

August 27, 2023
“Resisting Empire”
Exodus 1:8-2:10 / Romans 12:1-8
Pastor Tim

Today we're talking about Shiprah and Puah. SAY THEIR NAMES!

Shiprah and Puah. If you did or did not not know who they were before this morning's reading from Exodus, say their names.

Shiprah and Puah.

It is on their shoulders, the shoulders of these two, humble Hebrew midwives, that the whole arc of the Israelite civil rights movement stands. The Exodus.

And for that matter, the whole arc of civil rights movements more generally – including the Black freedom struggle still unfolding in this country.

Within the context of relentless cultural, institutional sexism and patriarchy, including – of course – within ancient Israel and within the biblical canon, it's a wonder that we even know their names.

They could just as easily be known to us as two Hebrew midwives – nameless, or whose names have long been forgotten, like so many women on whose shoulders the struggle for justice and radical, progressive social change stands.

Historically, men like Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, James Baldwin, John Lewis are so often seen as the faces and heard as the voices of the Black freedom struggle in this country. But women have been and continue to be its backbone.

We don't always, or certainly not nearly as often, hear their names. If we know them at all.

Ruby Bridges, Ella Baker, Pauli Murray, Ruby Sales, Fannie Lou Hamer, Angela Davis, Audrey Lorde ... Alicia Garza. So many more. Say their names.

As pastor Brandon Crowley notes, “Dr. King may be the lyrical genius, the prophetic visionary and masterful orator of the civil rights movement,” but “(it) was the women of

the movement who put feet, hands, legislation and organization to Dr. King's prophetic words."

Or as the late Ramsey Clark put it, he the longtime Justice Department official and attorney general in the Johnson administration, "If Rosa Parks had not refused to move to the back of the bus, you and I might never have heard of Dr. Martin Luther King."

And so it is with Shiprah and Puah. If they had not refused to follow the Pharaoh's imperialist order, you and I might never have heard of Moses.

Say their names!

We note that Joseph – son of Jacob and Rachel, grandson of Isaac and Rebecca, grandson of Abraham and Sarah – had managed to rise up within the ranks of Egyptian politics. Functioning as the Pharaoh's second-in-command after correctly interpreting the dreams of the Pharaoh.

We also note that it's Joseph, in response to widespread famine, who is largely responsible for the gradual impoverishment and enslavement of the Egyptians – and for the concentration of Egypt's wealth and the Pharaoh's land-grabbing power.

Joseph and his family settle in Egypt, but it is their descendants whose freedom will be taken away. After Joseph dies and a new king assumes power.

The Israelites, as God had promised, have indeed been fruitful and multiplied – and the new king is concerned about what Brandon Crowley and others have described as the "Hebrewing" of Egypt.

O God, how history repeats itself. O God, hear our prayer.

Now it is the Israelites who are enslaved. Ruthlessly, as we are told: "The Egyptians became RUTHLESS in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were RUTHLESS in all the tasks that they imposed on them."

And it is in that context that we meet Shiprah and Puah.

Enslavement is not enough for the Pharaoh. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Where power is threatened, violence is often unleashed. The Pharaoh, operating from a place of fear, means to control the Israelites by killing off their newborn boys – a strategy that will be echoed by Herod in anticipation of Jesus' birth.

But enter Shiprah and Puah. Say their names!

Just two Hebrew midwives, and apparently midwives to ALL the Hebrew women. We note here that, in spite of their Semitic names, it's not clear from the text whether they are Hebrews themselves, or Egyptian women serving the Hebrews.

We are left to consider the story in both circumstances, each providing a different layer. Either way, the Pharaoh – who, by the way, is NOT named – takes his strategy to Shiprah and 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 Shiprah and Puah have a strategy of their own. Like Rosa Parks, their allegiance lies elsewhere. And they have a plan.

Fearing God, not the Pharaoh – and at great risk to their own lives – they simply “do not do as the king of Egypt commanded them.” They let the boys live. They let the boys live!

Here, disobedience – civil disobedience – reflects fear of God. Claiming agency within an extremely unbalanced power dynamic reflects fear of God.

Imagine their courage, their fortitude. Resisting Empire, resisting the Emperor himself.

David Daube calls their refusal to comply “the oldest record in world literature of the spurning of a governmental decree.” Shiprah and Puah, remember their names.

Fearing God, and not the Pharaoh, they explain their defiance using deception – suggesting that the Hebrew women “are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.”

As the great African American pastor, scholar and civil rights activist Howard Thurman noted, “Deception is perhaps the oldest of all techniques by which the weak have protected themselves against the strong. Through the ages ... at all of the stages of activity, the weak have survived by the fooling of the strong.”

God is pleased. Shiprah and Puah are blessed, with families of their own.

And Pharaoh moves on to plan B. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.

He recruits all Egyptians – ALL Egyptians – to implement his strategy. Codifying into law that all Egyptian citizens shall throw Hebrew boys into the Nile to drown. A precursor to Nazi Germany. We don't have to imagine the evil, the horror.

It would seem that Shiprah and Puah's bold act of resistance is doomed to failure. At best, a temporary, fleeting resistance. The battle won, but not the war.

