Exodus 1:8-21

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.

It was a strange way to start a job. I had never been to Central, or Atlanta, or even Georgia. I interviewed by video Skype from Jerusalem, where I was spending a year on a research fellowship. Yet, I accepted the three year position as resident pastor here before I had ever met anyone in the flesh. And when the time came, it was not Pastor Gary Charles I met first, or Associate Caroline Kelly. It was not even the Residency Committee that oversees the application and hiring process. It was not Personnel, former residents, or other future colleagues. The first Centralites I met were the nine youth who went to the 219th General Assembly in Minneapolis last July.
It was a memorable meeting. I was introduced to them briefly in a hallway. It was just long enough to recognize them later as they gathered in the room where the proceedings on ordination standards were taking place. Much to my surprise, they began, one by one, to go up to the microphone and testify on behalf of ordaining gays and lesbians. They spoke of God’s love. They spoke of their church and the people they knew. I was in awe. There they were, thirteen, fourteen years old, standing in front of a room made up completely of adults, speaking with conviction and compassion on an issue that so many would rather avoid. Not these youth. They spoke, in a society that doesn’t want to listen to the voices of teenagers. They spoke for the world they wanted to live in, facing off this room of adults who ultimately held all the power over the future of their church.

This summer we’ve listened to many stories from the book of Genesis—of Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son, of Jacob cheating his brother of his inheritance, of Laban tricking his nephew for years on end, of Joseph’s brothers selling him into slavery… We listened to the stories of these characters, and we saw ourselves in them, for we too can be deceitful, dishonorable, and traitorous. It is comforting to think that these are the same people we revere for passing on the faith—sort of a relief. It takes some pressure off that the standards seem so low.

That is, until we meet Shiphrah and Puah in this first chapter of Exodus. They ruin the curve. There they were, a disregarded sex in a disregarded profession serving a disregarded people. How dare they defy the king? They risked banishment, prison, torture, death. What could have possessed them? Or, perhaps a more appropriate question—what did they possess that gave them such courage?

After Pharaoh instructs the two midwives to kill any baby boys they deliver, the passage tells us: “But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.” Shiphrah and Puah knew enough about this God to know that if they feared God, they could not follow Pharaoh’s order. This was a God of mercy, of justice, of creation. This was a God whose first promises to God’s people were promises of children. In their refusal to obey a command to kill, the midwives declare through their actions who they knew God to be: a God of life.

They aren’t the only ones who understand the kind of God they’re dealing with. In today’s gospel passage, the disciples were also asked to declare who they believed their Lord to be. Peter responds by saying, “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.” The word Messiah, or Christ, means savior, a word referring to the hope that God had finally sent someone to bring “peace, wisdom, righteousness, and prosperity”1 to the world, a world currently too overrun by death. Peter’s identification of Jesus shows that he too understands the character of the God he had chosen to follow.

So, like Peter, the midwives had knowledge of who God is, and this knowledge clearly motivated their actions. But that isn’t all they had. The text introduces them by their profession; they are midwives. Their identity consists of their ability to usher life into the world. Their vocation is by its very nature a stand against death. Pharaoh’s command is in direct opposition to who they know themselves to be, and obedience would be a betrayal of their life’s work and identity.

But there is even more that these midwives had. The story does not tell us why Pharaoh singled out these two women or the nature of their relationship. Maybe it doesn’t matter. It is enough to note that they did not act alone; they had each other. Who knows what might have happened if they had to face Pharaoh alone, if they’d had to decide alone how to respond to his command? What wisdom and strength did they impart to one another? I wonder if one of them ever had a moment of doubt when obedience to Pharaoh seemed to make a lot of sense. After all, they had everything to lose. Maybe they

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had to remind each other who God is. Maybe they had to remind each other who they were. We don’t know. All we know is that, in the end, they stood firm. Together.

I wonder if it might be possible to see ourselves in these admirable women, just as we saw ourselves in the less than admirable characters we met in Genesis. Why not? Don’t we have the same things they had?

Like Shiphrah and Puah, we know who God is. We declare it every week from this font, this pulpit, this table. We know God claims us in love through baptism, even before we are able to respond in faith. We know God chooses forgiveness instead of judgment. We know God came to be one of us and conquered the power of death. We too know that we worship a God of life.

Like Shiphrah and Puah, we know who we are. We know we are created in the image of the living God. We know we rebel against God, who yet continues to redeem us and all of creation. We know we have been united in Christ and sent out into the world, working alongside God for a day when all is whole. We too know we are meant for life.

Like Shiphrah and Puah, we are not alone. We are part of the body of Christ, connected and united. We are part of a denomination with a unique structure that by its very nature is meant to uphold, support, and nurture all. We are part of a congregation striving to care for those within and without its walls. We too can remind one another who God is. We too can remind each other who we are.

There are ways our denomination is already doing this. Like any good Presbyterian nerd, I am nuts about our constitution, the Book of Order. Part One of the constitution contains the eleven official confessions of the church, and a later section describes the purpose of these confessions: “In these confessional statements the church declares to its members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do (G-2.0100a).” This sounds exactly like what Shiphrah and Puah were doing as they stood in defiance of Pharaoh and the evil born of his fear and greed. Our confessions help us remind each other what we stand for and then do it.

There are also ways our congregation is reminding each other who God is and who we are. We come together for worship every Sunday and do just that. We visit each other when we’re sick. We try to find ways to fight the poverty devastating our city. We make music. We try to be better stewards of the earth. We teach and we learn. Our life together is full of this reminding.

We know who God is. We know who we are. We are not alone. So perhaps we too have what it takes to find in ourselves the same courage that Shiphrah and Puah found. At least some of us have already found it. I went back this week and watched the videos of the youth testifying at General Assembly. What courage. They spoke of who they were and who they knew God to be. Together.

As readers thousands of years later, we can see the far-reaching consequences of the midwives’ courage. People were saved, and among them a boy who grew up to lead a people from captivity to freedom, beginning a nation that eventually gave human birth to a God who would heal the world.

One year later, we could argue we see some consequences of the courage of Central’s youth. Our church as a whole is now able to stand and declare along with them that God is a God who created and loves all people.

Let us, like these midwives and our youth, take strength from our knowledge of God, our own identity, and one another so that we too may find the courage to stand in the face of the powerful forces of fear and greed and confess a God of life and love. Thanks be to God. Amen.