

“Bible Heroes: Shiphrah, Puah, Miriam, & The Pharaoh’s Daughter”

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First Scripture Reading: Philippians 4:4-7

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Second Scripture Reading: Exodus 1:8-2:10

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

¹⁵The 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 boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” ¹⁷But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ¹⁸So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” ¹⁹The 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.” ²⁰So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. ²¹And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. ²²Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.”

2 ¹Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. ²The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. ³When 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. ⁴His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

⁵The 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. ⁶When 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. ⁷Then 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?” ⁸Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother. ⁹Pharaoh’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. ¹⁰When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, “because,” she said, “I drew him out of the water.”



Sermon: “Bible Heroes: Shiphrah, Puah, Miriam, & The Pharaoh’s Daughter”

The Bible is full of colorful characters and larger than life heroes. As a kid growing up in the church, I loved the Old Testament because of the great stories. As an adult, the New Testament has become pretty important for me. But as a kid, well, the New Testament was kind of a snoozer. Sure, there were some cool Jesus miracle stories like raising Lazarus from the dead,¹ walking on water,² and running all those pigs into a lake,³ but for sheer action and adventure, nothing topped the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament, there was the tower of Babel, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Noah’s Ark. David did battle with a giant and Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, marching the Israelites around the city for seven days before blowing trumpets causing the walls to collapse. Jacob cheated Esau out of his birthright, and then wrestled with God at the river Jabbok.⁴

The Old Testament was and remains the Elementary Sunday School class teacher’s best friend!

So, this summer, Mary and I will revisit some of those old stories that tell of the exploits of our Bible Heroes. Some of them will be familiar, but others you may not have heard much about.

We’ll start this week in Exodus, where the story of Moses begins. Most people remember Moses. Moses spoke to God in the Burning Bush. Moses went to Egypt and demanded Pharaoh “Let my people go.” Moses presided over the ten plagues and led the Israelites out of Egypt towards the promised land. Moses parted the Red Sea. He spent 40 days and 40 nights atop Mt. Sinai in the presence of God, and came back down with the ten commandments.⁵

Exodus tells us that “The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.”⁶ And according to Deuteronomy, “Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.”⁷ If you’re putting together a Bible Hero All-Star team, Moses is probably going to be the first one picked.

However - even though we begin within his story - we are not here today to talk about Moses. We are here to talk about four obscure women who played a crucial part in Moses ever having a chance to become the great prophet we all know and love.

The story of Moses’ birth and childhood is lacking in detail, but it is still one that featured prominently in most of our Sunday School lessons while growing up. I’m sure most of you

¹ John 11:1-44, NRSV

² Matthew 14:22-34, Mark 6:45-53, John 6:15-21, NRSV

³ Matthew 8:28-34, Mark 5:1-20, Luke 8:26-39, NRSV

⁴ Story References: Tower of Babel - Genesis 11: 1-9, Sodom & Gomorrah - Genesis 19:24-26, Noah’s Ark - Genesis 6:11-8:14, David & Goliath - 1st Samuel 17:12-51, Battle of Jericho - Joshua 6:1-20, Esau’s Birthright – Genesis 25:29-34, Jacob Wrestles with God – Genesis 32:24-32

⁵ Story References: Burning Bush – Exodus 3:1-4:17, Pharaoh – Exodus 5:1-2, Plagues – Exodus 7:14-12:36, Parting the Red Sea – Exodus 14:21-22, 40 Days & Nights – Exodus 24:18, Ten Commandments – Exodus 19:16-20:21

⁶ Exodus 33:11, NRSV

⁷ Deuteronomy 34:10, NRSV

remember learning about the baby Moses put in the bulrushes, being found by Pharaoh's daughter, who took him as her own child and raised him. The story is remarkably charming in its simplicity: the little baby, resting in a basket, floating gently in the tall reeds close to shore, is found by the daughter of a King. But within the details of this story lies a deeper narrative, filled with defiance and sedition.

