

Shiprah and Puah

Sermon preached by Rev. Miriam Lawrence Leupold
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church, June 24, 2018

“Still I Rise”

Exodus 1:6–21

Today’s passage is from Exodus 1:6–21. Prior to our scripture, the book of Genesis accounts for the birth and growth of the Hebrew people. At the end of Genesis, we find the Hebrew people—in the form of Jacob’s family—in Egypt. If you recall, Jacob’s sons had ganged up on one of their brothers, Joseph. Feeling jealous of and resentful of their brother, they sell Joseph to a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead on their way to Egypt. Joseph makes it to Egypt where he’s sold to Pharaoh. In Egypt, through a series of fortunate events, Joseph becomes Pharaoh’s right-hand man. In anticipation of a famine, Joseph sets up a program to store some of the food harvested in the good years. As a result, Pharaoh and the Egyptians are able to survive the famine – the years when crops failed.

Joseph’s family back in Canaan is affected by the famine, so they travel to Egypt to beg for food. They also end up begging for Joseph’s forgiveness when they discover he is alive and doing very well. The family is reunited, settles in Egypt and begins to multiply. Many generations have passed since the end of the book of Genesis and the beginning of the book of Exodus.

Hear these words from Exodus 1:6–21:

⁶Joseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation. ⁷But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

⁸Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land” ¹¹Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. ¹²But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. ¹³The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, ¹⁴and 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.

¹⁵The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiprah and the other Puah, ¹⁶“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.” ¹⁷But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ¹⁸So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” ¹⁹The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” ²⁰So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. ²¹And because the midwives feared God, God gave them families.

The word of God -- 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.

By the end of Genesis, the Israelites had achieved most-favored immigrant status in the land of Egypt. The Egyptians had welcomed the Hebrew foreigners from Canaan because they were family to Joseph who, even as a non-Egyptian, had risen to second in command next to Pharaoh. But generations passed and there came a great disruption: A new Pharaoh arose over Egypt. One who did not know Joseph. ⁽¹⁾ This new Pharaoh looks at these Hebrews with very different eyes. No longer are the people seen as the heirs of the mighty Joseph, whose shrewd policies had saved Egypt during the country’s terrible famine. No longer are the Hebrew people seen as Joseph’s family who had come to live among the Egyptians in peace in the lovely land of Goshen. Israel’s status quickly deteriorated from welcomed guests to feared aliens and oppressed slaves.

*You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I’ll rise. ⁽²⁾*

Pharaoh begins to single out the rapidly expanding Hebrew minority as an emerging threat, a terroristic threat that may endanger Egypt’s security and way of life. Now there is no hint in the biblical narrative that the Israelites are anything but good, faithful citizens of the empire. Yet the delusional Pharaoh imagines that the growing but still small Israelite minority in Egypt is more numerous and more powerful. He warns the Egyptians that in the event of war the Israelites *might* join their enemies and fight against them. ⁽¹⁾

We’ve seen this movie before. In the thirties, especially though not exclusively in Germany, it was the Jews; in our own country in the 40s it was the Japanese. Throughout our country’s history it has been the African American, the homosexual, and more recently it’s been the “undeserving” poor, the Muslims, the immigrants without papers, the Dreamers, people from particular countries, and children of asylum seekers. ⁽³⁾

This is a tempting political strategy for new leaders, whether an Egyptian pharaoh or a Nazi Hitler or an American president. It involves trying to solidify power by singling out a relatively weak minority or outsider group and calling them an enemy. Fear of others can be a powerful source of unity. ⁽¹⁾ It feeds into our sin of defining ourselves over and against others and in the process denying others their essential humanity, their status as beloved children of God. ⁽³⁾

*Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
’Cause I walk like I’ve got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.*

*Just like moons and like suns
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I’ll rise. ⁽²⁾*

Pharaoh needs a common enemy in order to solidify his political base. He chooses the Israelites and makes them his slaves. He assigns taskmasters over them and forces the Israelites to build cities for him. He tries to work them into the ground. The Egyptians became ruthless in all the tasks they imposed on the Israelites and made their lives bitter. But the more the Israelites were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread.

