

Exodus 1:15-22

"Thanks to our mothers – Shiprah and Puah"

As Christians, we come from a long line of patriarchs. Our God is often referred to in both Jewish and Christian Scriptures as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In fact, I believe I referred to God that way in last week's sermon and this is for a reason. First it is Biblically sound and second because these three men are known and accepted as the fathers of the Jewish people and ultimately of Christians as well.

But if I asked you to think about who you would credit with being the first person that introduced you to Jesus Christ, I would venture a guess that many of you would immediately think of a mother, a grandmother, a special Sunday School teacher, a favorite aunt or some other woman in your life. In our modern day society, it is often true that the female is the spiritual head of the household and of course, women have helped shape many of us into the special individuals that we are.

I thought about this when I came across a statement by Darius Graham in his book *Being The Difference*. He writes, "The truth is anyone can be the difference; all it takes is using whatever you have, to do whatever you can." This led my mind on a trip down memory lane to think about the women who used what they had to make a difference in my life.

My grandmother went to college in the 1920's. I assume that this was a bit unusual for women of her day. But instead of being given the opportunity to use that education, she spent her life raising five children on a farm and supporting them and her husband in every way that she could. I doubt people who knew her would think of her as an intellect, yet she was one of the wisest women I have ever known.

My mother-in-law, who did not go to college like her sister and always considered herself "less than" because of it, taught me more practical lessons about life than anyone I have ever known. She could do things that I would never even think about trying like grow things from seeds and sew anything, even without a pattern. She also was also the embodiment of kindness.

My AP English teacher, Ms. Haddon, was the one to challenge me to graduate from college in three years instead of four and an older friend at my home church that I got close to when we served on the Presbyterian Women Coordinating Team together was the first one to say out loud that I was going to become a minister. These are a few of the many women who definitely steered me down certain paths. Who used what they had to BE the difference in my life.

And as I began to take a mental stroll with the women who had influenced me so, I found myself walking through the pages of Scripture with Mary Magdalene and Martha and the bleeding woman in Luke's Gospel until I ended up walking with Shiprah and Puah. Now I can hear you asking yourselves, "WHO did she say? Where DID this preacher come from?" So hear these words from the book of Exodus, Chapter 1, verses 15-22.

There you have it – Shiprah and Puah. Two forgotten names from the Scripture of women who made a difference for an entire people and even all of history. You see, theirs is the story of what anyone can do when we respect God more than worldly authority. When we act out of compassion and stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves. Two Egyptian midwives dealing with the most powerful man in their world – the Pharaoh, the king.

At the time this story takes place, the children of Israel were living as slaves in Egypt with the promises that God made to Abraham and Sarah hanging over their heads like a cloud. God had promised Abraham descendants who would become a great nation, living in the

Promised Land. Yet, as they slaved away to build bricks for the Egyptian King who lorded over them, they had to wonder if that cloud was ever going to burst and rain down blessings on their heads.

And then two brave midwives intervene. You see, the writer of Exodus tells us that there were simply too many children of Israel for the Pharaoh's comfort. He was afraid that they were becoming so numerous that they would one day outnumber his own army. So he tells the Egyptian midwives, namely Shiprah and Puah, to throw the first born male of every Hebrew woman into the Nile. Can any of us imagine throwing a *newborn baby* into a river? I had a friend once, an older and wiser lady at church, who told me when her children were babies they were so cute, that she could have eaten them and when they got to be teenagers, she wished she had! (No offense to you young people in the balcony.) But when I think about how sweet and perfect my two year old grandson is, I cannot imagine doing something so heartless to someone so helpless!

In much the same way of thinking, these particular women responded to God's children because they were moved by compassion to defy the Pharaoh. And in doing so they can be OUR source of inspiration to be advocates for those who cannot protect themselves when WE feel God's call to do the same. They can teach us to listen to the Spirit of God to make a difference in our world, no matter our age, our gender, our ability or our circumstance.

