

Carol Strickland  
 First Presbyterian Church of Athens  
 May 10, 2015

6th Sunday of Easter, Mother's Day, and Graduate Recognition  
 Text: Exodus 1:8-22, (John 15:9-17)

## Shiphrah and Puah

Raise your hand if you had ever heard of Shiphrah and Puah before a few minutes ago? I thought so. I don't know why their story is not more well-known because it's a great story of courage and faith. And I thought it was a great story for Mother's Day. While the two women aren't mothers until the end of the story, they certainly do aid mothers, working as midwives, helping to bring life into the world. It also seemed appropriate as a sort of baccalaureate story.

First, a little back story. You remember Joseph (Old Testament Joseph)? Obnoxious kid with the fancy coat of many colors whose brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt? Long story short: through God's providence Joseph wound up as the Pharaoh's chief deputy and was able to keep his family from back home in Canaan from starving when they sought help in Egypt during a prolonged famine. Joseph's people then settled in Egypt and because of him enjoyed a favored status.

In time, however, Joseph's generation died. And we pick up the story with the ominous words: "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph."<sup>i</sup> The king is not named. Historians have speculated that perhaps he was Ramses II who was a colossal builder. But regardless of the name he bears, the king is always the same when this story is played out again and again down through history. The nameless king signifies the power of this world. The king embodies all the old patterns of control. In the king's system, wealth and security are valued at the expense of justice and human dignity. The king stands over against everything that God stands for.

This king, who did not know Joseph or Joseph's God, finds himself threatened by these resident aliens, Joseph's people, the Israelites. Over time, their numbers had multiplied. The fact that they have flourished in Egypt is evidence of God's promise to Joseph's great-grandfather Abraham. God told that old patriarch that he would be the father of a great nation. And so God's plan was unfolding.

But this unfolding divine plan made the king nervous. And so he called his advisors together and hatched his own plan – a plan to suppress the Israelites. He enslaved them in forced labor, making them build bigger and bigger storehouses for his supplies. Their taskmasters were ruthless and made their lives bitter. But the plan failed. For the more the Israelites were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread.

So the king went to Plan B. He called for the midwives who served the Hebrew women. Enter Shiphrah and Puah. While the Book of Exodus does not name the great Egyptian king, the names of these two lowly women are recorded for all posterity: Shiphrah and Puah. The king orders Shiphrah and Puah to kill every baby Hebrew boy that is born but to let every baby Hebrew girl live. I got a kick out of the Jewish Midrash – the commentary written by the ancient rabbis – on this text which points out the fallacy of the pharaoh's plan. The rabbis say that God accused Pharaoh of being *stupid* as well as *wicked*. If a shrewd king wanted to get rid of a whole nation of people, he would kill all the female babies rather than the males. After all, it is the women who give birth to and nurture any nation.<sup>ii</sup>

Ordered to carry out the policy of the mighty king, Shiphrah and Puah perform what may be the first act of civil disobedience recorded in the Bible. They defy the king's order.

Why? What could possibly motivate them to stand up to the king of Egypt? What could possibly cause them to risk their lives in the face of this despot? The reason? *They feared God.* They were willing to stake everything on God and what God stood for, rather than to obey the king and pay homage to everything the king stood for. As midwives, Shiphrah and Puah were called to act on the side of life, and this calling they did not betray.

Word reached the king of their defiance, so he summoned Shiphrah and Puah for a second audience. "Why have you allowed the boys to live?" he demanded. They had a clever answer ready. "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." The text says that God rewarded their faith by giving them families of their own.

Meanwhile the Israelites continued to multiply and grow stronger. Just imagine how perturbed the king is now! With the failure of Plan B, the king now goes berserk and launches Plan C. He continues his policy of ethnic cleansing by commanding his *own* people, the Egyptians, to kill every Hebrew boy and spare every Hebrew girl. The corpses they are to throw into the Nile. So crazed is the king, he is willing to pollute the river of life to keep power. The old adage, "power corrupts," takes on a new twist.

If you continue reading the story as it's told in the Book of Exodus, you'll see that the heroic actions of Shiphrah and Puah set the stage for Moses. Because of the faith of these two women, Moses is spared at birth, then hidden in the bulrushes by his mother and sister, then rescued by none other than the king's daughter. And who says that women don't influence the course of history!

Moses, you recall, grows up and has an encounter with a burning bush. There he accepts God's call to liberate God's people from the king's iron rule. And so Moses goes before the king – by then a different king than Shiphrah and Puah defied, but as I said before, the nameless king may change but the dynamics are always the same. You know the story of the ten plagues and how much more dysfunctional the king becomes each time as he says, "No," to God and subjects his own kingdom to scourge after scourge until finally it is the Egyptian firstborns who must die. Only after that horrible slaughter does the king finally bow to God.

"God is working his purpose out" declares the old hymn. And so God is unfurling his plan down through history, a plan that is moving us toward God's kingdom—a kingdom of justice, freedom, and peace.

