

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Proper 16A, Exodus 1:8-2:10 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

We have two of my favorite biblical characters in our opening of Exodus today: Shiphrah and Puah. Do you know those names? Did you, perhaps, kind of tune out at the beginning of this morning's Old Testament, and only beam in when we started hearing about baby Moses? That's really a shame. And it's completely normal.

Shiphrah and Puah are the midwives who defied Pharaoh to save countless Hebrew babies. They may not have saved Moses himself, but their story sets the tone for the whole book of Exodus that follows.

Pharaoh—who unlike Shiphrah and Puah is not named—Pharaoh ordered these two midwives to kill baby boys born to the Hebrew slaves. Since last Sunday's Old Testament reading, there is a new Pharaoh in Egypt, one who did not know Joseph. Last week we had the happy ending in Genesis, with Joseph and his brothers getting ready to settle in the land of Egypt during a famine. They and their families would prosper and have enough to eat. But now, generations later, the Israelites are enslaved and suffering. Their Egyptian oppressors, our reading this morning tells us, are ruthless.

Despite the ruthlessness of the Egyptians, the oppressed Israelites keep having babies, so that Pharaoh orders these two midwives to kill the baby boys. Now, this makes no sense. He's probably thinking that the boys will grow up to be warriors, but he completely underestimates the women. If his concern is population control, he's got it all wrong. Letting the women live just means more babies, as well as more subversive women who grow up to defy kings.

Shiphrah and Puah don't carry out Pharaoh's orders, because they "feared God." Some of us might object to this language of fear, because God's loving, right? So we shouldn't be *afraid*. But think back to the Transfiguration three weeks ago, when we talked about holiness. Fear is one appropriate response.

Our translation today calls Shiphrah and Puah "Hebrew midwives," but the original language is not clear if these midwives are of Hebrew origin—that is, Hebrew slaves themselves—or if they are Egyptian midwives *to* the Hebrews. We don't know. It's not clear. But we do know that they fear God, and this informs their ethics; so, they will not obey the king's command to murder baby boys.

They get called before the king. Kind of like being called into the principal's office or your boss's office, or for me, kind of like being called to diocesan headquarters to go before the bishop. Not a good thing. But in their case, it's not that they could lose their job or be expelled: they could die, for disobeying Pharaoh.

They are subversive in their response to him. “Oh, those Hebrew women: they’re just so vigorous that the baby has already popped right out before we get there!” Fortunately, they don’t lose their lives. We read that God blessed them with families of their own.

It bothers me that we don’t know the names Shiphrah and Puah. I’m trying to use Shiphrah and Puah as much as I can in this sermon, because we won’t hear this story again for three years. In between, they will probably fade back into obscurity. We might think of the Hebrew midwives, but not remember their names. But we don’t forget Moses leading the people out of Egypt.

Notice that before Moses can save the Israelites, two women and a girl have to save Moses. His mother hides him for three months, then gently places him in a basket in the water. His sister pursues him to see what will happen, and then boldly suggests his own mother as a wet nurse. And Pharaoh’s daughter draws him out of the water.

All three were brave and defiant. After Shiphrah and Puah were so successful in bringing about healthy baby boys, Pharaoh became more overt in his murderous campaign and ordered that all baby boys should be thrown into the Nile. These two women and one girl were not carrying out this edict. They saved Moses. They paved the way. Moses gets all the glory.

This makes me think of a saint in our church, Martin Luther King Jr. Our saint’s day for him in the Episcopal church is April 4, the day of his death, his assassination. That’s how it usually works with saint days, that we acknowledge the day that they return to the Lord. Dr. King’s feast day can also be celebrated in January, of course, when our country honors him.

But there were others who paved the way for Dr. King. Like Rosa Parks. Her name, hopefully, is more familiar to us than Shiphrah and Puah, because we know Rosa Parks as the first lady of civil rights; but Rosa Parks, like Shiphrah and Puah was first an ordinary woman. One night, after working all day as a maid, she was tired and refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white man; and the Montgomery bus boycott was born. Martin Luther King Jr. was instrumental in organizing the boycott, and as a preacher, he was initially more prominent than Mrs. Parks, but she helped launch him into national prominence by her defiance one evening.

And even before Rosa Parks, there were other ordinary people who had taken similar steps, but who are less well known. Elizabeth Jennings was an African-American church organist in the nineteenth century who was running late for work one Sunday, and hopped on a streetcar in New York City. The conductor ordered her off because most streetcars were segregated; but she refused. She was forcibly removed. She sued and won her case.

Elizabeth Jennings helped paved the way for Rosa Parks, who helped pave the way for Martin Luther King Jr. Moses would not have had as many Israelites to lead out of Egypt without Shiphrah and Puah, and he couldn’t have led anyone anywhere without his mother, his sister, and his adopted mother.

This month and through September I'm using a four-fold Franciscan blessing at the end of our services, which concludes with "God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you might do what others say cannot be done." These stories make me think of that. Look at what these ordinary people did, in the Bible and in more recent history.

What can you do? What foolish ideas do you have?

At the early service, when I read the blessing on the second Sunday in August, I could hardly get through the part about foolishness. That week was the day after the violence in Charlottesville. I had been shocked to my core, as probably you all were as well, that there was still such prejudice and hate these days, and by the violence and the terrible, deep divisions in our country.

We Christians are called to be fools for Christ. We can be subversive when it comes to love. We can make a difference in this world.

I'm inspired by Moses, of course; I grew up with his story. But today, I am even more inspired by Shiphrah and Puah, and by Elizabeth Jennings. I'm inspired to learn more about the people whose names I don't know yet. And I am inspired by so many of the saints here, who work quietly and lovingly behind the scenes.

Ordinary people, foolish people: we can make a difference. Jesus calls us to make a difference.