

The Women Who Know

Exodus 1: 8 – 2: 10

Rev. Dr. Benjamin J. Broadbent

The Community Church of Sebastopol

United Church of Christ

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I. A king who did not know

As I speak to you today, there is smoke and ash in the air.

A complex of fires in Northern California is burning forests and causing evacuations.

Homes and cherished outdoor places have been damaged or destroyed.

Lives have been disrupted and, no doubt, some have been lost.

We surround those most closely affected with our love and compassion, including those working to protect lives.

In times like this, we can draw upon our faith in God, the source and end of all that is, who offers to us steadfast love and abiding faithfulness.

Let's see whether the reading from the Hebrew Bible might have a word of life for us on a day such as this.

At the beginning of the Book of Exodus, the Hebrew people find themselves in a vulnerable and precarious position.

This is signaled by ominous verse 8 in chapter 1: "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph."

You may have heard the saying that wisdom lies not only in what you know, but in what you know you *don't* know.

Well, here is a king that does not know, and does not know what he doesn't know.

Does not know the story of Joseph and his people.

Does not know about the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

Does not know the story about how they came to Egypt seeking safety in a time of famine; that they settled in Egypt and made it their home.

This king, known as Pharaoh, does not know, and does not care to know.

He has either chosen willful ignorance or he suffers from historical amnesia.

Because he doesn't know, he looks on the surface of things and says, "Look, these Israelite people are more numerous and powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them."

Because he doesn't know Joseph, he doesn't know Joseph's God, he doesn't know Joseph's people, he uses his "not knowing" as a justification for fear and violence.

It is worth noting that "Pharaoh" is not a name; it is a title, like President.

We don't know exactly which Pharaoh of Egypt this is, but it seems important to the Hebrew memory of this story that Pharaoh has no name.

The text is telling us, "If you've seen one Pharaoh, you've seen them all."

In Hebrew memory, Pharaoh is obsessed with power, wealth, and violence; and by "obsessed," I mean he is paranoid about not having enough power, wealth, and violence.

This story seems to be saying that the more you have, the more afraid you are that it will be taken away from you, and the more afraid you are, the more likely you are to ruminate on your fear and concoct violent plans to keep you safe.

II. Dealer of death

Pharaoh's fear is that the Israelites will turn against him, will side with his enemies.

His first fear-based violent plan is to create an economy based on slavery.

The text is chilling in its terseness.

Oppressed by taskmasters, the people continue to grow.

Pharaoh, now more desperate, opts for genocide. He decides to kill all of the Hebrews' baby boys. Presumably, the Hebrew women would marry Egyptian husbands and, within a generation, full assimilation will have been achieved.

The more one lingers over this story, the more sickening it is.

And the more it might remind us of our contemporary situation.

A fearful President perpetuating the worst of America's inclinations.

- A 400-year legacy of white supremacy, slavery, Jim Crow laws, New Jim Crow criminalization and police brutality and indifference to the well-being of people of color.
- In the face of a pandemic, "open all the schools" sounds very close to "kill all the baby boys."

Pharaoh had then and President has now the power to deal death while rationalizing it in the nation's interest.

Against that overwhelming power of death, this story provides a counter-narrative.

While the dealers of death always have the upper hand, there are other agents.

One of those agents is the God of Israel who is not a God who can be used as a prop or a foil or a rationalization.

The God of Israel is the God of freedom working behind the scenes, enabling power that does not flow from the top down, but that bubbles from the bottom up.

III. Bringers of life

The other agents in the story are the women, some midwives, who are summoned by Pharaoh to carry out his murderous scheme.

It is at this point that the story turns humorous, if you have the ears to hear it.

This sardonic humor fits the theological message of power that comes from unlikely, unsanctioned place.

For example, why would Pharaoh call two midwives, those entrusted with bringing new life safely into the world, to carry out his task of death?

Answer: because he is an idiot. He hasn't the slightest clue about the limits of his power.

He thinks he can use violence to assuage his anxiety, but he has no clue who he is dealing with.

He is dealing with Shiphrah and Puah, and the text gives them something Pharaoh will never have. The text gives them names.

By remembering their names, the tradition elevates these women who act with cunning to bring life instead of death.

