

Rev. Lisa Schrott
Exodus 1:15 – 2:10
Living Stories: Drawn Out
January 23, 2022

For the next six weeks our worship services will feature scriptures, sermons, and music that will prepare us for Jazz Sunday on February 27. I am excited to experience my first Jazz Sunday at PCO – Marlene has got me excited with the plans that are coming together. With the pandemic still gripping us, we will not be doing a full Jazz Weekend with pancake breakfast, but we still have some treats in store. The sermon series for this season is entitled Living Stories and I will be sharing scriptures that have been influential in spirituals and gospel music that come from the African-American tradition. We will sing and hear the handbells play some of these musical selections. Many of these living stories will come from the Old Testament – especially from the book of Exodus as we hear about the enslavement of the Israelites, their deliverance into freedom and their quest for the promised land.

We begin this morning with the birth of Moses. We are in the first chapter of the book of Exodus, the second book of the Old Testament. The first book, Genesis, ends with the migration of Israelites to Egypt due to a famine in their land. One of the great patriarchs of the Hebrew faith, Joseph, son of Jacob, an interpreter of dreams, had gained prominence and power in Pharaoh's court and made sure that the food that the Egyptians had stored was shared with the Israelites.

Exodus opens after Joseph's death, with a recognition that Israelites had increased in number so much that the Egyptian powers were afraid. They feared that if there was a war the Israelites might side with an enemy. The new Egyptian king did not know or recognize the gifts that Joseph had brought to the people of Egypt and began to deal harshly with Israelites, treating them as an enslaved people rather than refugees. We pick up the story here as the king of Egypt has some other ideas about how to keep the Israelite population under control. Hear now these words from Exodus chapter 1 beginning at verse 15.

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. 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."

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. 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. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

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. 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. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. 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 him. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water." This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

During the Advent season we heard the birth narratives of John the Baptist and Jesus, and featured prominently in these stories were their mothers, Elizabeth and Mary. Elizabeth and Mary embraced the work of the Holy Spirit – as challenging as it might be. Likewise this morning, we hear the birth narrative of Moses, one who like John and Jesus would deliver his people from bondage – a birth narrative that highlight the role of women, women who were defiant and found ways around the rule of men in power.

The story of the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah has a rich tradition in the Jewish Midrash, an ancient commentary on the Hebrew scriptures. The Midrash is attached to the particular text and often read and studied with it. As rabbis engage with the text, they ask questions of it, providing interpretations that stand alongside the traditional understanding. These questions often bring new perspectives and new life to text that have been heard many times before – making them truly "living stories."

One Midrash commentary about the story of the Hebrew midwives reminds the reader that the midwives "did not do as the king of Egypt had spoken to them; they let the boys live." The Midrash then asks "...why it was necessary to write "they let the boys live," if Scripture already stated that the midwives did not do the king of Egypt's bidding? The rabbis answer the verses teach that not only did the midwives not kill the boys, but they also actively aided them to live. It explains that if the midwives saw poor women, they would go and collect food and water from the houses of wealthy women, which they gave to the poor ones, thus enabling them to provide for their children."¹

The Midrash praises Shiphrah and Puah for engaging in civil disobedience, defying the king and allowing the male Hebrew offspring to survive and even thrive. And it is not just the ancient Midrash, but also many contemporary commentators who have noted the irony of females outwitting the king, a king who believed that by killing off the male offspring, he would be decreasing the power of the Israelites. The king, who interestingly is not named although the Hebrew midwives are, lets his **fear** rule over logic, for he doesn't seem to grasp the basic tenet of population control - fewer males are needed than females to sustain and grow the population.

¹ Kadari, Tamar. "Shiphrah: Midrash and Aggadah." Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women. 31 December 1999. Jewish Women's Archive. <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/shiphrah-midrash-and-aggadah>.

The story grows even more ironic when it is Pharaoh's own daughter who saves the infant Moses from death. And while we attribute the deliverance of the enslaved Hebrew people to Moses – for good reasons as we will hear over the coming weeks - if it were not for a collection of women, who on the surface seem the definition of powerless, there would not be this arc of salvation.

