

The Israelites Are Oppressed

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

¹⁵ The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶ "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live." ¹⁷ But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ¹⁸ So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this and allowed the boys to live?" ¹⁹ 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." ²⁰ So God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very strong. ²¹ And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. ²² Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every son that is born to the Hebrews^[a] you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live."

Birth and Youth of Moses

2 Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. ² The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he

was a fine baby, she hid him three months. ³ 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. ⁴ His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

⁵ 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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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?" ⁸ Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, ^[b] "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

We may recall the story of Joseph, the Israelite sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, who through honorable behavior becomes Pharaoh's second and saves both the people of Israel and Egypt. It is said that modern people have a very short memory, quickly forgetting the past, but this is not a new thing. Within sixty years of so of Joseph's death, there is a new pharaoh, and the great service of Joseph and the Israelites is forgotten.

The Israelites are different than the Egyptians. The Israelites believe in one God, the Egyptians believe in many. The Israelite God is good and all powerful. The Egyptian gods are often petty, childish, their power checked by others in the system, and generally not the sort you would select for a role model. Moreover, God blesses the Israelites to no end. They are growing and thriving in Egypt.

The new pharaoh sees this as a problem. For one, soon the Israelites may well outnumber the Egyptians. He sees his people becoming the minority. The pharaoh was considered a divine leader, and he was watching the very religion which reinforced his power and way of life becoming the minority.

He feared the growing Israelites would weaken his power and expose his reign to enemies. He feared the other, and rather than forging a path forward together, he sought the destruction of the Israelites. First, he oppresses them, treating them as property, taking away their humanity by making them slaves. When their spirit and their growth is, by the grace of God, unbroken, Pharaoh tries something else.

Pharaoh summons two midwives, Shiprah and Puah. He orders them to murder all the male Israelite babies as they are being born. You see, Pharaoh doesn't want an open massacre. He could just as well have waged open war on the people. He could have sent his soldiers to kill any number of the Israelites. Perhaps Pharaoh feared the people would rise up, and so sought a more quiet approach. The mother on the birthing stool wouldn't be able to see the midwife strangle the child, and after all, children and mothers died in childbirth all the time. It seems as though Pharaoh wanted to keep his murderous plan quiet, rather than openly demanding the blood of all the male children.

But these two midwives feared God. To be a midwife has always been a sacred role, it is to be with a woman in a very vulnerable time of her life. These two women would not violate their sacred trust or the teachings of God. They would obey God and not men.

But now they were in a dangerous place. What power do they have in the face of Pharaoh? Do they outright refuse to Pharaoh's face? He would have them killed, and probably give the same ultimatum to the next round of midwives. So the midwives take a wittier approach.

They tell the Pharaoh that the Israelite women give birth too fast, before the midwives can arrive. The Hebrew used in this passage has connotations of wild animals. If you've watched a nature documentary you may have seen an elephant or a giraffe, give birth. It seems a sight more effortless than it is for us humans. So, these midwives actually slur the Israelite people to Pharaoh and create this clever excuse to protect the people. These two women worked within the systems they lived. They were not considered important, but they used the power they had and made ripples throughout history. For doing the right thing, God blesses them and gives them families of their own. A further blessing is that pharaoh is never named in the text, and even today, scholars argue over which pharaoh is the pharaoh of the exodus, but these two women had their names preserved as part of our

spiritual ancestry. Our Jewish friends elevate them more than we do, believing them to have a very important and prominent role in our spiritual history.

Still, innocents must have died or else Moses's mother would not have needed to hide her baby boy. Perhaps Pharaoh's murderous plan was becoming more overt, or maybe there were whispers among the people. Whatever the reason, this mother knew should could not safely keep her child.

From where she stands, there are no good options. Much like the midwives, she lives in a system which sees her as unimportant and powerless. She could openly refuse, but Pharaoh's armies would quickly overpower her. She could try to start a revolution, but revolutions are fickle and bloody. Maybe she could flee, but it's unlikely she could escape with the child. So this mother, still nursing her baby, hormones still raging, still vulnerable in the post partum period, decides she will let God decide. She builds an Ark for Moses and sets him loose in the Nile.

