

8/24/08 Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson – Exodus 1:8-2:10

The OT lesson is from the beginning of the book of Exodus – and Exodus marks a shift from the story of the forebears of the people of Israel to the story of the people of Israel itself. All of the sons of Jacob have followed Joseph into Egypt, and Joseph is buried there – but then come these ominous words ‘a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.’ This means trouble for the people of Israel and sets the stage for Exodus, their suffering and deliverance and coming out of Egypt to the promised land – ‘a journey out’ is what Exodus means. This passage tells us a lot – it describes the oppression of the people and also tells of the birth of Moses, the one who God would use to deliver them – and along the way gives us the story of some Hebrew midwives too.

One other thing – if you follow along in the pew Bible, you’ll notice that in 1:21 it says the ‘midwives feared God’ – I greatly respect the NRSV translating committee but they got that wrong here and throughout the OT – so instead I will read ‘the midwives revered God’ – because that is what the Hebrew word means – to be in awe of – to revere – so that’s what I’m going to read....

Listen to this: “The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives: ‘when you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.’” Listen again: “The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah: ‘when you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.’” Did you hear the difference? – the 1st time I skipped the names of the midwives – the 2nd time I included them – and of course that’s what the text does, includes the names of these 2 women – Shiphrah and Puah.

Does that make a difference if the names are there or not? – is the story the same with or without the names? Well I think it makes all the difference in the world – in a story full of remarkable events and details, I am struck most by the detail that the names of these 2 midwives are there. And if there is nothing else you remember about this sermon, I will consider it a great success if you simply remember Shiphrah and Puah – tuck those names into your brain and your soul – because their names, remembering them, matters in this story and in our story too.

You and I know how history is usually written, right? – it’s the story of dead white men – which is a slightly cynical way to express that history is most often told from the perspective of the powerful and renowned – white men are in control and their story is told. There’s good reason that educators have developed the idea of a Black History month and a Women’s history month – those stories have often been lacking in the annals of history. And if you want to get outside of Western culture, then you could simply say history is often the story of dead *men* of various colors and cultures – men in power and in control dominate the stories.

And that is the clear trend in the Bible too – the names and stories of men are the prevailing lens of the story – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – a story line which continues into Exodus with Jacob’s sons and the story of Moses as the leader of Israel. In our time it’s been an important development in the life of the church to recognize that

reality – that bias – and God has given the gift of faithful people to help us listen in new ways – and Hope Church is blessed to have people who have helped to lead the greater church to do that.

When we are aware of ‘dead white men’ as the typical lens history, then part of our job in reading scripture is to notice when something different happens. And something different does happen in Exodus 1 – in the midst of the expected cast of characters – the patriarchs of the tribes of Israel – the king of Egypt – the story of Moses; in the midst of this predictable cast of characters comes a most unexpected and amazing storyline: “The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives – whose names were...(do you still remember?!)...Shiphrah and Puah.”

It’s remarkable enough that people are mentioned who are not powerful or important according to cultural standards; it’s remarkable enough that these people are women – it would be remarkable enough even with the names left out; but please, try to be shocked that the names are there – it is stunning – it is rare – it is a flashing neon light in the text that says ‘pay attention to this.’ And it happens because of the story – the story of what Shiphrah and Puah do: in the midst of an unfolding life and death struggle, the king of Egypt decides to recruit 2 Hebrew midwives to help keep the Hebrew population under control. So the king of Egypt talks to them – doesn’t send a message – talks to them, face to face...please be shocked by that! Pharaoh says: “Kill the boys; let the girls live.” The midwives nod and bow – and then they ignore the king of Egypt – 2 Hebrew working women ignore the king of Egypt...please be shocked by that! The king of Egypt sees his plan is not working – calls the midwives back – the king is angry “why have you done this? disobeyed me?”...well, we know the answer – the story tells us before – it’s ‘because they revered God’...but the midwives respond a bit more subtly – ‘well, king, unlike your frail Egyptian women, our sturdy Hebrew women are in good shape so they have their babies even before we arrive!’ The midwives explain their disobedience by making fun of the Egyptians in front of the king of Egypt ...please be shocked by this! And the king believes

them – and that is not shocking, that a man is completely out of his league when it comes to birth stories from women. But the rest of the story is shocking - and because of Shiphrah and Puah the king's violent plans are thwarted.

This is a story, these are names to hold onto and to take hold of you – and as I've had the story and names abide with me for awhile, there are 3 things in particular I'd like to wonder about with you – or, if I liked puns, in this case I might even say that I want to deliver to you...!

