

8-27-17 Sermon – “The Darkness of the Womb” – Exodus 1:8-22

The lectionary has taken us to the Book of Exodus. To one of the most beloved stories of our faith tradition, to *the* central story for our Jewish brothers and sisters. We’ve heard this story before, haven’t we? Maybe we’ve even seen a movie, whether the classic Charlton Heston version, or the more recent *Disney* adaptation. As the story goes, the Hebrew people have come to be enslaved in Egypt, and they cry out to God for deliverance. And so, God calls to Moses from the burning bush, and sends Moses to tell Pharaoh: Let my people go. But Pharaoh refuses, and so God sends plagues to Egypt – frogs, and gnats, and locusts – until finally, after the death of his firstborn son, Pharaoh relents and lets the Hebrew people go free.

And then, when Pharaoh changes his mind and sends his army after them, Moses prays to God and parts the Red Sea so that the Israelites can walk across to safety, while Pharaoh’s mightiest horses and chariots are lost to the rushing waters. And the Hebrew people begin their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness, before at last they reach the Promised Land.

But I’m getting ahead of myself, because in this morning’s reading, none of that has happened yet. In fact, Moses hasn’t even been born yet. In what we heard Sheron read this morning, the Hebrew people’s suffering has just begun. A new Pharaoh comes to the throne, who is afraid of how numerous and how strong the Hebrew people have become. And, perhaps to subdue them, perhaps to make an example of them, he enslaves them, and conscripts them into forced labor to build his great and mighty empire.

It is a dark time for the Hebrew people. They came to Egypt in the first place because of a famine in their land, and now, a generation later, they find themselves not only far from home, but now regarded as foreigners, viewed with suspicion by the Egyptians, and therefore confined to the shackles of slavery, to “put them in their place.”

And when the Hebrew people continue to multiply even under the bitter hand of slavery, Pharaoh turns to genocide. He sets out to kill every baby boy that is born to the Hebrews.

That’s how we meet the main characters of this morning’s story – two brave midwives named Shiphrah and Puah. Into the Israelites’ season of darkness step these two courageous lights. They hear Pharaoh’s instruction to carry out the murder and genocide...and promptly disregard it. And when Pharaoh realizes that baby boys are in fact surviving, and summons the midwives in anger to ask what is going on, they lie to his face.

Who are these women? They show up nowhere else in the exodus story or in the Bible at all. Even here, in their little Biblical ‘cameo’, if you will, we learn very little about them. In the exodus story, they are supporting characters at best. And yet, without the courageous, defiant civil disobedience of these two midwives who let the baby boys live, there would have been no Moses, and no exodus story at all.

And the choice these midwives make is courageous and defiant – have no doubt about it! A tyrant like Pharaoh who is willing to orchestrate genocide in order to keep his power intact is not likely to deal too kindly with people who disobey his direct orders and lie to him about it. Shiphrah and Puah literally put their lives on the line...for the sake of Life itself.

Perhaps that shouldn’t surprise us. They are midwives, after all. They are in the business of life. Of diving headfirst into the beautiful and sometimes terrible miracle of birth. Countless times, with women and the children they are laboring to deliver, they have approached that fragile line between life and death. Pharaoh, the most powerful person in this Biblical world, sits on his throne, doling out death. And meanwhile, two humble, enslaved Hebrew midwives go about their daily work, where time and time and time again, they choose life.

It seems to me that Shiphrah and Puah are able to see something that perhaps their fellow Hebrews cannot. They all live in the same season of darkness, all labor under the same yoke of slavery. But Shiphrah and Puah look into that darkness, and they see something else.

Those of you who came to the prayer vigil on the Plaza last Sunday evening heard my friend Daniel read some words offered by a Sikh woman named Valarie Kaur. Reflecting on the darkness of the world she sees around her, Valarie asks, “What if? What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb? What if our [nation] is not dead but a country that is waiting to be born? What does the midwife tell us to do? Breathe. And then? Push. Tonight, we will breathe. Tomorrow we will labor in love. And that revolutionary love is the magic we will show our children.”¹

Shiphrah and Puah lived in the same darkness as they rest of the Hebrew people. But they looked into that darkness and saw something different. They see the seed of their liberation beginning to take root and grow. They recognize the signs of the times, that God’s Kingdom is already beginning to be born into the world. And so, they show up with hands ready and arms open to help that fragile little infant of a Kingdom breathe its first breath. Shiphrah and Puah made the decision to trust their God, to act on their hope that what looked and felt like the darkness of the tomb might in fact be the darkness of the womb.

Perhaps that shouldn’t surprise us. They are midwives, after all. They are literally in the business of wombs and new life. They know that the darkness of the unknown can go one of two ways – the way of death, or the way of new life. They fear God, and so they choose the way of life. They choose to live in the darkness of the womb.

And what do the midwives say to their fellow Hebrews living in bondage? What do they say to their neighbors sitting in darkness as deep as the valley of the shadow of death?

“Breathe. And push.” And then repeat.

Now, I’m no midwife. But I think Shiphrah and Puah are onto something.

“Are you facing darkness?” they ask us. “In your heart, in your family, in the world? First, breathe. Breathe in that which sustains you; breathe in the Holy Spirit herself. Remember that the Biblical word for ‘spirit’ is the same as the word for breath. So breathe that spirit, breathe in God’s own breath. Breathe in the love that has surrounded you since before you were born and that will accompany you to the end of the age. Be still, and know that God is God.”

And then? “Push. Push and labor with your whole body and soul because you are laboring on behalf of Life itself. Push because the Kingdom of God is being born, and it needs your help and your labor. Push because we who have come to know God in Jesus Christ know that God *does* come into the world as a tiny child. Labor because the story of our faith tells us that God’s salvation for all of creation begins in the darkness of the womb.

Shiphrah and Puah were midwives not only to the Hebrew women, but also to the exodus story itself. Quite literally, their faithfulness allowed for the birth of Moses, the one who would go on to lead God’s people out of Egypt. But even more so, I am inclined to think that the steady, *persistent* resistance of these two midwives engendered a sense of hope in the parents they served, an imagination that another world, another way, was possible.

Shiphrah and Puah give birth to hope, and hope drives out fear. Shiphrah and Puah fear God, which leaves no room for fear of Pharaoh. They remind us that we who follow Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, need not fear any darkness. For in his death and resurrection, Jesus has turned the darkness of the tomb into the darkness of the womb. Even in death, God says, I can bring new life.

So take courage, fellow midwives of the Kingdom. Indeed, as the whole creation groans in labor pains, grab your bag and have your hands and arms ready. For as one wise observer has put it, “Another world is not only possible; she is on her way...On a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.”²

Breathe. And push. For the Kingdom of God is at hand. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/03/06/breathe-push-watch-this-sikh-activists-powerful-prayer-for-america/?utm_term=.eaaee4edb998

² Arundhati Roy, *War Talk*, South End Press: New York, 2003.