

Courageous Women (and Men)

Scripture: Exodus 1:1–2:10

These are the names of Israel’s sons—the ones who traveled from Canaan and entered into Egypt with Jacob during the great famine. Each of these men arrived in Egypt with his family: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; Dan and Naphtali, Gad, and Asher.

At that time, Jacob had 70 children and grandchildren. All of them came to Egypt, except for Joseph; he was already there. Joseph died, and so did all of his brothers. It was not long before that entire generation was gone. But the people of Israel were prolific; they had children easily, and their numbers increased rapidly. As their numbers grew so did their strength. Eventually, they filled the land.¹

These first few verses of the book of Exodus connect it to Genesis and set the stage for some of the most pivotal events in Jewish (and Christian) history. Wilda Gafney, a Hebrew biblical scholar, notes that in Hebrew, the book of Exodus is known as *Shemoth*, the book of Names, because of how the book opens: “These are the names of Israel’s sons.” However, the introduction doesn’t provide the names of all of Jacob’s sons; it names only the twelve who become the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel. It doesn’t name his many other sons. It doesn’t name any of his numerous daughters.

According to Gafney, the number of female characters in Exodus is only about a tenth of the number of those included in Genesis. In Exodus, stories of any individual women, let alone women whose names are mentioned, are few and far between. This fact heightens the importance of the shrewd, brave women who star in the first two chapters of Exodus before Moses and Aaron take center stage.²

The report that the Israelites have filled the land is good news for them. They’ve fulfilled God’s command found throughout the book of Genesis to be fruitful and multiply. The family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is finally on its way to becoming the nation of Israel. But this blessing for the Israelites is a threat to Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt. He’s unaware of – or possibly chooses to ignore – the story of Joseph and how Joseph worked for the good of all those living in Egypt many generations ago. He chooses to ignore the fact that the Israelites have lived and worked peacefully in the land all this time. His primary concern is holding onto his power. He’s worried that the Israelites will rise up against him even though they’ve given no indication that this is in their plans. (By the way, it’s interesting that Pharaoh is his title. The writers of Exodus never tell us his name, while preserving the names of four women – Shiphrah, Puah, Jochebed, and Miriam.)

¹ Exodus 1:1-7, *The Voice*

² This sermon draws from the Week Seven Eleven Prepare Essay written by Timothy Harvey, *Shine: Becoming a People of God*, a curriculum from MennoMedia, [Shine - Menno Media](#); Pulpit Fiction Podcast, [Proper 16A \(OT 21\) — Pulpit Fiction](#); Waldemar Janzen, *BCBC: Exodus*, Herald Press, 2000, pp.15-54; and Gafney, Wilda. *Womanist Midrash*, Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, Kindle Edition, pp.87-100.

Pharaoh feels threatened so he tightens his grip on the Israelites, taking away their freedoms, forcing them into labor, ruthlessly imposing unreasonable tasks on them, and making it almost impossible for them to complete those tasks. And yet, their numbers grow, and they spread across the land.

This story with its twin themes of power and fear is quite familiar. We've seen similar scenarios played out across the ages and across the world. A gain of power leads to fear of losing that power which leads to the decision to use any means necessary to hold onto that power and an insatiable desire for even more power.

Most of us at one time or another have become part of that cycle – on a smaller scale within our families, workplaces, or congregations and on a larger scale in our community, denomination, nation, or world. Someone defines someone else as the “other.” We divide ourselves into “us” and “them” and the situation escalates. We need to fear them. We need to make sure they don't get into power. We need to oppose anything they want. We need to exclude them. We need to make it difficult for them. We need to get rid of them.

We lose sight of the fact that they are human like us. Like us, they want to make a living and live in peace. Like us, they want to worship and live out their faith. At the very least, part of our mission as shalom people is to peacefully coexist with those who aren't like us. At our best, we are to work together so that even those with whom we disagree can flourish.

Let's return to our stories from Exodus. Since Pharaoh can't stop Israelite babies from being born, he takes the unthinkable step of ordering that the baby boys be killed right after birth.

Shiphrah and Puah are two of many midwives in Egypt. In fact, it seems probable that Shiphrah and Puah are the heads of an Israelite midwifery guild. Midwives are invited into women's lives during childbirth to assist at a vulnerable and dangerous time. Pharaoh's unthinkable command is even more horrific when set in the context of the midwives' calling. Instead of ushering new life into the world, they are ordered to become midwives of death.

Wilda Gafney imagines what might have happened after their meeting with the pharaoh.

Shiphrah and Puah call all the birthing-women to assemble, telling their overseers that they are passing on Pharaoh's instructions. One Egyptian lingers longer than the others; Puah shoos him out with the ancient womanist refrain: “This is women's business.” He leaves.

Hundreds of women come to the place of Shiphrah's tent. Many bring daughters, granddaughters, and nieces whom they are apprenticing in the profession. Some are pregnant; others are nursing. It takes more than a day for everyone to gather, eat, and rest from their journeys. And there is talk. Shop talk, women's words, shared experiences, and new techniques: herbs to stop bleeding, herbs to bring on labor, teas to increase milk production, ways to limit pregnancies.

Finally, Shiphrah speaks. She tells them Pharaoh's words. The women gasp. Some mutter. Some shout. Some of the children are frightened. Shiphrah and Puah shush them and call for calm. Shiphrah begins to prophesy: “God has brought our people a mighty long way. And I don't believe God has brought us this far to leave us. Do not fear this pharaoh or his warriors, not his warhorses nor his chariots. God will blow them away like smoke in the wind. In our days, before our eyes God will break the back of Egypt and wash away its might. God will raise up one of our sons to lead us and all our children out of this house of slavery. Our hands and our wombs do God's work. We will deliver the deliverer. We will keep him safe until the day that God calls him

to lead us to freedom. We shall receive our freedom, dancing to woman-song if we trust in the mighty power of Shaddai, who drew us from her holy womb, whose spirit covers the earth.”