People often forget that Moses was placed in that basket and set adrift on the river, as a desperate means of escaping a cruel royal edict that all Hebrew boys should be put to death. As Exodus tells us right away, many generations have come and gone since Joseph (he of the many-colored coat and the Andrew Lloyd-Webber musical) was Pharaoh's right-hand man. Joseph had been a star in Egypt. But now, the rulers of Egypt do not remember Joseph and all that he did for them. Now, the descendants of Joseph are feared as a growing foreign population within Egypt.

Pharaoh's xenophobia pushes him to take drastic measure to ensure these outsiders do not one day take over the land. So, he orders the midwives who assist the Hebrew women with their births, to take every newborn boy and throw him in the river. Here we meet the first of our four heroes.

We don't know much about Shiphrah and Puah except their names. And that is no small thing since the names of women in the Bible are rarely given. Women were not seen as important enough to record their names. Consider that the daughter of the Pharaoh of Egypt is not even named in this same story.

Shiphrah and Puah are given Pharaoh's command but they see it for what it is – unjust and evil - and they refuse to enforce it. When Pharaoh demands to know why they have not thrown the Hebrew baby boys into the Nile, they explain that the Hebrew women are too vigorous and hardy; “by the time we arrive, the women have already given birth.”

That, of course, is a bald-face lie. It is an outright rejection of the Pharaoh's divine right to rule by decree. They know that what he is trying to do is wrong and they won't allow themselves to become a part of the machinery of injustice.

When Moses is born, his mother hides him until she is no longer able to safely do so. Maybe he grows too big or too loud. Maybe it is impossible for him to continue going unnoticed in the community. So, she puts him in a papyrus basket, waterproofs it with bitumen and pitch, and sets it gently in the still waters on the edge of the Nile.

Here, the nameless mother obeys the letter of Pharaoh's command while openly rejecting its spirit. She does not throw the baby into the Nile, she places him there gently. And it is also worth noting that the Hebrew word the author uses to describe the basket is found in only one other place in the Old Testament. It is the same word used earlier in Genesis to describe another boat:

Noah's ark.⁸ And so he floats there in his ark, but he is not alone. His sister, Miriam is stationed nearby to stand watch over him.

When the daughter of Pharaoh comes down to the river to bathe, she finds the basket and has one of her attendants bring it to her. One wonders what she thought when the basket was opened to reveal an infant. She is taken with it immediately and wants to care for the child.

Traditionally Pharaoh's daughter is depicted as sort of clueless. "Look a baby! I think I'll keep him." After all, she is Egyptian and they are not the heroes of this story. But maybe she is shrewder than that. And maybe she stands as evidence that God can work through even those people who do not claim themselves to be believers.

Think about it. Who would find a child in this place, at this time and not wonder to whom it belongs and what it would be doing there. As daughter of Pharaoh, she couldn't have been ignorant to the policy of her father. She had to have known that Hebrew babies had been ordered killed. As Exodus 1:22 says, when the midwives proved unreliable in carrying out his order, "Pharaoh commanded *all his people* every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live." This was a public pronouncement. Such an order couldn't possibly have escaped her notice. So, what other rational explanation could there have been for a baby in an obviously waterproof basket, floating, hidden among the tall reeds except that one of these Hebrew families was trying to hide their baby boy from the authorities? That's how she knows that this is "one of the Hebrews' children."

Pharaoh's daughter had to have known, yet she defied her father's edict and prepared for the child's safe-keeping. Here, from within the household of Pharaoh, is a second act of defiance.

And then, Miriam. The older sister of the child who has been keeping watch from a distance, re-enters the story offering to find for the daughter of Pharaoh, a woman from among the Hebrews to nurse the child. The simple explanation is that having had no child herself, it would have been impossible for Pharaoh's daughter to breastfeed. But it is unlikely that a woman of such high estate would have been breastfeeding her own child anyway.

So, she is open to Miriam's offer of finding a nurse from among the Hebrews. And a nurse from the slave class probably would not have been unusual. But I would assume there are usual channels for the house of Pharaoh finding servants. I would suggest that there is at least a *hint* of Pharaoh's daughter contracting with someone outside those usual channels as a means of keeping her actions secret from her father a little longer.