There is so much irony in this story that if I were really talented, I believe I could turn it into a country song. Or just borrow the lyrics from Van Zant's song that says, "If You Want to Hear God Laugh, Tell Him your Plans"! First, since we are told that Shiprah and Puah fear the Lord more than the Pharaoh, they save the baby boys and tell the king that the Hebrew women

are just too strong and too quick and they can't get there before the sons are already secure in their mother's arms and enjoying their first meal.

Isn't it interesting that two women who were NOT Israelites, who had no loyalty to the God of the Hebrews, knew in their hearts that this God was to be feared and respected above any earthly king. Their unexpected allegiance to Yahweh tells us that God uses who GOD chooses, even those who do not necessarily know him. Even those that we may consider the least qualified. Even you and me!

Of course, Shiprah and Puah are not the only resourceful women in this story, which is another irony to consider. If we keep reading in the book of Exodus we find out about another mother who manages to hide her son for three months. Now if you have ever been around a hungry or wet or mad baby, this would seem almost impossible but I guess Pharaoh's kingdom **IS** considerably large! But when it becomes apparent that she can no longer hide her son she builds an ark, the Hebrew word tells us, and puts him in the river, at about the same time that she knows the Pharaoh's daughter would be walking by.

We all know the rest of the story. The Egyptian princess comes down to the water, sees the baby, hears his cries, has compassion on him and saves him. And with a little help from his natural sister and his own mother as a nursemaid, she raises him as her own, right under the nose of the Pharaoh. And the rest, as they say, is history!

The baby will of course grow up to be Moses and deliver God's people out of slavery in Egypt. He will open the cloud that will shower out blessings on God's people. And perhaps the greatest irony of all is that the Pharaoh's daughter pulled the baby out of the very river that the he was supposed to have been thrown in to!

This story reminds us that women, whose names we can't remember, whose names we may never have even heard, who may be sitting right here in this sanctuary have been an instrumental part of God's story of redemption for generations. And on this Mother's Day, I think it is fitting for us all to think about not only our mothers, but of the many women that we are grateful to who have "Been Something" in our lives, to go back to Darius Graham's book.

But to be more inclusive, I think the story of Shiprah and Puah reminds us all, male and female, young and not so young, longtime members of Nazareth and visitors – that each of us has been given gifts by God to use for our good and God's glory.

As an aside, I recently registered to take a preaching class at Columbia Theological Seminary in the fall entitled "Preaching the Verbs". I don't really know what the class is about, only that the instructor is one of the best preachers I have ever heard. But the title of the course piqued my interest as I read through the Exodus text. Listen again to the verbs, the ACTIONS of the Pharaoh's daughter.

The writer of Exodus tells us that she COMES DOWN to the water, SEES that baby, HEARS his cries, is MOVED to compassion and SAVES the baby. And she did this because she showed steadfast and fiercely protective love for another in bold ways.

COMES DOWN. SEES. HEARS. IS MOVED. SAVES. Her actions, and indeed the actions for ALL the women in this story are exemplary of what God does for us in Christ. God in Christ came down to be a part of our world, saw our sinfulness, heard our cries and had compassion enough to save us all.

Now, thankfully, God does not call us to save the whole human race. But perhaps God IS calling us, men, women and children alike to follow the example of Shiprah and Puah. To show compassion that knows no boundaries and extend grace to people who are despised, looked

down upon, powerless, and marginalized. I believe that their story reminds us that, as American Christian who have more freedom, more rights and more resources than Shiprah, Puah or the Princess ever dreamed of, we can show the same respect for the Lord and compassion for others and fiercely love another in God's name.

God has used powerful forces of women's compassion to bring about life for generations and God will continue to do so. It is my prayer that we will recognize the opportunities to be modern day Shiprahs and Puahs. To fear the Lord and do what is right rather than what is popular. To listen to the call of God in ways that honor the children that God created in his image – including each of us here. And to continue to bring about God's kingdom in the ways that we can.

Phyllis Tribble wrote about this story: "If Pharaoh had anticipated the effectiveness of the women in thwarting his plan, he might better have commanded that all FEMALE infants be killed." Yet the Lord came that we might have life and have it abundantly. May we all listen and respond to God's call to be fiercely compassionate in our love of God and of each other. Amen.

Rev. Julie Schaaf

Nazareth Presbyterian Church, May 8, 2016