But we read on. We must read on. We hear nothing more of Shiprah and Puah, but resistance inspires resistance. Love inspires love. Life inspires life.

As Kat Armas writes, “Pharaoh thinks men pose a threat to his power, but he overlooks the real threat: God is using the women to set the scene for liberation. Enslaved to patriarchal ideology, Pharaoh disregards the women's power and character. But scripture does not.

“In fact, the narrator of the exodus story shows us how the women begin to take action. The story reveals with pointed irony the fallacy of the patriarchal lie that men are more valuable than women. When Pharaoh decrees twice that the girls shall live, he is intensifying the very power—namely, the women's power—that will eventually lead to his undoing.”

A son is born. Destined to be thrown into the river. But, like Shiprah and Puah before her, another woman – his mother, curiously not named – refuses herself to comply with Empire.

She hides her son for a few months, then makes the heartbreaking, excruciating, impossible decision – IMAGINE! – to put him in a basket and place him among the reeds at the river's edge.

Leaving his life to chance, or perhaps divine intervention, she is THAT desperate. Because that is how Empire works. Empire asserts power and control. Steals agency and choice. Breeds desperation.

But resistance to Empire is resistance to Empire. If injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, as King suggested, then resistance to Empire anywhere is a threat to Empire everywhere.

As the story goes, none other than the Pharaoh's daughter comes down to the river and finds the boy in the basket. And in her position of privilege, she takes pity on him.

She returns him to his mother to be nursed, and his mother eventually takes him back to the Pharaoh's daughter to be adopted. And she, also unnamed, names him Moses.

That guy.

Now let's be clear, here. This is not a happy ending. This is not a JUST ending. Moses is effectively stolen away from his birth mother, like enslaved African children stolen from their families. Native children stolen away from their families and sent to white boarding schools, and adopted by white families.

But the story, nonetheless, remains a story of resistance to Empire. Part of the ongoing story of resistance to the oppression of Empire. And in this and so many cases, resistance by women – women with privilege, and women without. Intersectionality matters. Intersectional justice matters. Intersectional solidarity matters.

Empires do not fall on their own. And they do not fall without solidarity between those who benefit from their existence and those who do not. History repeats itself when we continue to blame and scapegoat and target each other, to “other” each other – instead of directing our attention, and our resistance, where it belongs. To the Empire itself.

Empire feeds off our manufactured fears, and it is Empire, of course, that manufactures the fear. Fear of each other, and failure to see and live into our inherent interconnectedness with all beings, distracts and deflects us from rage against the machine.

Jesus took issue with the machine of Roman Empire, and its many political and religious minions. That's why he and his message of love, and his pointing to another kingdom and another way of being and engaging marked by love, was such a threat. Is such a threat.

In this story, the system of oppression and injustice does not come crashing down with these individual acts of resistance.

From Shiprah and Puah, to Moses' birth mother and his adopted mother. But they set the wheels in motion. Empires do not fall quickly or easily.

"The arc of the moral universe is long," King also said, "but it bends toward justice."

It is indeed on the shoulders of Shiprah and Puah, and the women who followed in their footsteps, that the arc of the Israelite civil rights movement stands. There is no Exodus without them.

It is indeed on their shoulders that the long and ongoing art of civil rights movements stand more generally.

And it is also on their shoulders, oh by the way, that the long and ongoing movement for reproductive rights and bodily autonomy stands. Resisting control of women's bodies by the state. By men.

Resisting empire. Or what Paul's letter to the Roman church calls it: nonconformity.

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect."

That is to say, what is loving and life-giving, life-sustaining.

Other translations say, "Do not be conformed to the patterns of this world ..." Be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is loving, what is life-giving, what is life-sustaining. Liberating.

I think it's a verse, in many or most Christian contexts, that gets easily relegated to focus and practice at an individual level. Nonconformity to some perceived moral low ground. That's how it was for me as a kid coming up in the church. And frankly, that's ALL it was for me as a kid coming up in the church.

But Jesus makes it clear in his life and in his death that the nonconformity to which we are called – or at least primarily called – is to injustice. To Empire. To that which is NOT loving, life-giving, life-sustaining.

To that which replaces love with fear, to that which divides and destroys, to that which is life-threatening.

We are called, like Shiprah and Puah, to resist Empire – in all its forms. It is on their courageous shoulders that we all stand, with courage perhaps the most important feature of our individual and collective – and ongoing – resistance to Empire.

Courage to fear our God, and not the Emperor. Courage to align our hearts and our lives with God's ways, and not the Emperor's. Not the world's.

As Maya Angelous suggests, "I am convinced that courage is the most important of all virtues because without courage, you cannot practice any other virtue consistently. You can be kind for a while. You can be generous for a while. You can be just for a while or merciful for a while, even loving for a while, but it is only with courage that you can be persistently and insistentlly kind and generous and fair."

It is only with courage that we can persistently and insistentlly resist Empire. It is only with courage, in solidarity with each other, that we can persistently and insistentlly realize the alternate kindom of love, the kindom of God, the kindom of heaven, in THIS world.

Cracks in the armor of Empire, opening up to another way.

May we be like Shiprah and Puah, and all those midwives of justice and liberation along the way of divine love. Say their names. Go and do likewise.

May it be so.