

## “Women of Faith”

Many of you know that I didn't quit running from God and answer the call to ministry until I was 34. At the time, my children were 5 and 9 and if it had not been for the help of many women in my life – my mother, mother-in-law, sisters-in-law, friends, the Women in Christ class at my home church, female pastors and mentors who cheered me on, the other mothers who arranged carpool every semester *after* I had secured my classes so they could help get my children to and from school and one very supportive husband, I would never have made it. However, today is Mother's Day, so I am going to forget the husband for the rest of this sermon!

On Mother's Day at Nazareth, I always make an effort to honor ALL the women in our lives. After all, while many of us had mothers that were nurturing and loving, some did not. Some of us remain close to our mothers and some do not. Some of us ARE mothers and some are not. And many people have mothers who have joined the Church Triumphant and watch over us from the Heavenly kingdom. Mothers, like people, fit into all categories.

So today, I am going to highlight SEVERAL women in the Bible who have qualities like the women who helped me so much. Qualities that I hope I am able to pass on to my daughter, daughter-in-law, young women and girls in our church, peers and friends that might help them as much as I have been helped. They may be women that you have never heard of. Some do not even have names. But they possess the qualities of godly women who act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God.

The first is Jehosheba. Her story is found in **2 Kings 11:1-3**. Hear the word of God. Jehosheba's name is mentioned only once in all of Scripture, but her actions impacted the history of Israel in an important way. She is also named as one of twenty-three righteous women in the

Midrash, an important commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures. Her family tree is a little convoluted, so pay attention!

Jehosheba was the sister of Ahaziah the king of Judah in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC. Although he was the son of wicked and manipulative Jezebel, he must not have inherited her tenacity because his wife, Athaliah, had all the males in the royal family murdered and assumed the reign herself, becoming the only QUEEN to serve in the kingdoms of the chosen people.

That is where Jehosheba comes in! When she realized what was happening, she and an unnamed midwife **hid** the only living male, a baby named Joash and the rightful heir to the throne. Jehosheba was married to the High Priest and, with his help, she was able to hide him and raise him in the Temple until he turned seven. Then her husband, the Priest, helped Joash overthrow his stepmother's government, resulting in her death. Joash became the youngest king in Israel's history. He is listed as a good king in the annals of the kings and is known for repairing the Temple. And with a story like that, who needs Netflix? But why would I choose such a woman to preach about today?

Jehosheba was brave and resourceful. She basically stole a baby right out from under the eyes of a wicked and unscrupulous queen, who was determined to have power at any cost. Then, she hid him right in plain view until he could claim his rightful position in the kingdom. Her courage can be an example to all of us who struggle with doing what is right as opposed to going along with the rest of the crowd. Surely, Jehosheba knew the risks involved were high when he saved the baby. Yet her compassion for this child of God and her righteousness in preserving the Davidic line in God's kingdom outweighed her sense of personal safety.

Basically, Jehosheba put the needs of others before her own needs. And isn't that the very definition of motherhood. When we who are mothers, sisters, aunts, godmothers, teachers

and friends live out this quality for others to see, we help raise up the next generation to put others needs above their own.

I heard the story of an 11-year-old boy in New Jersey when the COVID pandemic was just beginning who realized how important hand sanitizer was becoming. With the help of his mother, and her credit card, he bought enough small hand sanitizers to distribute them to every school child in his district as well as 50 for the policemen department and 50 for the fire department. Surely this quality of thinking of others has been modeled for him from the beginning of his life. Like Jehosheba, when he saw a need, he implemented a plan.

But perhaps Jehosheba had the courage to do what SHE did because her mother or grandmother or sister had told her about Shiprah and Puah who lived hundreds of years before she did. Their story is found in Exodus when God's people were living in slavery in Egypt. They were midwives when the Pharaoh became fearful that the Israelites would soon outnumber the Egyptians and ordered all the male children of Hebrew slaves to be killed at birth.

Listen to their story found in **Exodus 1:15-21**. The most important quality about Shiprah and Puah is that had their priorities in order. We know this because the Bible tells us that they feared God more than they feared the king. The story of Shiprah and Puah 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. And because of their willingness to do the right thing, even in the face of what could have meant certain death, a little Hebrew boy named Moses was born. And the rest is history.

I can imagine that today there are many Shiprahs and Puahs serving others around the world. Nurses, midwives and doctors who put their own health and safety on the line every day

to attend to victims of COVID 19 and other deadly diseases; women serving as doctors and nurses in deplorable conditions on the mission field, who could be making more money and living in modern day homes yet sacrificing to help where they feel called. These women are advocates for their brothers and sisters in ways that many of us can only imagine.

