

2024 07 21 – *Shiphrah and Puah*

Scripture: Exodus 1:8–2:10 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Today is the third Sunday of our Women of the Hebrew Scriptures summer series. This week, we are focusing on two women, Shiphrah and Puah.

Shiphrah and Puah are two of the women who made the Exodus, the departure of the Israelites from Egypt, possible.

To understand their story we need to go back and review some of the even earlier origin stories of the Hebrew people. Last week as we talked about the story of Hagar and her son Ishmael, we also met Abraham and Sarah and their son, Isaac. Isaac eventually becomes the father of two sons, Esau and Jacob. Jacob (also known as Israel) then has twelve sons, one of whom was called Joseph. You are probably familiar with the story of Joseph. Joseph was sold by his brothers to some Ishmaelite traders and taken to Egypt as a slave. Amazingly, Joseph rises to become the Egyptian Pharaoh's right-hand man and oversees the storage of excess crops in preparation for a time of famine. Eventually Joseph's brothers and their families come to live with him in Egypt.

Today's story begins after Joseph and his brothers have died and their descendants, the Israelites, have multiplied to the point where they now outnumber the Egyptians. A new Pharaoh has come to power, one who never knew Joseph and who does not have a strong connection with the Israelite people. This Pharaoh is worried that the Israelites may some day turn against their Egyptian hosts and so he oppresses them by forcing them to do the hard

labour of building new storage cities. But this tactic doesn't work and the Israelites, even under oppression, continue to multiply

So the Pharaoh speaks directly with the midwives of the Hebrews, two women named Shiphrah and Puah. In an attempt to wipe out the Hebrew people, the Pharaoh orders these midwives to kill all boy babies as soon as they are born. Some scholars suggest that Shiphrah and Puah, despite their Hebrew names, were probably Egyptian women serving the Israelites. This would, of course, make them more likely to follow their Pharaoh's horrific command.

It's hard to imagine anyone making such a devastating decree. And yet, we know of genocides that have occurred in recent years around the world. Even today, we hear of mass killings of civilians happening in places like Gaza, Burma and the Sudan. What if we, like Shiphrah and Puah were asked to kill? What would we do in their shoes? What can we do about the oppression and the killing that is happening in our world today?

The scripture goes on to tell us that Shiphrah and Puah were God-fearing women. So they ignored the Pharaoh's instructions, and let the male babies live. These possibly-Egyptian midwives believed in the power of the God of the Israelites. Shiphrah and Puah believed that YHWH was the one true God and what is called "fear" of God in this passage was really more like wonder or awe or reverence. The story tells us that because of their strong belief, they found the courage to follow their hearts and their calling and they let the male babies live. They did this knowing that they were putting their own lives in jeopardy.

When the Pharaoh realized the Hebrews were successfully birthing male babies he summoned the midwives and asked them what was going on. They, very cleverly, explained that the Hebrew women were more “robust” or “vigorous” or “quicker” than Egyptian women and their babies were being born before the midwives could even arrive. It’s amazing that the Pharaoh believed their story. But maybe his opinion of women was so low that it never occurred to him that these midwives would have the strength or the courage to defy him.

The Pharaoh must have believed Shiphrah and Puah, because he came up with another plan; he made a new decree that all Hebrew boys were to be thrown into the Nile.

It is after this decree that we are introduced to a Levite family, with a beautiful baby boy. This baby boy was, of course, Moses. This morning we heard the famous story of how he was placed in a papyrus basket which floated among the reeds by the banks of the Nile. How he was found and raised by the Pharaoh’s daughter and how, thanks to his older sister, his own mother became his nurse.

It’s ironic, isn’t it, that the Pharaoh was so concerned about killing baby boys, that he forgot about the courage and ingenuity of women. It was Shiphrah and Puah, Moses mother, his sister and the Pharaoh’s daughter who managed to save the boy who would become the leader of the Israelite people. Moses was, of course, the man chosen by God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and eventually to their promised land.

None of these women knew the impact that their actions would have. Just as we have no way of knowing how our actions will impact the world around us. All we can do is follow the example of Shiphrah and Puah and trust in the power of a God of life and love. All we can do is follow our own call and perform those small, simple actions that when added to everyone else's contributions can lead to major changes in the world.

What can we do? We can write letters to people in leadership positions. We can educate ourselves and our friends about what is happening in the world. We can financially support organizations that are working towards peace. We can become agents of change, agents of new life..

Shiphrah and Puah were midwives. They were women who assisted in the process of giving birth. One of the authors that I read this week asked.

“If our mothers had named the Holy One,
would God have firstly been midwife,
continually welcoming new life
in even the most excruciating circumstances?”

— Becca <https://adrielbooker.com/motherheart-of-god-midwife/>

We often think of God as creator, as life-giver, and yet the Spirit of Love, the Holy Mystery also accompanies us as we go about our own process of re-creating and transforming ourselves and the world around us. Ours is not an easy task, and can, at times, be excruciatingly difficult. It can even seem impossible.

But with God as our mid-wife, with the Holy Spirit to guide, comfort and strengthen us, we too can take on those tasks that seem overwhelming. By focusing on each separate breath, one at a time, we too can be part of the birthing process of God's kindom of peace and justice.

May it be so. Amen