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*Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?*

*Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard⁽²⁾*

When all of that doesn't suffice, Pharaoh takes a further step to ensure the ultimate destruction of the Israelites. He asks the Hebrew midwives Shiprah and Puah to kill every baby boy that they deliver to Hebrew mothers. Ironically, Pharaoh sees no threat from Israelite females, yet females (the midwives) are the very ones who set in motion Pharaoh's eventual undoing. And we see the beginnings of resistance to the Egyptian Pharaoh emerge. The midwives' vocation from God is to preserve and protect life. Pharaoh demands that they deny their vocation and kill. In the Bible's first act of civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance for the sake of justice, the midwives refuse to obey Pharaoh's deathly command.⁽¹⁾ They continue to help with the birthing of Israelite babies without killing any of them.

When the Pharaoh asks them why they are not killing the baby boys, the midwives respond, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them,” they say. They play into Pharaoh's own stereotypes about immigrants and their breeding habits.⁽⁴⁾ The midwives intend Pharaoh to hear such a statement as echoing his own loathing of the Israelites and his own positive judgment of the Egyptian women and their delicacy.⁽⁵⁾

Shiprah and Puah are fearless in their acts of compassion. Their work of defiance embraces life and blurs Pharaoh's attempts to draw lines of distinction between “us” and “them,” between Egyptian and Hebrew, between dominating and dominated, between immigrant and non.⁽⁵⁾

*Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise.
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide.
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.⁽²⁾*

The midwives succeed in saving the lives of both Hebrew boys and girls. In the process, they protect the birth of one special child named Moses, the eventual leader of Israel who would overthrow Pharaoh and lead Israel to freedom. As is the case so often in the Bible, God uses what the patriarchal and power-hungry Pharaohs of the world consider as low and despised in their eyes (Hebrew women) as instruments to shame and overthrow the arrogant and the strong.⁽¹⁾

And it all starts here, with two women willing to say “no” to an act of injustice. I doubt very much they thought they were changing the world. But they were, just by being faithful, by following the dictates of their hearts, by heeding the call of conscience.⁽³⁾

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*Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bring the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave. ⁽²⁾*

So, what are you going to do this week? The things we do this week—our actions, decision, choices—will, in fact, ripple out with consequences foreseen and unforeseen, for good or for ill, for the health or damage of the world. That question isn't whether, but what...what will we do this week to make a difference in the world. Some of these actions may be big, bold, and courageous. Others may be small, hardly noticeable. And yet they all have the potential to ripple out, affecting countless lives. In today's reading it's Shiphrah and Puah, quietly standing up to a bully and tyrant and acting with compassion, mirroring the way their God loved them.

Who knows who it will be today, this week, this year...teenagers tired of seeing their friends gunned down, women fed up with working for lower wages, churches willing to protect immigrants from ICE deportation, neighbors protesting yet another black teenager killed by police, federal officials refusing to separate children...

This week what will you do? God calls us to show compassion and to rise in ways that may break the rules—for the sake of justice. You may save the life of the next Moses. Like Shiphrah and Puah—act—confident that God will use you.

May we also say,

*I rise
I rise
I rise. ⁽²⁾*

Amen.

I am grateful for the wisdom contained in these resources and have used words and ideas from them throughout my sermon:

- (1) Dennis Olson, “Exodus 1:8–2:10: From Welcomed Guests to Suspected Terrorists” from workingpreacher.org (August 24, 2008). http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=131
- (2) Maya Angelou, “Still I Rise” from *And Still I Rise: A Book of Poems*. Copyright 1978 Maya Angelou.
- (3) David Lose, “The Butterfly Effect” from workingpreacher.org (August 14, 2011). <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1599>
- (4) Karla Suomala, “Commentary on Exodus 1:8–2:10” from workingpreacher.org (August 27, 2017). <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1599>
- (5) Amy Merrill Willis, “Commentary on Exodus 1:8–2:10” from workingpreacher.org (August 21, 2011). http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=972