But God! God not only saves the child, but all is worked together so that mother continues to nurse her child as a wet nurse, and the experiences of Moses' life in the palace would shape him as one who walked with God and saw God's face.

Often in the church I hear people tell me of a project they want to start, a person they want to witness to, or a wrong they want to right but they feel as though they are powerless and unimportant. What can they do? I think Shiphrah and Puah have lessons for us when we feel as though we are just a drop in the ocean. These women were considered lowly unimportant people, but through their obedience to God and cleverness, they did wonderful things. They trusted God, certainly, but they also used the wit that God gave them and the very system they were captured by. They were unimportant midwives by pharaohs eyes, but that perfectly placed them to help the people of Israel and to speak as an authority on the birthing practices of the women.

I've encountered a sort of romantic idea of martyrdom in the church. It usually presents as someone body saying that if the powers that be made a sinful law they would promptly, proudly, and loudly stand up to the authorities in refusal, consequences be what they well. That is a very easy

thing to say when you live in the United States of America and no matter how disliked Christians may or may not be, there is little to no danger your resistance will cost you your life.

But perhaps more importantly, Jesus told us to be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Even from the beginning of the early church, the saints were encouraged to use prudence and cleverness, to use the means available to them, rather than volunteering for the fire. One such example of this is Polycarp. The persecution of Christians begins in Smyrna, and Polycarp prudently leaves. He hides out from the officials, though continues his work as bishop supporting the flock. Eventually he is found and arrested. At that point he is offered a chance to save himself by renouncing God. Polycarp famously says ““Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong,” said Polycarp. “How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” At that point, Polycarp accepts martyrdom bravely. Not unlike the midwives, Polycarp used discernment and wisdom in decided how and when to fight, when to be subversive and when to be bold.

Today we don't usually face dilemmas like Shiphrah and Puah, and like Saint Polycarp, for which we give praise and thanks to God. But we do face an endless litany of things which are not as they should be. Here in America, we might face discrimination for our faith, especially when it's counter-cultural. Our brothers and sisters in other lands, however, face much more danger than we do. North Korea has been considered the most dangerous place to follow Jesus for many, many years. At least two decades now. And yet we know that Christianity continues there. Our brothers and sisters practice their faith in secrecy, knowing that discovery will mean death. As Jesus told us, they practice their faith with the wisdom of serpents and the innocence of doves. When these precious brothers and sisters are found, though, many accept martyrdom with bravery.

Friends I doubt any of us will ever be in a situation where we might face death for our faith. Should that situation ever arise for us, I pray the strength of martyr be given to us at that time. We do, however, face wrongs all the time, every day. We tend to think those situation have a binary solution. Either we ignore it to the discredit of our beliefs, or we charge full steam ahead, our guardian angels cringing and covering their eyes. But Scripture shows us a different way. These two women lived in a system where they had very little power, recourse or agency, but they fought for what was right with prudence, accomplishing far more than they would

have with a bullheaded approach. Polycarp could have walked straight into martyrdom, but instead used the resources he had to prolong his ministry and to encourage a frightened and hurting flock. Shiphrah and Puah, and Polycarp, did not budge one inch on their beliefs and their principles, but neither did they allow their passion to diminish their message.

How might God be calling you to work for good here in your community? Don't ever think you are too unimportant or powerless to do great things for God. If these two women are named over one of the most powerful Pharaohs of all time, you can make a difference. Trust in God and do not compromise, but use all the resources given to you by God. Perhaps, like the midwives, you can use your wit to accomplish good. Perhaps you are good at talking to people and making connections. Perhaps you understand a system and want to use that information to reform it. Whatever your gifts are, use them fearlessly to navigate the waters, for you never know when the ripples may be.

Rev. Kate Mauch, August 27, 2023