Shiphrah takes her seat. Puah speaks: “Trust in God-Whose-Name-Is-Holy. This is what we shall do: deliver the babies; hide as many of the boys as you can. Raise others as girls. Do not worry about the Egyptians; they will not come house to house to check on women! They cannot imagine that we would defy the pharaoh whom they revere as a living God.”

The women leave the convocation of birthing-women. Days, weeks, then months go by. Pharaoh is too busy to think about the Hebrew birthing-women. Someone mentions that the Hebrew people are still growing, in spite of the pharaoh’s commandment. He summons them back to explain themselves.³

It isn’t difficult to understand the midwives’ refusal to participate in Pharaoh’s scheme. As they held each new life in their hands, it went against their nature to bring death. But their courage brought risk; eventually they must explain to Pharaoh why they have not acted on his decree. Their explanation is a deception; the midwives simply lie. They also use Pharaoh’s cultural bias against him. They tell him the Hebrew women are brutish and animalistic, not refined like Egyptian women. Because of Pharaoh’s low opinion of Israelite people and his ignorance about how babies are born, the deception is successful. The baby boys live, and the midwives are blessed with families of their own.

This is a clear story of civil disobedience. I wonder ... Under what circumstances is it OK, even faithful, to lie? What stories can you tell of individuals and churches who followed in the footsteps of Shiphrah and Puah and stood up to oppressors even when it violated the laws of the land? When have we – or you or I – failed to do what was right because of fear of the consequences?

Back to Exodus. Shiphrah’s and Puah’s resistance appears to be in vain. Pharaoh again orders the deaths of all Hebrew baby boys. This time, he doesn’t trust the women to do his dirty work; he commands his own people to become his genocidal agents. Every boy who is born to the Hebrews must be thrown into the Nile, and every girl is to be left alive.

When Moses’ mother – whom we later find out is named Jochebed – gives birth to him, she does what Pharaoh says, but in a way he doesn’t intend. When the baby is three months old, and perhaps beginning to roll over, Jochebed knows she can’t continue to hide him, so she conceives an ingenious and desperate plan. She puts him in the Nile, but rather than throwing him into the river as Pharaoh commands, she places him in a basket made of reeds and sealed with tar and pitch. (It’s interesting to note that the Hebrew word for the basket she prepared is the same word used in Genesis 6:14 for the ark that preserves Noah and his family from a watery judgment.)

Jochebed is strategic about the location where she puts her son. She hides him in a basket near where Pharaoh’s daughter comes to bathe. Another part of her strategy is to send Moses’ sister Miriam to watch over him. Because Miriam is a child, she won’t draw attention. She’ll be easily ignored. Jochebed coaches her well. When Pharaoh’s daughter discovers Moses, Miriam fetches her mother and the princess hires Jochebed to raise her own son.

Jochebed’s last act recorded in the Bible is to secure a place as her son’s wet nurse. We’re left with questions. How long did she nurse him? Did she tell him that she was his mother? If so, when? What lullabies did she sing him? What stories did she tell him? Did she ever tell his foster mother who she was?

³ Gafney, pp. 89-90.

Listen again to the writings of Wilda Gafney: *At some point, Moses learns who he is; by Exodus 2:11 he is an adult and knows that he is a Hebrew. I will suggest that Jochebed is responsible for his self-knowledge. Using my sanctified imagination, I see Jochebed talking to her son, singing to her son with the full knowledge of the princess, her partner in the deception they perpetrated against the pharaoh and his edict. I imagine that she nurses him for as long as she can, five or six years. I imagine that Moses maintains his relationship with his birth mother with the full knowledge of the princess, his ... other-mother. As a result of his contact with his mother and sister, Moses is also able to maintain relationships with his father and brother.*⁴

Is this what actually happened? We don't know. However, we do know that once again Pharaoh's plans are defeated by seemingly insignificant people.

Moses will be the most significant character as we journey through Exodus together over the next eight weeks or so. Moses, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (later named Israel) are some of the so-called "giants" of our faith—the patriarchs who were given God's promises and invited to set God's people on the course they would follow for nearly 1,000 years. Each of them displayed great courage at pivotal times in their lives and in the story of God's people. It's easy to compare our lives to theirs and feel we come up short in the comparison.

When considering our faithfulness, we might do better to measure ourselves against women like Shiphrah, Puah, and Jochebed, three ordinary women who faced injustice in the course of their everyday lives and discovered the courage to confront it, at great risk to themselves.

I imagine each of us has witnessed something we knew to be wrong during our daily lives—at home, school, or work. In what ways have we – have you or I – been involved with righting that wrong?

I imagine all parents can identify with Jochebed. Most parents will do whatever it takes to protect their children without considering any possible threat to themselves. I imagine most of us at some time in our lives have done something to aid in protecting a child.

Thinking back to something Weeden Nichols shared a month ago: I imagine each of us has said or done something that created a pause in the escalation of a conflict, giving room for insight and re-thinking. Even at times that we're unaware of it, we may have provided a new awareness or appreciation that helped to repair a relationship or prevent someone from doing something harmful.

We may not do anything that will make it into the news or be recorded in the annals of history, but as courageous women and men of God, we can – and should – address the harmful situations, oppression, or injustice we encounter.

May God help us to not become distracted and overwhelmed by the big problems in the world. May God open our eyes so we may see what is happening in the lives of people we meet every day. May God give us the courage to protect the dignity and safety of the vulnerable people around us. Amen.

⁴ Gafney, pp. 93-94.