The stories of Shiphrah, Puah, Moses' mother and sister, and even Pharaoh's daughter and her maids are stories that through the centuries have spoken into the lives of those who were oppressed and enslaved. Acts of subversion, of creative disobedience, acts of watching for an opportunity to present itself and then leaping to act. These stories have become "living stories" for countless women who were imaginative and resilient in the face of overwhelming power. We will hear about one of these women – Harriet Tubman – in a few weeks when we feature special music that honors her work in the underground railroad.

Another woman who is often lifted up as a living the story of Shiphrah and Puah is Rosa Parks. As related by pastor Tim Suttle, "When she (Parks) got on the bus after work that fateful day in Montgomery, Alabama, she wasn't thinking about changing the world. She was thinking about getting home and cooking dinner. However, Parks was prepared to resist evil. She had been trained in non-violent civil disobedience by her church.

Contrary to popular thought, Rosa Parks did not sit in the white's only section of the bus that day. She sat in the colored section. But after a few stops the bus filled up, and a white man was left standing. The bus driver said: "Y'all better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats." That particular driver, a man named Jim Blake, had a reputation for being harsh and crude. All that fear and all that power... he was so sure he was in control."²

Rosa Parks challenged that power and control when she politely declined to stand up. And Parks was subsequently arrested and jailed for not giving her seat to a white man. Community leaders organized a boycott of the buses the next day. The boycott lasted 381 days. Rosa Park's one little act of civil disobedience fired the civil rights movement for years."

Suttle goes on to share that "What many choose to ignore is that Rosa Parks was a devout Christian. She was part of the church for her entire life, and her faith grounded her in the story of civil obedience. Once, when she was asked how her faith impacted that act of civil disobedience, Parks said: "From my upbringing and the Bible I learned people should stand up for rights, just as the children of Israel stood up to the Pharaoh."

Just as the people of Israel stood up to Pharaoh... just as Shiphrah and Puah and Moses' mother and sister stood up to power, for as Suttle says, "Even powers that seem invincible, are vulnerable to love, which is why God's love has so often taken the form of the civil disobedience of God's people."

The birth narrative of Moses ends with two beautiful examples of vulnerability to love. Rather than putting him to death, Moses' mother raised him for as long she could hide him – an act

²Suttle, Tim. *On Civil Disobedience*. Patheos Blog, November 24, 2014.

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/paperbacktheology/2014/11/on-civil-disobedience-saint-rosa-parks-and-the-women-who-saved-israel.html>

of disobedience. When she could no longer hide him, she put her beloved child in a basket and placed the basket among the reeds on the bank of the river. She put her trust in God and the infant was rescued by none other than Pharaoh's daughter, who took pity on a crying infant. Through the intervention of the infant's sister, who had watched from the sidelines, mother and infant were reunited. When the child grew up, the mother brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and who took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

Pharaoh's daughter was drawn into the "living story" of the deliverance of the Israelites because she took pity on a crying infant. Rather than turning the infant over to the proper authorities, she allowed the child to live and eventually reared him as her own son. She herself was "drawn out" from the fear of the Hebrew people which so affected her father; she was "drawn out" from the power structures that oppressed. And this woman whose name we do not know, becomes part of a bigger story.

Shiphrah, Puah, Moses' mother and sister and Pharaoh's daughter help us recognize that no matter how minor a character we play in the story, our role - and our deepest reward - is having a sense of that larger story. This larger story - this living story - gives us a sense of hope and a sense of a greater purpose.

As we are "drawn out" from our individual concerns and become part of the "living story" of faith, we have accountability to a higher purpose. This is a common story throughout scripture - from Ruth who would not abandon her mother-in-law to Joseph who forgave his brothers who sold him into slavery and helped save them from starvation to Queen Esther who saved her people from death to countless other named and unnamed conveyors of God's love. Each of these minor characters offers a piece of the larger story, such that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

We are called to be disciples, as we will hear sung in a moment. We are called to be disciples who live our faith through hope. And as we live into hope, we live into the words of the Lord's Prayer we say each week, "thy kingdom come". May we each work to bring the kingdom of God a little closer, faithful to the ways God may be calling each of us to live, not with a sense of fear like Pharaoh, but as disciples who understand that care for our neighbor is our highest calling. May it be so. Join me in prayer.