What is amazing to me is the means the Lord chooses to work his purpose out. God lets the liberation of the Hebrew nation ride on two little midwives and a fragile basket holding a baby. Imagine if you will, Shiphrah and Puah standing before the mightiest man on earth. You can picture the pharaoh in his royal splendor, the golden head dress, the magnificent throne, surrounded by courtiers, and every symbol of wealth and power. And there they are, two women in a man's world, aliens, knees knocking beneath their peasant garb. They look so vulnerable and the king, so impressive.

Now picture a fragile reed basket held together with a little pitch holding a three month old baby—the baby Moses. The basket is floating among the reeds of the mighty Nile River, left there by his mother and sister, exposed to an unknown fate. The baby is so vulnerable and the river, so powerful. The God of history takes enormous risks! His plan is totally dependent on the faith of people the world call powerless and even foolish.

In the Harry Potter tales, there is a wise old wizard named Albus Dumbledore. In the last book of the series, Dumbledore has learned how to defeat the Dark Lord, an evil wizard named Voldemort. But Dumbledore knows he soon will die before he himself can destroy Voldemort. So he has taken under his wing three teenage wizarding students (Harry and two friends) and entrusted them with the task. Of course, he doesn't tell them explicitly what they must do; else Voldemort could easily thwart their plans. Instead, before he dies, Dumbledore gives the teens a few cryptic clues, and they must figure out things as they go along. The teens are gifted, it's true. But they also are young and inexperienced. They have weaknesses and foibles. They do not know the whole plan. If they fail, Voldemort will come to power and execute a reign of terror over not just the wizarding world, but the entire world. Dumbledore's is a dangerous and risky plan. Dumbledore has chosen to entrust the fate of all humanity, as it were, to three seventeen year olds. Like all good fairy tales—and like the stories of Shiphrah and Puah and Moses and indeed the whole Bible—it ends well. Of course, not without cost and sacrifice, but it ends well.

It's the same story over and over: Harry and his friends vs. Voldemort, Shiphrah and Puah vs. Pharaoh, the baby Jesus vs. Herod, the adult Jesus vs. Pilate, Lech Walesa vs. the Polish State, Nelson Mandela vs. F.W. DeKlerk, Rosa Parks vs. the Montgomery Transportation System. It's the story of ordinary people of faith who stand up to the powers and dominions. God locates seeds of life in places that we would never think to look. Paul says that "God [chooses] what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God [chooses] what is weak in the world to shame the strong."<sup>iii</sup> Jesus tells a dozen disciples drawn from the ranks of fisher folk and tax collectors essentially the same thing. "You did not choose me, but I chose you. Go and bear fruit."<sup>iv</sup>

Friends, God is counting on us—yes us ordinary people of faith, weak and foolish in the world's sight, to do good--even great--things.

You high school seniors, you may think that you don't have the clout, the wisdom, the experience to make any real difference in the world. But think twice. A Presbyterian youth group in Columbia, SC got excited about the idea of having people come together on Super Bowl Sunday not only for football and fun but also for a more important cause—combatting hunger. And so the Souper Bowl of Caring (that's "S-O-U-P-E-R") was born. These kids got youth groups of other churches involved. The first year they collected \$5,700 in food and money in soup pots. The movement spread like wildfire. Since the Souper Bowl of Caring began in 1990, over \$100 million has been raised for soup kitchens, food banks, and other charities all over the country (including donations from this congregation), all thanks to some high school students who were people of faith.

It's tempting to think that God uses other people who are smarter, better connected, older, younger, more faithful,—you name it—people who are somehow more able than we. But that's not how God seems to work. Over and over in the Bible and in life, God works through ordinary folks. "Who me? I'm just a kid." "I'm just a mom." Never say "just" when God comes calling! "Who me?" you ask. Yes, you. God chooses you. It's ordinary people like you that God taps to do God's work. It's ordinary people who, in spite of their sweating palms and racing heart, summon their courage and stand up to the bully at school or blow the whistle on some unethical practice at work. It's ordinary folks like you that God works through to bring about justice, and peace, and healing in the world. Amazingly, God is counting on you. God has given you gifts, with one of the most important being faith. If you are willing to lean into it, as did Shiphrah and Puah, to fear God more than the king, that is all God requires. After all, Jesus said

you only need faith the size of a mustard seed. All the excuses we can come up with—our age, our lack of resources, our less-than-perfect track record, our bad habits, our fears, our insecurities—don't faze God in the least. God puts his bets on you despite the shortcomings you may have. That's true for individuals and for us collectively as the church. Despite the church's relegation to the sidelines of American society, despite our internal disagreements, and despite our shrinking numbers—to us God has given the task to bear fruit and to help birth new life and new vision in the world. To us. To us. God is counting on us.

Legend has it that when Jesus returned to heaven after his ascension, an angel asked him what his plan was now for establishing the kingdom of God on earth.

"I've left it up to my twelve disciples and a few women."

"That's it?" the angel said.

"Hmhhh," Jesus replied.

"What's your back-up plan?"

"I don't have one."

---

<sup>i</sup> Exodus 1:8

<sup>ii</sup> Exodus Rabbah 1.14, Michael W. Williams, editor, *The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible*, Vol 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 26.

<sup>iii</sup> I Corinthians 1:27

<sup>iv</sup> John 15:16