to the beginning of the Exodus story, which high-



lights our faith ancestors, the Israelites (or Hebrews if your an Egyptian and want to derogatorily speak of the Israelites) who had long enjoyed generations of ease and plenty, but with the new Pharaoh in Egypt the Israelites were suddenly thrust into oppression and violence and we can look to the women to see God's powerful presence in the midst of those fearful times. Let's pause here for prayer before going any farther.

Prayer of Illumination

Most holy God, You have given us the gift of a long legacy of your sons and daughters who have gone before us to look up to in order to make sense of our present circumstances and to help us trust that you have not abandoned us. Grant us the gift of your Spirit to hear and heed the message you have for us today. In Jesus Name, amen.

Sermon

The focus of our story today comes from the passage that Jim read for us from the first chapter of Exodus, but you need to know the backstory of how we got to verse 15 in order to understand what is happening in the verses we heard moments ago. Today's story begins generations after the whole Jospheh and amazing technicolor dream coat thing happened.

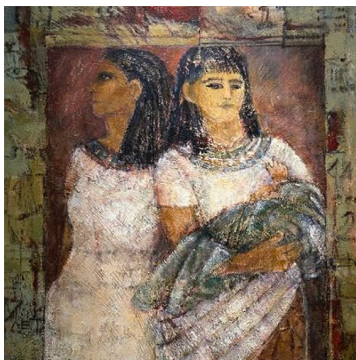
So first let's start there, in Genesis, with Jospheh. In the closing chapters of Genesis, God's people -the sons of Israel and their families- were threatened with famine in the land of Canaan. But God used what harm Joseph's brothers had brought upon him to make Joseph, who was a Hebrew, the #2 guy in Egypt. Egypt was the most powerful nation and with Joseph's divine assistance, Egypt had prepared for this famine. As a reward for Joseph's work, Pharaoh allowed Jospheh's family - all 12 tribes of Israel- to refuge from the famine in Egypt. In fact, Pharaoh gave the Israelites the rich pasture lands of Goshen on the Nile Delta, which made these agrarian Hebrew families prosper in both flock and family.

Eventually Jospheh's generation died and with the passing of yet another generation, so did Joseph's memory and eventually a new king of Egypt that didn't know Joseph came to power. This is how the first verse of Exodus begin a new chapter of the story of God's people who are going to go from a life of privilege and ease, to experience a significant disruption and disorientation as a new Pharaoh comes to power and forces the Israelites into slavery.

You see, this new Pharaoh that didn't know Jospheh. He was threatened by the refugee Israelites that came to live in Egypt to flee famine and who had grown more numerous and prosperous than the native Egyptians. And so the new Pharaoh oppressed these alien Israelites with hard labor, low wages and ensured that the Israelites were treated ruthlessly, even calling the Israelites - Hebrews- which in Egyptian is like calling them insects. However, the more these immigrant refugee Israelites were oppressed, the more their families grew and prospered.

Pharaoh realizing that his plans were so oppressive and cruel, he feared that the Israelites might organize against their oppressors and because there were more of these Hebrew invaders than the rightful citizens of Egypt, Pharaoh feared revolt. After all, the mantra of the powerful is often ‘we can’t stop dominating or we will be dominated’.

So it is with this back story that Pharaoh devises the most horrendous plot that Jim read for us this morning: the secret infanticide of immigrant refugee males. Just to be clear, I’m still speaking from the story of Exodus and not reading news from a developing nation, North Korea or our southern border. Though history does have a tragic way of repeating itself, doesn’t it?

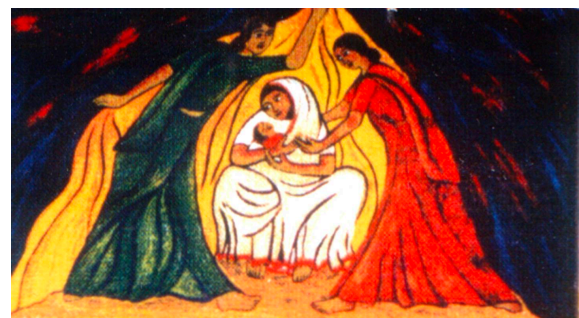


As the author of Exodus picks up this new disturbing chapter in Israelites’ history, it wants us to hone in and pay attention to two faithful women: Shiphrah and Puah, who are not the only midwives in Goshen, but who must have been leaders of the guild of Israelites midwives. These two named women of Exodus are trusted and respected women in their community. They are strong enough to help labor a child into the world, with hands that are gentle enough to usher the child from the safety and comfort of a mother’s womb into a cold and dark world and quickly bring the baby back

into the safety of a mother’s arms. These midwives are likely unflappable at the time of delivery and filled with compassion that can soothe an anxious mother and are also ready to make difficult decisions and deliver devastating news.

Their summons to Pharaoh’s presence and the news they received was shocking. Pharaoh orders them to secretly kill Hebrew males as they come out of the womb before their mothers’ can hear their baby’s first cry. This imperial command to take life was so antithetical to their divine calling to midwife, to usher new life into the world. So it comes as no surprise that Shiphrah and Puah were always going to obey the God of life even if it meant disobeying the ruler of the land.

