

Standing Up to Pharaoh  
Exodus 1:8-22  
September 25, 2022 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC  
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

I want to thank you all. You stuck with me last week through the very intense story of Hagar. Like almost all the women in the Hebrew Scriptures, Hagar lived in a time where women were treated as the property of their fathers and husbands, and enslaved women were oppressed far beyond what we want to think about today. There are many, many stories like Hagar's in the Hebrew Scriptures, and often their stories are even more difficult to hear than hers, because they don't seem to have a redeeming ending.

So, you should have seen me this week, searching for an Old Testament woman's story that is more hopeful. I had originally thought I would tell you about Sarah's today, how she finally found joy in her old age with the birth of Isaac. But just last week I shared how terribly she treated Hagar, and I just didn't feel like celebrating Sarah this week. Next, I came to Lot's wife. Nope, not preaching about turning women into a pillar of salt for looking back to the past. I already shared a lot about Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah last year. Then I came to Dinah. Wow! I really won't go there!

I flipped through page after page of my Bible and textbooks.... "Hmm," I thought. "Here's one. She's really interesting.... Oh, nope, I sure can't use that one! ... Oof! Not that one either!" Over and over again I would get drawn into the story of a woman in the Hebrew scriptures and then set it aside, because today, we need a story that will lift us up!

So, I leapt forward, past Sarah, past Rebekah, past Rachel and Leah. For SURE I skipped over Tamar and Rahab! In fact, I skipped all the rest of Genesis. Maybe we will consider some of those stories in some other year. For today, I landed in Exodus, at the time when all the people of Israel are in Egypt. Their numbers have grown in the four hundred years since Jacob's family first immigrated to Egypt to find food during a famine. In fact, they have become so numerous in those four hundred years that the Pharaoh is feeling outnumbered and threatened by them. So, he sets brutal task masters over them and presses them into hard labor to build huge supply cities. Despite these strenuous circumstances, the population of Israelites continues to expand.

Pharaoh is in a difficult but predictable spot. It is the situation of every oppressor. He needs the Israelites for brutish physical labor, but if there are too many of them, he fears they will rise up against him. Pharaoh has to do something!

So, he sends for Shiphrah and Puah. The Bible describes Shiphrah and Puah as the midwives for the Israelites, but they could not possibly have attended all the Hebrew birthing women, so we might more appropriately think of them as the heads of something like a midwives' guild. They are leaders of the birthing-women. Pharaoh can give them an order and expect it to be transmitted to all the midwives.

On the appointed day, Shiphrah and Puah go to the palace and appear before Pharaoh himself. "What can Pharaoh possibly want with us?" they must have asked themselves. They soon find out. Pharaoh orders them to kill all the boy babies they deliver, before handing them to their mothers. Just the boys. Kill all the little boys! Their hearts sink. How can they possibly do this?!?? Shiphrah and Puah stammer some answer to Pharaoh so that they can make a hurried exit from the palace.

The Bible skips over what happens next, how they spread Pharaoh's instructions to the other midwives, so we are permitted to imagine what happens then, to make up the part of the story that is missing, so long as what we imagine is consistent with what we know from the rest of scripture. This imaginative filling in the blanks is called midrash. Here is how the fabulous Old Testament scholar Wilda Gafney imagines what comes next:

Shiphrah and Puah call all the birthing-women to assemble, telling their overseers that they are passing on Pharaoh's instructions. One Egyptian lingers longer than the others; Puah shoos him out with the ancient womanist refrain: 'This is women's business.' He leaves. Hundreds of women come to the place of Shiphrah's tent. Many bring daughters, granddaughters, and nieces whom they are apprenticing in the profession. Some are pregnant; others are nursing. It takes more than a day for everyone to gather, eat, and rest from their journeys. And there is talk. Shop talk, women's words, shared experiences, and new techniques: herbs to stop bleeding, herbs to bring on labor, teas to increase milk production, ways to limit pregnancies.

Finally Shiphrah speaks. She tells them Pharaoh's words. The women gasp. Some mutter. Some shout. Some of the children are frightened. Shiphrah and Puah shush them and call for calm. Shiphrah begins to prophesy: 'God has brought our people a mighty long way. And I don't believe God has brought us this far to leave us. Do not fear this pharaoh or his warriors, not his warhorses nor his chariots. God will blow them away like smoke in the wind. In our days, before our eyes God will break the back of Egypt and wash away its might. God will raise up one of our sons to lead us and all our children out of this house of slavery. Our hands and our wombs do God's work. We will deliver the deliverer. We will keep him safe until the day that God calls him to lead us to freedom. We shall receive our freedom, dancing to woman-song if we trust in the mighty power of Shaddai [the Almighty], who drew us from her holy womb, whose spirit covers the earth.'

Shiphrah takes her seat. Puah speaks: 'Trust in God-Whose-Name-Is-Holy. This is what we shall do: deliver the babies; hide as many of them as you can. Raise others as girls. Do not worry about the Egyptians; they will not come house to house to check on women! They cannot imagine that we would defy the Pharaoh whom they revere as a living God.'

The women leave the convocation of birthing-women. Days, weeks, then months go by. Pharaoh is too busy to think about the Hebrew birthing-women. Someone mentions that the Hebrew people are still growing, in spite of the Pharaoh's commandment. He summons them back to explain themselves.

So, returning to what the Bible does tell us, Pharaoh says to Shiphrah and Puah, "Why have you done this and allowed the boys to live?" Their response is wonderful, and it is why I chose this passage for today. The midwives say to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not refined like Egyptian women, who take their time in giving birth. No, the Hebrew women are more like wild animals. Their babies just plop out of them before we can arrive!" Somehow these midwives are allowed to leave the palace unscathed, and Pharaoh has to find other ways to accomplish his terrible goal of killing those baby boys.

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How did they do that? Where did they find the courage to stand up to Pharaoh? I would suggest that they knew Pharaoh underestimated them because they were merely women. He had no idea of their leadership skills or their commitment to their profession of bringing life into the world, not death. He had no understanding of the depth of their faith in the God of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel. They knew that God was the one who had brought their ancestors to Egypt in the first place, to save them from certain starvation in Canaan, and these women trusted God to bring them out of Egypt again, and soon. To Pharaoh, Shiphrah and Puah were just women, and Hebrew women at that, so of course they would obey him. Boy, did he ever underestimate these women! And they knew he would.

Shiphrah and Puah could not stop Pharaoh from using his powers in other ways, but they didn't have to let him use them in his evil schemes. They turned his own prejudices against him – his belief that women were always subordinate to men and his conviction that Egyptians were refined, while the people of Israel were like animals. Shiphrah and Puah used these prejudices, which they could see and he could not, to concoct a story that would be just believable enough to let them stand up to Pharaoh himself and get away with it.

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The Hebrew Scriptures are filled with stories of terrible oppression, and especially oppression of women, because those are the lives that women lived then. We shouldn't forget that. But once in a while we get the story of spunky, faithful women who stand up for themselves and others, women whom God uses in important ways. The story of the deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt begins here, with Shiphrah and Puah, because they had the faith and the courage to stand up even to Pharaoh.

May we have that same faith, that same courage.

Amen