

**It's the Little Things; Exodus 1:8-22; Exodus 2:1-10; Pent 13A/Prop16A**  
**Second Presbyterian Church**  
**M. Evelyn Graham**  
**August 27, 2023**

**Scripture Reading:**

8 Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. <sup>9</sup>The king said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. <sup>10</sup>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.' <sup>11</sup>Therefore the Egyptians set taskmasters over the Israelite people to oppress them with forced labor. The Israelites built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. <sup>12</sup>But the more they were oppressed, the more the Israelite people multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. <sup>13</sup>The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, <sup>14</sup>and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. The Egyptians were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

<sup>15</sup> The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, <sup>16</sup>'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.' <sup>17</sup>But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. <sup>18</sup>So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, 'Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?' <sup>19</sup>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.' <sup>20</sup>So God dealt well with the midwives; and the Israelite people multiplied and became very strong. <sup>21</sup>And because the midwives feared God, God gave them families. <sup>22</sup>Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, 'Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.'

<sup>2</sup>Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. <sup>2</sup>The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months. <sup>3</sup>When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. <sup>4</sup>The child's sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

<sup>5</sup> The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. <sup>6</sup>When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. 'This must be one of the Hebrews' children,' she said. <sup>7</sup>Then

the boy's sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, 'Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?' <sup>8</sup>Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Yes.' So the girl went and called the child's mother. <sup>9</sup>Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.' So the woman took the child and nursed it. <sup>10</sup>When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, 'because', she said, 'I drew him out of the water.'

### **Sermon:**

The show is set in East London in the 1950s and 60s. Call the Midwife follows the nurses, midwives, and nuns from Nonnatus House, who visit the expectant mothers [in the poor neighborhoods of East London], providing the poorest women with the best possible [neonatal and delivery] care.<sup>1</sup> In watching the show, it is easy to see how a deep bond is established between the midwives and the pregnant women they help. By providing prenatal care and paying attention to their patient's lives, the midwives begin to understand the struggles of their patients and to be invested in their lives. This community formed between the women is what draws us into their stories, and the birth of the child ends one story and begins another.

Today's reading is the beginning of a new chapter or story in the history of the Israelite people. We've left behind Genesis, the beginning of their story, and start a new chapter in Exodus. We learn that Joseph and all his brothers have died, and so has the memory of the relationship between Pharaoh and Joseph.

A new Pharaoh has risen to power who has no relationship with Joseph or the Israelites. This Pharaoh is actually fearful of the growth and potential of the outsiders and he attempts to alleviate his fear by oppressing them and forcing them to be his slaves.

The term oppression "refers to a combination of prejudice and institutional power that creates a system that regularly and severely discriminates against some groups and benefits other groups."<sup>2</sup> As Americans we are all to familiar with systems of oppression. Many of us are attempting to come to terms with our own oppression of native Americans and black people brought to this country as slaves; but, these systems of oppression take many other forms including "sexism, heterosexism, ableism, classism, ageism, and anti-Semitism,"<sup>3</sup> just to name a few.

<sup>1</sup> Call the Midwife, About the Show, from PBS website, <https://www.pbs.org/call-the-midwife/about-the-show> accessed 8/27/23.

<sup>2</sup> "Social Identities of Systems of Oppression," from Talking about Race from the National Museum of African American History and Culture website, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/social-identities-and-systems-oppression> accessed 8/26/23.

<sup>3</sup> "Social Identities of Systems of Oppression." Ibid.

Our passage not only names the oppression of the Hebrew people by Pharaoh, but also points to a system of oppression of females by males. Let's look at the role of gender first.

Women have an unusually large role in our story. The first women to which we are introduced are the Hebrew midwives, specifically Shiphrah and Puah; then, we learn of the Hebrew women themselves, described as "vigorous" (1:19); we are told they give birth before the midwives can get to them. Next is a Levite woman who gives birth to Moses, the woman's daughter who watches over Moses, and the daughter of Pharaoh and her attendants.

