

Reflection

Shiphrah, Puah, Yocheved, Miriam, Bithiah- I want you to remember these names.

These are some very important people, without whom we would not have the Exodus, the Ten Commandments, etc. Yes, Moses is the one who leads the Hebrew people out of Egypt, who gets the stone tablets from God on the mountain, but without these five brave women, Moses would not have survived to do any of that.

The first two, Shiphrah and Puah, have one of my favourite stories. The two midwives are ordered by the Pharaoh, to one with the most power in all the land, to kill the Hebrew baby boys. It's not really clear whether these women are Egyptians who act as midwives to the Hebrews, or if they are Hebrews themselves, their interactions with the Pharaoh makes it sound as though they are Egyptian, which makes their act even more remarkable because they are also protecting people who are of a different race than them, people they are supposed to fear. And somehow they have the faith in God and the courage to disobey that direct order from the Pharaoh. Consider the risk they are taking: this is not something that can be hidden. Some people have compared what they do to the action of people who hid Jewish people during the Holocaust so they could not be taken, and in some ways they are similar faithful acts of civil disobedience. But in this case, it is clear the boys are not being killed, and that the midwives did not do what they were supposed to. When Pharaoh calls them to the carpet for it, they spin a clever lie, using the Pharaoh's own prejudices against him, saying it's because these Hebrew women are "different" than the Egyptians, they can give birth before the midwives arrive.

Their story is about the difference between the power of Pharaoh, which he is using to make unjust laws to kill and marginalize, and the power of God, which is greater than that of the Pharaoh, inspires these women to do what is right, despite the risk. And what highlights this power

differential is that the Pharaoh isn't even named in this story, and yet Shiphrah and Puah are named.

But after the midwives' civil disobedience, the Pharaoh tries another tactic, of having his people kill the Hebrew boys by throwing them into the Nile, and we shift into the second part of the story.

And so Moses' mother, who isn't named in this passage, but later in Exodus is called Yocheved, hides him for three months, so this can't happen to him. And finally, when she can no longer hide him, she sets him to sail on the Nile in a basket. We don't know why she does this, how it is that she has faith that this will save her son, but it is interesting that she, like the midwives, is using the Pharaoh's plans against him, the Nile which he commands the babies to be thrown into to kill them, becomes the place that saves Moses. She entrusts Moses to God's care as she makes this last desperate attempt to save his life.

The story is completed by two more women working together: Moses' sister Miriam, and Pharaoh's own daughter, who is also unnamed in Exodus, but who many believe is Bithiah, a daughter of a Pharaoh mentioned in 1 Chronicles who marries a Hebrew man. Bithiah finds Moses, and despite recognizing him as a child of the race of people her own father is working to oppress, she has compassion for him, and she adopts him as her own. We can only imagine how the conversation between Bithiah and her father goes when she reveals to him that she is adopting a child that he had ordered to be killed.

Miriam uses extraordinary wisdom, as she watches from the sidelines, and then approaches Bithiah at the right moment to offer to find her a nurse for the baby, and brings her own mother, so Yocheved is paid to nurse and raise her own child.

And so, because of these five women, not only is Moses allowed to live, but his upbringing gives him exactly what he needs to do the work he will be called to later. He is able to grow up being raised by his own mother, being taught the stories of his own Hebrew people, and yet protected by the influence and the funds of the Pharaoh's daughter. When he gets older, he goes to live with Bithiah, being adopted as her son, so he would get an education and a knowledge of the palace and the royal household that many, Egyptian or Hebrew, would not have access to.

It is ironic that twice in this story the Pharaoh says, kill the boys, but let the girls live, the implication being that the girls are useless, that they would not be a threat, and yet the story of his undoing and the freeing of the Hebrew people begins with these five women- Shiphrah, Puah, Yocheved, Miriam, Bithiah- standing up to power, and using the gifts God has given them to act for justice.

This is a good story for women to hear, because there aren't enough female heroes named in the Bible. But it's really a story for all of us, because it's a story of people who are not the ones in charge, not the ones with all the power, who are able to each do their part to unravel an unjust system. And we need that today. We know there is injustice today: there is racism, yes, even here in Canada, against black people, Indigenous people, and other racialized people; there are other people who are prejudiced against because of other factors: religion, ability, gender, sexual orientation, and many more ways we separate ourselves; there is economic injustice, where so many people in poverty really have no chance to get out of it. There are lots of ways in which the systems and powers that be in our world are hurting people, not helping them. And it can feel overwhelming, to be faithful people who want to make a difference, and to feel like we can't because we have limited power and resources ourselves. But this story shows us how small actions of resistance can make a difference.

You've heard of the ripple effect? That a small pebble dropped in water creates ripples that stretch far away from where it fell.

If we, like Shiphrah and Puah, can have courage to stand up for what is right instead of following along with injustice, we may not know how far our ripples may go.

It also goes to show that disobeying power, which is basically civil disobedience, can be the means to create great change. It may feel like it is only delaying the inevitable, but we don't know where our ripples will reach and who may be ready to take up the torch from us later on.

We may find ourselves in situations like Yocheved and Miriam, who are completely without power, and have to have faith in God to give us the wisdom to know what to do. But most of us are like Bithiah, we have some privilege, and if we feel compassion for those who are being marginalized, we can use our privilege to help others who are in need. I'm thinking of white people who have stood up for racialized people who are being harassed, who have filmed and bore witness, knowing the colour of their skin means they will be more protected, but still taking a step outside their comfort zone.

Shiphrah, Puah, Yocheved, Miriam, Bithiah- I asked you to remember their names, and it is a miracle that they are recorded in our scriptures, as a testament to their courage, faith, wisdom, and compassion. But they are not well-known, even in scripture. And really, that's OK, because for every one of these brave women, there are likely thousands more brave women and men who are unknown. This is how God works in our world- far more through the anonymous, the powerless, than through the people who seem to have power like Pharaoh. And we are called to also be a part of these faithful anonymous people, called to do our own small part for justice in this world, even though the full extent of our actions, where our ripples go, we

may not even know, and yet, we have faith that God, who sees everything, calls us for a reason. Amen.