

“Rise Up and Resist”

April 23, 2017

*Faith of Our Mothers* series – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter

Vs. 1 of “Sing Praise for Hebrew Midwives by Edith Sinclair Downing:

*Sing praise for Hebrew midwives,  
for by them God was served.  
They brought to birth God's people.  
A remnant was preserved.  
They used both fact and fiction,  
and found a cunning way  
to counter male dominion,  
and give God's will full sway.*

Shiphrah and Puah. How many of you have heard of these two women before? Their story is often overlooked because we skip right to Moses - the hero of Exodus - to the baby in the basket, the burning bush, the parting of the Red Sea and getting out of Egypt, the Ten Commandments, but there's so much more.

Shiphrah and Puah don't get a lot of play anywhere, but without these two women, Moses might not have even survived. These women are just as heroic. They are people we can follow as we seek to draw near to God.

I knew about them, but when I read more and thought more, I was amazed at their nerve. These women had guts! They had no power – at least not that anyone assumed – but they did something so clever, so creative, so smart, and so brave that it changed the history of God's people!

First it means something that we actually know their names. And we don't know the pharaoh's name! We don't know if Shiphrah and Puah are Hebrew or Egyptian by heritage. We know that they serve Hebrew women, and when Pharaoh – the most powerful person in the land – tells them to get rid of the Hebrew boys, they refuse. They defy him.

Some scholars say that these two may have been directors of a larger group of midwives – the managers of the whole team who served the Hebrew population. But consider their role. There's a show on PBS called “Call the Midwife,” which gives great insight. A midwife is there to assist in the birthing process. They can't do the work for the one giving birth, but they can bring a sense of calm instead of fear. They can encourage and support in the midst of the pain and struggle of childbirth.

We're told they refuse to follow Pharaoh's command because of their fear of God. These two weren't scared of God, but rather confident in God's desire for life. Pharaoh wasn't their king; God was. And there's no doubt that they lived their loyalty boldly at the risk of their own lives.

Shiphrah and Puah - women who were thought to be powerless and without any influence, resisted the command of the most powerful man in the land. They lied to him! And even more, they dug at him a little when they said that it was just too difficult to do anything to stop these Hebrew women from giving birth. That was Pharaoh's greatest worry – that the Hebrew people would keep on getting stronger and stronger!

Such as it is when people in power feel threatened. Such as it is when those with no power rise up and resist – even when it seems futile. Friends, this story may seem far removed from you and me, but it's not. We still deal with power structures that oppress and perpetuate hatred and injustice. We struggle to discuss the reality of privilege by virtue of race, religion, economic status, or any other category because it's hard to admit.

Those are conversations that force us to look at ourselves and our desire for power more closely. And when we're the ones in power, we feel threatened. We lash out. We don't want to lose it. And sometimes we do whatever we can to hold onto it – even when it means hurting others.

Pharaoh may seem similar to another king – King Herod – who was so threatened by the presence of an infant king that he ordered all of the children born in Jesus' time to be killed. Remember how Joseph's dream led him to take Mary and the infant Jesus to Egypt so many years later after Shiphrah and Puah challenged Pharaoh? It's not a new story.

And it's clear that God's way is a way of life, not death. Last week, on Easter, we celebrated baptism with young Luke and his family. The questions asked of Luke's parents - and asked of us as we reaffirmed our baptism were these:

**Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?**

**Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to *resist evil, injustice, and oppression* in whatever forms they present themselves?**

We've been using those questions for a long time in the celebration of baptism, but they're real. They matter. In a world where racism, sexism, sexual harassment, xenophobia, and other evils are alive and well – even in us, (yes, even in us!), how are we working to resist evil, injustice, and oppression?

Shiphrah and Puah's may seem like a small act, but small acts are what start other small acts. The big problems can seem too big and overwhelming, but small acts of faith and trust matter. They change the game and change the world.

How are we speaking or acting to make it clear that the God of new life and resurrection calls us all to be those who honor one another as fellow human beings and beloved children of God? And how are we doing that every day?

When we talk about the cards we've been dealt, these midwives may seem to have very little to work with, but they used their position to honor God's promise and bring new life. How do we use our social capital to help bring new life? We all have a

circle of influence where we can make a difference for good every day. How are we using it? What are we doing?

Last Sunday was the Boston Marathon. In 1967, Kathrine Switzer was the first woman to enter the race and run it. She registered under the name “K.V. Switzer” so that her gender wasn’t obvious.

And when she showed up on race day, it wasn’t easy. You can see footage of Switzer being pushed and bumped as she tried to run alongside other runners. But her courage opened the door for others, and she ran again this year – 50 years later - wearing the same number - 261.

During our Spring Break trip to Baltimore, we went to the newest addition to the Smithsonian – the National Museum of African American History and Culture. It was a moving experience to walk through a representation of a slave ship and see shackles that had been around wrists and legs, read stories of early resistance and rebellion, and spend time reading history of the civil rights movement, particularly those early marches, sit-ins, and demonstrations.

I was particularly moved by the story of Emmett Till. Maybe you know the story. Till was a teenager – just 14 years old – when he was murdered in 1955. His mother chose to have his casket open so that the world would be exposed to the truth of violence and racism – and the pain of losing her son. I’m always struck by the profound connection to faith and the promise of God’s presence in the midst of struggle. I’m moved by the risk of Christ-followers who stood for the rights of all people. And I’m aware that the fight isn’t over.

I know that prayer is a vital part of God’s call to resist, but I also know that prayer without action can be just empty words. Shiphrah and Puah did saving work because of their faith in God. They did what we sometimes struggle to do – allow Love to trump Law.

Think of anyone who’s ever resisted evil forces like those who hid Jewish families during the Nazi occupation at the risk of their lives. Those who were a part of the Underground Railroad and risked their lives for others. Consider those who protect others in the face of violence by giving up their own lives.

For Shiphrah and Puah, for those who seek to give life, this is nothing less than an act of civil disobedience in the name of God who seeks life, not death. There is not a more powerful example of what it means to be Easter people. And that witness is needed desperately.

It’s interesting that they work together. We’re told that women are natural collaborators. I don’t think it’s only women, but this is one of those moments when teamwork takes on a whole new dimension. Shiphrah and Puah challenge us to work together – all people together - for offer new life and give hope to those who are powerless. They oppose injustice and seek to protect life. I wonder how they planned

all of it – what they said to each other, how they prayed, and how they encouraged each other to trust in God’s promise.

A prayer I read this week offered these words that struck me deeply – poignant and powerful words: *Let our hands be those not of murderers, but midwives. Let us not mock justice, but embrace it. Let us not take life, but deliver it.*

Will you – will we - resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves? Will we do it so that the world knows that God brings life, hope, and joy into places where there is death, hopelessness, and despair?

Last week, Bishop Bard wrote about how sometimes we can feel entombed by the realities we face. He said, “Resurrection hope and joy are not a denial of difficulty, but rather trust that the God of Jesus Christ and the power of God’s love work with and through difficulty. God’s love is the power of new life.”

Friends, it’s our turn to rise up – to resist evil, injustice, and oppression, to serve those who are most vulnerable among us, to bring hope and love in the name of God.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

**Blessing:**

Resist the powers that use people.

Hear the cries of the weak.

Dare to work for justice.

Know that God—Source, Word, and Spirit—

is your help, will keep you safe,

and will bring you new life.

You are blessed by God and sent to serve.