One of the more interesting things about these gender relationships is how the power dynamic is turned upside down. Normally in the Biblical narrative, the lesser characters are not given names which is indicative of their insignificance. We see this fact clearly in this passage: a Levite woman bears a son, a sister watches over her tiny, baby brother, even Pharaoh's daughter who comes to bathe in the river has no name in our story. However, the seemingly insignificant characters of Shiphrah and Puah, women who are slaves to the Egyptians and lowly midwives, are given names to show their importance. Pharaoh, however, who would seem to have the most power as the king of the land, has no specific name. All this naming or not is to show that Pharaoh doesn't have the power in this story; God has the power and uses the least likely people who are named to carry out God's purpose.

Pharaoh calls Shiphrah and Puah along with the other Hebrew midwives to his office. If that wasn't terrifying enough, he tells them, you must kill all the Hebrew boys after they are delivered.

This edict of taking the innocent lives of babies might remind us of another similar edict recorded in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Matthew. Herod, who has been jilted by the wise sages traveling from the East, sends out his thugs to kill all the babies under two (Matt 2:16). If Herod can't find the King of the Jews for which the wise sages seek, he is determined to shut the entire idea down. No king is ever going to take Herod's place. This link to Exodus is an important way Matthew ties Jesus' story to Moses' story in order to legitimate Jesus to Matthew's readers.

Shiphrah and Puah have a much greater respect and fear of God than Pharaoh, so they disobey his directive and let the girls and the boys live. When Pharaoh realizes that the boys are proliferating as much as the girls, he calls Shiphrah and Puah back to his office. Instead of killing them, because they really have been given the power by God, he asks *Why have you been disobeying me?* (1:18) to which they reply, *The Israelite women are much stronger than the Egyptian women and give birth before we even get there* (1:19). Lie or truth? Who knows? But definitely another role reversal...the Israelite women are stronger than the Egyptian women, despite being oppressed.

Maybe you've never heard the names Shiphrah and Puah, but they are true Biblical heroes. Their story may not ever be named in the book of the most famous Biblical stories, but their acts of "civil disobedience" (if you will) puts them in the Midwife Hall of Fame. God uses the most unlikely people to carry out God's plan of justice, freedom from oppression, transformation, equality, and love.

Shiphrah and Puah join all the other unlikely heroes like Harriet Tubman, Dorothy Day, Father Charlie Stobel, Representative John Lewis, Greta Thunberg, Malala Yousafzai and so many others working to transform this world into the Kingdom of Heaven mentioned over and over and over again by Jesus. Unlikely heroes, not because they are kings, or come from wealthy families, or were famous before their heroic actions. They did what they could to make a difference in the ordinary lives of ordinary people.

All of us are called to be unlikely heroes and do the little things to create a place right here and now where love not fear, freedom not oppression, equality not difference, justice not punishment, and most importantly love not fear prevails.

You may consider yourself to be the most unlikely person to join this group. You might think you are the wrong gender or pronoun to make a difference. You may think you don't have time, or power, or money to change the world. But if Shiphrah and Puah can stand up to the powerful Pharaoh of Egypt, you can do it too! It takes all of us doing ordinary, little things to make a big difference in our world.

I have to admit, I've only watched a few episodes of Call the Midwife; but, the show will soon begin its 12<sup>th</sup> season, and I can't wait to watch more episodes. Think of how many fictional babies they delivered on that show and the bonds formed by the midwives and the women they helped. Think of how many babies Shiphrah and Puah must have saved while risking their lives in acts of civil disobedience against the oppression of Pharaoh.

Thankfully, we have not yet been called to risk our lives as Shiphrah and Puah did. But, God can and does use us as ordinary people to work for the transformation of the world. We are called to work for the liberation of the oppressed by forming a common community of love and care, one child, one relationship, one idea, one meal, one phone call, one task at a time until all the world can experience the transformative love of God. These ordinary things we do help to ensure that the children born today have a better future tomorrow. It's the little things we do that make a difference.

In the name of God the midwife, Jesus who showed us the Kingdom of Heaven, and the life-giving work of the Spirit. Amen.

