

NONCONFORMIST WOMEN

Exodus 1:8-2:10

Psalm 124

Romans 12:1-8

Matthew 16:13-20

Following the murder of George Floyd and the resulting protests, a collective of human service and faith-based organizations in my city have come together to address racism, both in our own organizations and in the broader community. Individuals who are interested in being an active part of this are asked to complete a form to help the organizers know how we might be used most effectively. There were the usual questions about work experience and skills. But the question that stopped me in my tracks was what is your ability and experience in speaking truth to power. Participate in marches, write letters to my representatives, chat with the mayor at a function—yes, indeed—but actually confront someone in authority over a moral or ethical issue? I'm not so sure.

But along come these women, Shiphrah and Puah, reminding me of how and why I could answer that question of speaking truth to power.

Their story sounds much like a fairy tale. In the beginning, the good guys appear outnumbered and powerless against the bad guys. In the end the good guys win and the bad guys don't, and in between are the many twists and turns required to overcome the odds. Sometimes in a fairy tale, the good guy is aided by a supernatural assistant, like a fairy godmother, but sometimes the good guy manages to come out on top through cunning and cleverness. So it is in the story of the two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. They seem to be powerless against the evil king but by the end of the story have maintained their goodness, outwitted the king and have won a great reward. The difference between a fairy tale and this story, however, is motivation, the reason that the poor midwives took their stand and, in so doing, turned the course of the story from destruction to salvation.

Their story begins, as such stories often do, with a king,

- a king who did not know Joseph, the Hebrew slave who had saved Egypt and its people from starvation,
- a king who did not remember the example of his predecessor that to rule with compassion and lead with justice is more effective than to rule with fear and lead by playing on the prejudices of the people.

The story begins with a king who is powerful but also fearful, and that is a dangerous combination for those whom he targets with his fear and his power.

And so it was that the king who did not remember Joseph, the Pharaoh over all of Egypt, turned on the descendants of Jacob. When Joseph's father and brothers came to Egypt seeking to buy food during a time of famine, Joseph made a plea to the king of his day to let them settle in Egypt. Out of gratitude to Joseph, the pharaoh allowed them to live in the area of Goshen, away from the cities on the Nile, a fertile area where they could herd their sheep. For 400 years they and their descendants after them lived there

and the clans grew and prospered. But the new pharaoh saw that community as a threat. Like tyrants before and since, he used oppression, enslavement and, finally, genocide, to control them.

The pharaoh's plan was to kill off the baby boys and, over time, to absorb the females into the populace where they would be lost. The Hebrew tribes would be no more. To carry out his horrific plan, he called on two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. Were they Hebrew or Egyptian? The names suggest that they were Hebrew, yet, would the king trust Hebrew women to betray their own people? But would Egyptian midwives have accepted the delicate task of aiding the births of Hebrew babies? On the other hand, the storyteller announces that they feared God, an unnecessary detail had they been Hebrews. It is that detail, however, that makes all the difference. It is that motivation upon which the story turns. These women, Hebrew or Egyptian, feared God and God-fearing women were a surprise with which Pharaoh had not reckoned. God-fearing, clever women, willing to exercise creative disobedience and quite capable of facing down the king's questioning with a clever answer, such women were beyond the imagining of a foolish, fearful, wicked king. So it was that the shrewd plan of the most powerful man in the world was undermined and outsmarted by a pair of ordinary women.

God-fearers, they were. They gave to God the reverence and awe and respect that is due God. Service and obedience to God was their priority, even when it meant disobeying and deceiving the king. They lived their lives and made their choices by a different standard than the rest of their world. Instead of trembling at the command of Pharaoh, they recognized that his power over them could not match that of the living God. Instead to participating in his culture of death, they chose to be part of God's culture of life. Even with their own lives under threat, they lived in confidence of God's presence and leading.

You and I know stories of memorable people who have spoken truth to power—Martin Luther King, Jr., Mohandas Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, Nelson Mandela, John Lewis. Their stories inspire us and their courage awes us, but they also seem bigger than life, exceptional, not like you and me and so it can be easy for us to dismiss their example. But these ordinary women, Shiphrah and Puah, are more difficult to dismiss. Their names are not on the front page; they are not heroes or martyrs. They are just folks, going about their business, and yet, they go about that business with a difference—all that they do is under the rubric of the fear of God. That informs and directs them and allows these ordinary women to be instruments of God's promised salvation.

The apostle Paul calls lives like these transformed. Because of all that God has done on behalf of human beings, Paul urges his readers to respond appropriately. Do not be conformed to this world, he says—the world where Pharaohs try to set the agenda based on fear and power, the world where some people are considered expendable while others are considered valuable because of the color of their skin or size of their bank account or the title on their door, the world which says that joy, contentment and meaning come from owning the newest wide-screen TV or a bigger house. Don't let such a world

define you. Rather, be transformed so that you may know what is good and acceptable and perfect. Eugene Peterson translates Paul this way: “Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out.”ⁱ

Think of the transformed lives of Shiphrah and Puah. From ordinary women to nonconformist women, from quiet, unnoticed midwives to rebels, those two were changed from the inside out by fixing their attention on God, not Pharaoh. God, then, was able to use their small acts of faithfulness to save a people from slavery.

And that is why this is not a fairy tale but a story of practical ordinary lives lived as godly vocations. They give us a vision of just plain folks facing life with a different mind-set about the way things are and the way things can be. Their small acts of resistance that refused to accommodate to a regime of death, made manifest God’s presence in their world. They show us that being God-fearers means having a different perception of the world and a subversive confidence in God’s power to recreate that world for good.

Paul affirms that by giving our everyday, ordinary lives, our sleeping, eating, going-to-work and walking-around lives to God,ⁱⁱ God can bring out the best in us. He says it with the confidence that comes from knowing the love of God in Christ. He is convinced that the gospel has real power to bring about change in human lives, to give them new meaning and purpose. He knows because he had been changed, transformed from the inside out, by his encounter with the living Christ.

Our Jewish sisters and brothers have a wonderful tradition called Midrash, in which they imagine the story in back of a scriptural text. One such back-story is about Miriam, the sister of Moses who watched over his basket as it rocked in the waters of the Nile. In the Midrash, Miriam reflects, “That day changed my life and the life of the princess. I was no longer simply Moses’ sister, and she was no longer simply Pharaoh’s daughter. We were God’s daughters, an army of resisters, with our weapons of love and faith.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Shiphrah and Puah, too, were God’s daughters and part of that same army of resisters, armed with love and faith, commissioned to act on behalf of God. Who would have guessed? Certainly not Pharaoh. Certainly not a world that values and is subservient to power and wealth and armaments. And yet here they are.

Who would have thought that we too might be called into an army of resisters? Who would have thought that we might be transformed from the inside out by the audacious love of God? Who would have thought that we too might be armed with weapons of love and faith and called to take a stand for the living God? Who would have guessed? Yet here we are. With God’s help, may we, like Shiphrah and Puah, be God-fearers, people who stand in awe of the living God. May we also speak and act on behalf of those the world considers expendable. May we too, in the ordinary, yet significant workings of our daily lives, take our stand against the pharaohs of this world, choosing

compassion over hatred and fear, life over death, in obedience to God. You never know. By the grace of God, it may change the world for the better.

ⁱ Romans 12:2, *The Message*.

ⁱⁱ Romans 12:1, *The Message*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marsha Pravder Mirkin, "Miriam," *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, edited by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, (New York: Women of Reform Judaism, 2008), p. 329.