

Today we begin a new sermon series entitled, "Faces of Our Faith." For the next few months, we'll dig deep into some of the bold and often untold stories of those who are sometimes overlooked in the Bible. I hope that these lesser known, ordinary, biblical characters will remind each of us that we all play a role in shaping God's redemptive and grace-filled story. And so we begin remembering the end of the book of Genesis, where Joseph, the favored son of Jacob with the coat of many colors not only survived but thrived after being sold by his brothers to a place of power in Egypt, died at 110 years old and after much time had passed, we pick back up with the story in the very first chapter of the book of Exodus. And things aren't quite the same for Jacob's descendants, who once enjoyed neighborly hospitality and favor with the Egyptians. As you all know with the passing of generations and time, people often forget- whether it's institutional memory or family history. Even though the Israelites had been in Egypt for several generations, they were now viewed as foreigners-immigrants- who had fled their home years ago in the hopes of surviving. And there's a new Pharaoh in town. This Pharaoh doesn't remember Joseph's role in keeping the Egyptians alive during a time of famine. This Pharaoh does not know that God is at work through God's people blessing those who bless them and cursing those who curse them. Nor does this Pharaoh know of God's promise to Abraham and Sarah that the Israelites would be "fruitful and multiply"(v. 7, Gen. 15:5; 17:2). No, this Pharaoh does not know- does not recognize- that Joseph's people belong to another Lord-a different Lord, a lord that is not he. And so this unknowing Pharaoh begins to work against the Israelites. Most of us know the epic story of Moses, the

Hebrew baby who was drawn from the water and raised in Pharaoh's court and becomes not a prince, but a liberator of his people. We may know of Moses but most of us probably haven't heard the story of **Shiphrah and Puah**, the story that sets the stage for Moses to live and determines the fate of an entire people. These two women are today's faces of our faith. But before turning to God's Word, let us first pray.

PRAY. READ.

This morning I'd like for us to think about three C's: 1. Chaos, 2. Choices, and 3. Courage. Let's start with Chaos. "In his novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens wrote, 'It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.' While Dickens described chaos in London around the time of the French Revolution, chaos exists today. All around us, people are living in chaos. People are operating in what appears to be a state of being disturbed in mind or purpose" (Kimberly D. Russaw, workingpreacher.org). Another word that comes to mind when thinking of chaos is fear- like the shaking in your boots kind. In today's biblical story, as well as many of our own, these two women are living amid chaos. Sometimes in describing Triune to others I say we are about Holy Chaos. Think about the chaos in today's story: as midwives in the ancient world, these women were already fighting an uphill battle. Chaos. They lived among a hurting community of people who were worked to death under harsh, inhumane conditions. Chaos. When the highest ranking official in Egypt uses a PR campaign of fear to "deal shrewdly" with those he perceives to be a threat. That how it always starts...a common enemy, a scapegoat to blame for whatever current problems ail society- that

group is chosen- whether it's ICE agents rounding up illegal immigrants, the alt right or the alt left spewing doctrine, black lives matter and blue lives matter, the LGBTQ community and the conservative church or like cities looking to clean up by criminalizing the poor. It always begins with a campaign of fear-fear of "the other." Pharaoh names the weak minority group the enemy. For fear of others can be a powerful source of unity. This new Pharaoh singles out the rapidly expanding Hebrew minority as an emerging threat, and he goes BIG! He starts with working them to death building supply cities, but they continue to grow in number. Chaos. This paranoid and delusional Pharaoh imagines that the small but growing minority is more numerous and more powerful than the empire, and he warns the Egyptians that in the event of war *those* Israelites will join Egypt's enemies. So he turns up the heat, oppressing the Hebrew people more and more, but they still grow in number, thus increasing his fear. Then he pulls out all the stops and commands Shiphrah and Puah, these two midwives, to kill all the male Hebrew babies. These midwives, who "woke up every morning prepared to craft birth announcements were now being asked to write obituaries" (Russaw) for all males. What? This edict is not only crazy but immoral! "If Shiphrah and Puah were unsure before, they are sure now: they are firmly rooted in chaos" (Russaw).

That brings us to the second C- Choices. We all know them. Some are easy and simple. Others are hard and complex. We all make them. And here in the midst of the chaos that Shiphrah and Puah are already experiencing, the Pharaoh gave them the harshest, cruelest of choices to

