

## You Don't Have To Be Moses

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*Exodus 1:15-21 — The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shifrah 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.*

So, this is my first time preaching on Exodus—which is surprising to me, because it's one of the most extraordinary books in the Bible. Many of you are familiar with some of its more extraordinary stories: baby Moses floating down the Nile River in a basket; the ten plagues on Egypt; the parting of the Red Sea. Our story this morning is less well-known than those, but it is no less extraordinary.

Our first reading sets the stage for the book of Exodus, and it looks bleak. The Israelites had immigrated to Egypt years earlier, when Joseph, the son of Jacob, was still alive. Because of his great wisdom and charity, Joseph became the nation's second-in-command, and he served Pharaoh and the Egyptian people exceedingly well. But then Joseph dies, and a new pharaoh comes to power, and the Israelite foreigners are this new pharaoh's target of choice.

Curiously, we never get the name of the pharaoh in Exodus. Many scholars think, and I agree, that from the very first time the story of Exodus was recorded, the character of Pharaoh was meant to represent much more than just one person. Pharaoh is meant to be anyone whose greatest desire is power and whose greatest fear is the loss of power. Pharaoh is anyone who looks at people who are different from them and sees, first and foremost, a threat to their dominance. Pharaoh is anyone who is so afraid that a different and "lesser" people might gain enough power to rival their dominance, that they will do anything and everything to keep that people down. Pharaohs twist the truth: "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we," he says. It simply wasn't true. Pharaohs stoke fear: "Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase, and in the event of war, they will join our enemies and fight against us and escape from our land!" Pharaohs orchestrate injustice and injure the vulnerable without any remorse: "Therefore, they set taskmasters over the Israelites to oppress them with forced labor...and made their lives bitter with hard service." Hoping to solidify his power and stifle an immigrant population, pharaoh enslaves the Israelites and forces them to build military supply cities for the Egyptian empire—but, our first reading says, "the more the

Israelites were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread.” This is the first of many whispers in this book that no matter how hard pharaohs try to break God’s people, God will not let God’s people be broken.

Since slavery doesn’t work, Pharaoh resorts to a new strategy in our second reading: kill the babies. At first, he does this covertly. Later on, he gets desperate enough that he makes genocide a public policy—but we’re not there yet. For now, in our second reading, Pharaoh just calls a secret meeting with two women, two midwives for the Israelites, named Shifrah and Puah, and he tells them, “As soon as a baby boy is born, kill it, but let the girls live.” Then he sends them on their way. This undercover operation is, of course, horrifying, but it is also ironic for two reasons. First, it’s ironic because it seems obviously counter-productive: If Pharaoh wants these people to be his slaves, to build up his empire’s military stockpile, then shouldn’t he want them to be able to procreate? Otherwise, the labor force will die out. Isn’t he shooting his empire in the foot with this strategy? The answer is yes. Pharaoh is being delusional—wanting to use these people for his own political purposes while simultaneously working to destroy them. This is what happens when a lust for power gets combined with a deep-seated fear of the other. Craving dominance, despising those who are dominated, feeling a need to be seen at the top and a need for “those people there” to be seen at the bottom—these are powerful human emotions, human drives, and they can lead people to do things that are not just wrong, but also foolish.

The second reason why Pharaoh’s plan for genocide is ironic has to do with the fact that he goes out of his way to spare all the baby girls. Now, admittedly, I don’t know how a tyrant thinks, but if you’re going to become so wicked as to command genocide, why stop halfway? Presumably, Pharaoh doesn’t think that women pose a threat to his power...and in an era when women were regarded as property rather than as equal human beings, no one is going to correct Pharaoh’s reasoning—except, that is, women. If you read the first two chapters of Exodus, you’ll notice the irony that it is women—so often belittled in both ancient and modern societies—who subtly thwart the great and powerful Pharaoh’s strategies. It is women—so often sidelined and even erased in our own scriptures—who lead the way in resisting Pharaoh’s unjust regime and deadly decrees. It is women who prepare the way for Moses, who set the stage for God to liberate God’s people.

And they do it not by parting the Red Sea, not by becoming leaders of the Israelites, not by performing spectacular deeds for the elite or for the masses. No, these two midwives Shifrah and Puah take part in God’s saving work simply by saying “No” to a tyrant. Our second reading tells us that Shifrah and Puah left that secret meeting with Pharaoh, and did *not* obey his command, for they feared God. That means that they took the will of God more seriously than they took the wishes of the powerful, and so when the powerful asked them to do evil, to be complicit in an evil scheme, they courageously, non-violently resisted, and in so doing, they were being faithful to God.

These two women must have known that, sooner or later, Pharaoh would find out what they were doing—or, more specifically, what they were *not* doing. Sure enough, Pharaoh gets wind of their

disobedience, and so he calls them in, ready to show them who's boss. "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" he demands. It seems like the jig's up: Shifrah and Puah will surely be executed for insubordination, and more obedient midwives will replace them to do Pharaoh's bidding. But here's where we get the most extraordinary part of this little story. Since they knew that it was only a matter of time before Pharaoh found out, Shifrah and Puah had been crafting their response to Pharaoh from day one, and here's what they say: "the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." Now, you don't catch it in the English translation, but in Hebrew, that word "vigorous" here is a loaded word. It comes from the same root as the Hebrew word for animal. Basically, the midwives are saying, "These Hebrew women are like animals—they go into labor so fast, they don't even need midwives to help them! You know, Pharaoh, these Hebrew bodies...they just aren't as developed as the bodies of your Egyptian women." Shifrah and Puah know how little regard Pharaoh has for the Hebrew people, and so, incredibly, they play into his racist stereotypes of them, and then turn those stereotypes against his agenda. You won't find a more cunning ploy in all of Scripture. And God blesses these two women for it, blesses them for saying "No" to a tyrant's evil mandate, then taking his evil, and slyly turning it into a force for good, a force for life.

In closing, friends, I think that Shifrah and Puah give us an unconventional example of what obedience to God can look like. Sometimes, obedience means bowing our heads and saying, "Yes, sir." And other times, it means raising our fists and shouting, "Over my dead body." Sometimes, obedience means being innocent as a dove. And other times, it means being wise as a serpent. Sometimes, obedience takes place in the spotlight, like with Moses. And other times, obedience takes place on the sidelines, like with these two midwives. Whether we feel like we're in the spotlight or on the sidelines, friends, we are called to be obedient not to the death-dealing ways of our world and its rulers, but to the life-giving, peaceful, radically welcoming ways of Jesus. May the Spirit help all of us to discern what obedience should look like for us today, and tomorrow, and each step of the way. Amen.