In an online article by Robin Cohn¹, I learned a lot about these two fierce midwives:

- I learned that this is quite possibly the oldest recorded instance of Civil Disobedience, that is, of people directly disobeying a government order.
- I learned that in the Talmud, the rabbis debate whether Shiphrah and Puah are the only midwives, or whether they are the leaders of a large guild of midwives.
- I learned that there is a question about whether the women are Hebrew or Egyptian. Our translation suggests they were Hebrew, but alternate translations suggest they were Egyptian. If true, these women acted on behalf of other women instead of on behalf of ethnocentric interests.
- I learned that the name Shiphrah means something like "straighten," suggesting that she had a reputation for delivering babies and straightening their limbs as necessary. A post-natal chiropractor! And the name Puah onomatopoeically derives from the cooing sound made to comfort babies when they were born. She could soothe newborns with her voice.
- Finally, I learned that the root meaning of the word "midwife" in middle English is "knowing woman."

In defiance of a king who does not know, two women who *do* know thwart his death-dealing plans.

The text tells us that the midwives "feared God." In other words, they did not fear Pharaoh.

Their loyalties were with the God of liberation and not with the God of violence. They let the boys live.

When called before Pharaoh, he says, "Why did you let them live?"

"Sorry," they say, "but whenever we get there, the baby has already been born. You know these Hebrew women – they're not like the Egyptian woman – they're so vigorous they give birth to the babies before we even show up."

You see what they did there?

You can imagine Pharaoh nodding at this. "Oh yeah, of course."

He doesn't know anything. To safeguard life, the midwives take advantage of his cluelessness – he doesn't know anything about childbirth – and his racism – there's no difference between Hebrew women in labor and Egyptian women in labor.

Not satisfied, Pharaoh puts his next executive order on papyrus: throw all the male Hebrew children in the Nile.

We don't know whether this policy has much teeth, but we do know about one child. His mother hides him from her Egyptian neighbors until she can't anymore.

Then she puts her baby in a basket and put the basket in the river like a little boat.

It's kind of a sad and pitiful story until you realize it's all part of a brilliant plan.

The baby's sister stands at a distance and watches as Pharaoh's own daughter, the princess, finds the baby, has compassion, and decides to take him into her own house, Pharaoh's house.

Just then, the sister, Miriam, appears and says, "Do you want me to find a Hebrew wet nurse."

"Yes," the princess says.

And that is how Moses, who will one day lead his people to freedom, is raised in Pharaoh's mansion, nursed by his own mother.

That's pretty awesome. That's pretty cunning. That's pretty fierce.

One strand of Jewish interpretation believes that Shiphrah is Moses' mother, Jochebed, and Puah is Moses' sister, Miriam. In this version, mother and daughter work together to save all of the Hebrew children, and finally Moses.

IV. Out of the water

This week as I was preparing this sermon, I wasn't sure how to end it.

Then I decided to ask the midwives. I'll ask Shiphrah and Puah.

As I walked along the creek by my house, reminding me of the Nile, I imagined that the two knowing women were walking beside me.

"What can you tell me about the days we're living in, days of multiple crises: a crisis of leadership, a crisis of disease, a crisis of racism, and a crisis of the environment?" I stopped talking and waited for them to say something.

Shiphrah spoke first: "Remember who you are. Be who you be. Be a bringer of life. Do not be a dealer in death. Do what you can, where you are, with what you have. Be bold, be sly, be creative. Tell life-giving lies if you have to, but always be loyal to the God who hangs out with the ones Pharaoh most fears."

That was a lot to take in. I kept walking with them awhile until Puah said: "Remember the water. We are all drawn from the waters. That's why we named the baby Moses."

When she said that I couldn't help but think of Baptism.

Jesus, a descendent of Miriam and Moses, came out of the waters of baptism and heard the voice of the God of liberation saying, "You are my child, the beloved."

We, the church, are those who come out of the waters of baptism. We have names.

We have been called by our names and we have been called to serve the God whose power bubbles up from the ground.

Don't take my word for it. Take it from the midwives, the women who know.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://robincohn.net/shiphrah-puah-the-midwives-who-delivered-israel/>