Another woman in the Bible whose qualities we can celebrate today is a young Jewish girl names Hadassah. She was taken from her guardian and forced to compete for the affection of the King of Persia. Basically, she won the beauty pageant and was renamed Esther, meaning “star”. Because of her bravery and faithfulness to God, she was used by God to save her entire nation.

When the kings’ chief advisor persuaded him to pass a decree that would have all of her people, the Jews assassinated, Esther thwarts his plan and wins permission from the king for the *enemies* of the Jews to be killed instead. The most famous line from her story is found in **Esther 4:14**. When her cousin is trying to convince her to use her position to persuade the king to let her people live, he says, “Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such as time as this.”

Her story reminds us that, as children of God, we are called to be watching for ways to serve God and to serve the least of these, even when we don’t expect it. Like the story that I read about Rebecca Mehra just this week. She writes: “I went to the grocery store this afternoon. As I was walking in, I heard a woman yell to me from her car. I walked over and found an elderly woman and her husband. She cracked her window open a bit more and explained to me nearly in tears that they are afraid to go in the store. Afraid to get sick.”

It seems that this couple is in their 80's and know that the coronavirus is affecting older people disproportionately. And they don't have family around to help them out. Through the

crack in the window the older woman handed Rebecca a \$100 bill and a grocery list and asked if she would be willing to buy her groceries.

Rebecca could have ignored the woman's cry for help or, even worse, taken the \$100 bill and run. Instead, she bought the groceries and placed them in the couples' trunk, giving them back their change. The woman said she had been sitting in the car for nearly 45 min before Rebecca had arrived, waiting to ask the right person for help. Rebecca said, "I know it's a time of hysteria and nerves but offer to help anyone you can. Not everyone has people to turn to".

But on this day when we celebrate mothers and the other important women in our lives, I feel I must share a story about the sacrificial love of a mother named Amanda Franklin of Hartford, Connecticut. Amanda was at a stoplight on her way home from the store when suddenly, a carjacker jumped in and started to drive off with her two young children in the backseat. Courageous Amanda hung on to the car door as the thief dragged her 200 feet. Then, with superhuman strength, she crawled into the car and pummeled the driver, forcing him to stop and kept on pummeling until the police arrived!

The local newspaper reported that Amanda suffered cuts and scratches from her toes to her thighs and her knees looked like raw hamburger from being dragged on the asphalt. When asked what gave her the strength to accomplish such a feat, the answer was simple - her powerful maternal love.

Thousands of years before, it was this same maternal love that gave an unnamed Syrophenician woman the courage to approach the man called Jesus of Nazareth about freeing her daughter from the demon that had overtaken her life. Her story is found in **Mark 7:24-31**. (Hear the word of God).

Jesus' healing powers and miracles were becoming more widely known, despite his insistence to those whom he healed to keep silent about what happened. And we can only surmise that, like Amanda, this woman would do anything to help her child.

Of course, there are some real roadblocks for the woman. First, and most obvious, is the mere fact that she IS a woman. A woman in first century Palestine was not allowed to speak to or touch any man in public, even her own husband. Yet this woman apparently followed a well-known and increasingly popular rabbi who was seeking solitude and interrupted his thoughts with her pleas.

On top of this, the woman is a Gentile. In Greek the word means simply "foreigner" or in other words, not a Jew. She was not one of God's chosen people. Add this to the fact that those who were currently in power, the Romans, were Gentiles who lorded their strength over the Jews and charged them unfairly with taxes and fines and the animosity grew even deeper. This poor woman had two major strikes against her!

So while this story may seem rather insignificant to us, in our multicultural world of freedom and political correctness, it would be like a homeless man bursting into a statehouse dinner to ask for a meal. Now Jesus' reaction to the woman is almost more scandalous than **her** actions but I will save that for another sermon. The point is that, because of her sacrificial love, her daughter was healed and so was the mother's heart.

Friends, I have no doubt that God is using these times of uncertainty, fear and yes, even boredom to teach us important lessons. One of those lessons might be this: Heroes are not athletes who make millions of dollars to play a sport. They are not actors and actresses who win awards and entertain us yet perpetuate the myth that beauty means being thin and looking young.

No, heroes are the mothers and fathers who raise children who want to give to others and lend a helping hand. Heroes follow the words of their faith instead of the words of society. Heroes help others in need, even when they do not know them, listening to God when God calls them to serve. Heroes are every day men and women like you and me and the beautiful people that God has placed in our lives, our schools, our churches, our communities and our world that teach us to be brave, resourceful and sacrificial. To be advocates who stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves. To follow the words of our Lord Jesus Christ and do to others what you would have them do to you.

About those obscure midwives who saved the life of Moses, Biblical scholar Phyllis Tribble wrote: “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. And may our lives be examples, like these Biblical heroines that we have just heard about, so that God’s kingdom will come on earth as it is in Heaven. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

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