Miriam goes and comes back with her own mother; the birth mother of the child Pharaoh's daughter intends to save. And so, the sentry posted to guard the child has delivered him back into the protective arms of his own mother.

⁸ Propp, William Henry. *Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday, 1999. 149. Print. Anchor Bible Commentary.

There is irony in the fact that Pharaoh had seen only the boys as a threat, but it is the girls who contribute to the downfall of Pharaoh's plan.

After the child is old enough to be weaned, he is returned to Pharaoh's daughter who takes him in and raises him as her own son. The rest of the story is what we covered in the beginning; the story we learned in Sunday School. Moses goes on to be an instrument of God's will. Through him, God does amazing things. But his story simply does not happen if not for these subversive women who refused to abide by the law of the land because that law was at its heart, unjust.

I think these stories in and of themselves are amazing. It shows how inconsequential people simply making the choice to do the right thing can make a tremendous difference. What you do with that I guess is up to you.

But I was thinking about this story when I read a letter to the editor in the *Dispatch* Thursday morning. The writer was addressing protestors that were arrested at the recent Pride March. The writer said that if they hadn't been disobeying police there would not have been a problem. "People have to listen and obey when instructed to do so." The letter writer says. "That is what our country's 'law and order' is all about."⁹

Well I've got news for that guy. This country was founded by people who absolutely would have said "Nuts" to that! Our founding fathers and mothers saw that the laws being passed in England that governed this set of colonies were unjust. Unfair tax laws were still legally passed and enforced, but people stood against those laws and fought for what they believed was right. And that was just the beginning.

Right up until the 19th amendment was ratified in 1920, women in this country were routinely denied the right to vote. Laws that banned women from voting in this country were legally passed and enforced, but people stood against those laws and fought for what they believed was right.

Jim Crow laws that institutionalized segregation and racism in the American South for almost a century were legally passed and enforced, but people stood against those laws and fought for what they believed was right.

Just because someone has authority does not make them right. And just because a law is on the books does not make it just.

In his letter from A Birmingham Jail, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr wrote:

⁹ Riley, Micahel. "Letter: Protesters Should Obey the Police." *The Columbus Dispatch*. The Columbus Dispatch, 22 June 2017. Web. 26 June 2017. <<http://www.dispatch.com/opinion/20170622/letter-protesters-should-obey-police>>.

“One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws... ‘an unjust law is no law at all.’”¹⁰

And this from a man who was arrested 29 times during the civil rights movement.¹¹

Now, I’m not telling you to go out and break the law, or to ignore the police. But I think we are called to pay attention and to speak out against injustice, especially when it is institutionalized in our system of laws.

The words of our Pledge of Allegiance call this country “One nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” If we really believe those words to be true, then our system of government and laws must reflect that truth and we must work to ensure that they do. We have been given that responsibility and we must accept it. And that means paying attention, being informed, voting, even in small local elections we sometimes think don’t matter. We must communicate with our representatives and let them know what we think and when injustice is being done, we have to raise our voices in protest.

Several thousand years ago, four inconsequential, powerless women defied the law and made a difference. Their actions had an impact on the world that is still being felt today.

We are their legacy. Now, you don’t have to defy the law like they did. You don’t have to rebel. But you **do** have to do everything in your power to make sure the laws of this nation are just and fair. You won’t change the world by yourself. But if you do your best, and I do my best, and we all do our best, God will take *all* our best and make something great come from it.

*To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion in this world and in the world that is to come.
Amen.*

¹⁰ King Jr., Dr. Martin Luther. *Letter From A Birmingham Jail*. 1963. Letter. Manuscript available at: https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

¹¹ King, Coretta Scott. "The Meaning of The King Holiday." *The King Center*. The Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, 2014. Web. 26 June 2017. <<http://www.thekingcenter.org/meaning-king-holiday>>.