These two faithful women relay the horror from Pharaoh to the other midwives on how they were to break the tiny bodies of males before their first breath, but these faithful women had their own secret, defiant plan: “We are the strong arms and soft hands of God, we are going to deliver babies and care for mothers just like our mothers and grandmothers before us have



done” all as an act of civil disobedience. What we see from the beginning of Exodus is that these organized and skilled women were more powerful than the most powerful leader of the most powerful nation of the world at that time, because they feared God and valued life. And so for a long time, the women of the midwives guild of Goshen, led by Shiphrah and Puah waged a silent war against Pharaoh and for quite some time Pharaoh didn’t even know he was losing the war.

Shipharah and Puah remind me a bit of the older Ukrainian woman who, as the Russians invaded Ukraine, handed out sunflower seeds to the Russians soldiers to put in their pockets with the famous words “Take these seeds and put them in your pockets, so at least sunflowers (Ukrainian national flower) will grow when



you all lie down here.” This woman’s defiant confrontation with the soldiers got much more colorful if you’ve seen the viral video. But her faith in fearful times reminds me of this Exodus story.

But back to Exodus, eventually reports reach Pharaoh that the Hebrews were still prolific. Pharaoh asked if there were toddler boys amongst the Hebrews and he knew he had been betrayed. Pharaoh never imagined an underling not obey his order, let alone women. So he called them in. A bit shocked by betrayal, Pharaoh half accuses, half gives the benefit of the doubt to these lowlife women and asks them “why there are toddler boys in Goshen?”

Shiphrah and Puah use Pharaoh’s prejudice against him claiming the Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women. They coyly claimed they couldn’t carry out Pharaoh’s plan even if they wanted to because the Hebrew women are more vigorous than the Egyptians and give birth before the midwives arrive. These two women looked Pharaoh in the eye and told a half lie that saved countless lives. And these two women weren’t entirely lying, Hebrew women were quite vigorous in

NOT carrying out his edict of death, but they were still there helping mothers deliver babies.

God responds to these faithful women who chose to obey the God of life over the leader of fear and death by blessing them with families of their own. The fear these women had of the Lord was more of reverent trust, then coercive terror. It's like the Shiphrah and Puah lived the kind of fear of the Lord we read about in Proverbs 14 when it says: "In the fear of the Lord one has strong confidence, and one's children will have a refuge. The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, so that one may avoid the snares of death."

In the context of the early pages of Exodus, we learn that fear of God can mean disobeying unjust laws and edicts, even if it means lying to the powers that sponsor death. I think the fear of God isn't some strategy or agenda or political party. Fearing the Lord is just doing the next right thing no matter what, even if it means risking your life in the midst of fear.

I see that kind of fear in women like Malala Yousafzai, the young Pakistani woman who was shot in the head by the Taliban for promoting the education of



girls, of her peers. With prayer and medical care, Malala recovered from the shooting and faced a choice of letting the terrorists win in silencing her for doing what is right or to persist anyway. Many of you know her story and she persists anyway. She felt called to make it her life's passion to fight for every girl in the world under 12 to receive free, safe, education. She was the youngest person to be awarded the Nobel Peace prize in 2014 and continues to fighting

poverty, wars, child marriage and gender discrimination so that the 130 million girls under 12 in the world get the chance to go to school.

Back to Exodus again, Pharaoh realized that his secret plan with the midwives wasn't going to work. So Pharaoh did what powerful, threatened, narcissistic men often do when they don't get their way. He turns the screws and further abuses people with his power. Pharaoh makes the infanticide plan public and turns the people against each other in a distraction from the real evil inside his own heart. Again, this is Exodus, not anything from modern day, right? But the Pharaoh in his horror had also planned his own demise, when he said "let the girls live." Even after encountering the faithful women, like Shiphrah and Puah, he still underestimates the faithful women who persist in fearful times, because they fear the Lord and not their circumstances or those who hold power over them.



Looking back upon this story in Exodus, we see how God energizes faithful women to obedience to the Lord even in the face of dangerous powerful people in the midst of fearful times. They use all their God given skill to organize against death and dehumanization. We trust that Shiphrah and Puah were not the first women to

act so faithfully in the midst of fear. I'm sure there are godly women that came before these two in our story today, who empowered them having faced prejudice, death orders, oppressive systems with divine stamina, clarity over God's call for justice even when the evidence of success wanes. I'm also confident it wasn't just the women, but the boys and men (like Moses, Aaron) these women helped birth and raise that also answer God's call to chose the fear of the Lord of Life over the worldly leaders whose edicts only bring oppression and death to the most vulnerable in the world.

Each and every one of us have come from a women. We all have the heart beat of justice and strength that God has placed in faithful women, beating in each of us and as we all answer God's call to love neighbor boldly in fearful times in whatever defiance of powers it must take for the God of love and life to break through the edicts of death that bring us to such fearful times.

May God grant us the strength and courage of Shiphrah and Puah to live faithfully in the midst of our fearful times today. Amen.