One thing is about what it means to have a name for yourself – not to 'make a name for yourself' in the way that phrase is often used as a measure of success or importance – but to have a name for yourself in the sense of knowing who you are, knowing your identity. In the culture we hear described in the Old Testament names were often full of meaning, of description about a person, and we see that in many stories including this one, in which Moses means 'drawn out of the water.' But with Shiphrah and Puah it's a bit different – with these 2 women it is more that their names come into focus as their identity as followers of God is revealed. What this story tells us is that as their lives show reverence for God, their identity is literally made real and whole – their names are voiced and remembered as women of God. There is a connection there for us - when you are baptized, the name used is your 'Christian name', your given names, not your last name; and using only those given names proclaims that our identity is first and foremost with the family of God – that is our true name – our true identity. Baptism marks us with the truth clear that our true name is found, our true identity is given, as we walk in faithfulness to Jesus Christ. The king told the midwives to do one thing; faithfulness to God told them to do differently – and they followed God: the names Shiphrah and Puah stand as the identity of those who follow the ways of God in the face of the powers of this world that – powers that literally seek to shape your identity, your name. Who do you follow? revere? trust? - your true name, true identity is found in relationship to the living God. In the face of the prevailing powers of our world – as we stand up to and do not follow the ways of violence,

hatred, excess, immorality, exclusion, fear –but follow the good news of Jesus Christ with love and grace, justice and peace, integrity and forgiveness, courage and hope- then we find our identity – our name – you know who you are, and others are blessed.

One thing is to claim your own name – and then another is to find what a difference it makes to see other people with a name as well. One of things I have done with my daughters for many years is to sponsor a needy child with a monthly donation through an international organization – and I’m not telling you that to brag...in fact we could even debate if it’s a good idea – are those organizations the best way to help? or should I give that money to Hope Church instead to support our missions? – there are always issues to debate. But I’m telling you that because what it does for us as a family is it gives a name for us to focus on rather than just an issues - we know that poverty, healthcare, education, development are important to address as Christians – but we see the reality of those issues in a name. A boy Marugen in India for many years; and now a young girl Lagno in Thailand – it makes a difference for us to be connected to a name, a person, a life.

The story of Shiphrah and Puah it is not only about their names or ours, their faithfulness also helps us to see the issues and needs of this world in terms of real people – names. Pharoah wanted them to dispose of these nameless infants, but they refused to see lives as just the pawns of a king to be taken away. We are challenged to see those in need – and see that they are names, known to God; we are challenged to see that life is not about issues, but real people - and that draws us closer to our need to follow God’s ways of life for all. It challenges us deeply – to know that our enemies, they have names too – created and known by God. It seems to me it even applies to our world, our environment – it is not just a resource or a problem or an issue – it is named by God as Creation, as good and precious to God. Claiming our own names as followers of Jesus Christ calls and empowers us also to see people and a world precious to God – known by name to God.

And the last thing is that Shiphrah and Puah are given to us as part of the ongoing project God has of rewriting history. I know that the Bible often tells history through the

main characters – the powerful people - but is also an ongoing theme in scripture that God is present to and at work in not only the powerful and the renowned – God is present to and at work in the ordinary and the lowly too. And even more than that, that it is the ordinary and the lowly whose lives and actions express and embody and bring to life the ways of God in this world. This story simply and unavoidably tells us that we are important to God's will and way in this world: who you are – what you do – has an impact on others as we are called is to be the body of Christ in and to this world. This story will not let us escape our names as part of the story of God's kingdom.

And we do so much as Shiphrah and Puah did – not as midwives, although that may be a calling for some of you – but we do so in an imperfect world doing what we can. After all, the Exodus story is not all perfect- Shiphrah and Puah act with incredible courage, but still the king seeks other ways to destroy the children – Israel's hardship endures. S & P don't make it all better – they do their part – their part of God's way and will – and they trust the rest to God. And that is the way and life we follow as well – seeking our own faithfulness in an imperfect world, and trusting that who we are and what we do serves the light and life of Jesus Christ for the world.

I've held the names Shiphrah and Puah in my soul for many years now – it helps me, blesses me – they help me remember my identity, and others' too – they help me see my place in God's story. I urge you to do the same – remember Shiphrah and Puah – they help us to remember our names as children of God and to claim our story to live out faithfully with all God's children – the stuff that makes history each day. AMEN.