make. Do what he says and take lives or risk their lives. Let's back up for a second. What do we know about Shiphrah and Puah? For starters, we're given their names, which is a big deal, especially for women in the Bible. It's interesting that Shiphrah and Puah's names are here...recorded in scripture and yet, Pharaoh's name is not. We aren't told his name. Other than their names, we only know that they are midwives. But why are they the only two midwives for all those Hebrew babies? Surely they aren't?! Maybe they are the supervising midwives or representatives from a guild of midwives? We aren't told. What is even more perplexing though is that we don't know the ethnicity of these women. The way it's written they could either be the Hebrew's midwives or midwives who are Hebrew. Are they Egyptian, Hebrew or another ethnicity? We don't know. It can and has been argued all the ways. But back to choices. These midwives have a choice, even though others may argue otherwise. While discerning what to do, these midwives know one thing for certain: they fear God. This isn't the same fear that comes from chaos. Rather, it is more like a respectful fear- a reverence or being in awe. And because Shiphrah and Puah feared God and more than likely were in a relationship with God, that made all the difference. They made a very bold choice. When Pharaoh confronted them and asked they why they let these Hebrew male babies live when he told them to kill them, Shiphrah and Puah strategically, creatively, and defiantly fibbed. They respond that the Hebrew women aren't like the Egyptian women- "they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife" can get there (v. 19). What they really say is that the Hebrew women are like animals. Of course what they said wasn't true and yet, their response seems to be

believable enough to convince Pharaoh, thus sparing many lives, including their own. In their ruse, they play on Pharaoh's prejudices, and it works. Who says that our choices don't matter because they do and they effect lives- whether in small or big ways?! Think about how important it is to be in relationship with God, especially in times of chaos! With God's help, these two women took a chance, made a choice, and changed the world.

And now we've made it to the third C- Courage. Shiphrah and Puah could not have made their choice without fearing God and also without courage. When you look up the word courage, you'll see Shiphrah and Puah's pictures because they have big lion hearts. They risked it all to find a creative way to say "not on my watch." That's right. "Sometimes, the most holy thing we can say is, 'No- not on my watch'" (Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*). Talk about God's provision? These women were hand-picked to do what they did and to make the choices they made. "Their subversive activity allows the population growth to continue, as a result of their fear of God. The insubordination of these brave women allows, the perceived Hebrew threat to grow. Their effective strategy helps to support the eventual deliverance of the Hebrews" (Nyasha Junior, *Women's Bible Commentary*). It's interesting, ironic really, that it's these no count women, these so-called meaningless daughters who save the sons. Pharaoh obviously didn't see it coming. So much so that he overlooks the real threat: God using these two women to set the scene for liberation. I mean, who would expect that in a patriarchal world such as Egypt? Pharaoh disregards the women's power but scripture does not. These ordinary midwives were divinely defiant. Some

people wonder where God is in this story. God is in the agency of these two midwives, who led with love and wit. Shiphrah and Puah were not in positions of influence to affect change in policy but God was and is. Yet, they weren't powerless. "In the process of carrying out their rather mundane responsibilities they are shown to have had a profound effect. God is able to use persons of faith from even lowly stations in life to carry out the divine purpose" (*Interpretation*, p. 34). Their courageous act of civil disobedience sets the stage for Moses to live, thus determining the fate of an entire people. It also sets a model of a "collective work of gracious defiance that embraces life and blurs Pharaoh's attempts to draw lines of distinction between 'us' and 'them,' between Egyptian and Hebrew, between dominating and dominated" (Renita Weems, *The Hebrew Women Are Not Like The Egyptian Women*). As a result, Moses grows up to be a child of two worlds. Shiphrah and Puah's story needs to be told "as they stretch us toward a proper response to oppression and the need for courage to do justice and bring about transformation, regardless of one's position" (*Preaching God's Transforming Justice*, p. 364).

History always has a way of repeating herself and so I ask each of us...will we have the courage of Shiphrah and Puah in the face of oppression and inhumane treatment to practice civil disobedience? How will we, the church of Jesus Christ, fear God in the way that we say "not on my watch" to how God's children are treated? Before answering, we must think carefully because our answers and actions are reflections of our faith. "The things we do this week- our actions, decisions, choices- will, in fact ripple out with consequences foreseen and unforeseen, for

good or for ill, for the health or damage of the world. That question isn't whether, but what...what will we do this week to make a difference- small or big in this world" (David Lose, workingpreacher.org)?

Remember the 3 C's: Chaos, Choices, and Courage and remember Shiphrah and Puah's story. I recently read a sign that read, "The people who hid Anne Frank were breaking the law. The people who killed her were following it." I also came across a quote from Rev. Fred Rogers (Mr. Rogers) that gave me great pause. It reads, "We live in a world in which we need to share responsibility. It's easy to say it's not my child, not my community, not my world, not my problem. Then there are those who see the need and respond. I consider those people my heroes." As ordinary people of faith, we, like Shiphrah and Puah, are called to see the need of any humans and to respond, especially to the vulnerable.

Jazz Fest just ended last night in downtown Greenville. In John Coltrane's Part Four of A Love Supreme, called simply, "Psalm," Coltrane scribbled down these words among many others, "Help us to resolve our fears and weaknesses- in you all things are possible. Thank you, God. We all are from one- the will of God. I have seen God. I have seen ungodly- none is greater nor can even compare to God. Thank you, God. He will remake us- He always has- and he always will." Amen.