

Gracious Deliverance

August 24, 2008

Exodus 1:15-2:8:

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah 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, the Lord gave them families. Then 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."

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

The 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. When 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. Then 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?" Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother.

One: This is the Word of the Lord. **ALL: Thanks be to God!**

Our story starts with ominous words: a new king came to power in Egypt who no longer knew Joseph. Joseph was that resilient dreamer, who despite his jealous brothers selling him into slavery and being thrown into an Egyptian prison, overcame the odds and rose to be Pharaoh's right-hand man. Joseph managed Egypt's affairs so well that when a famine came, the nation was well prepared. Joseph saved the lives of many Egyptians, reconciled with his brothers, and even found a place for his family to live, work, and thrive in Egypt.

The new king not only forgot how Joseph's work benefited the Egyptians, that ruler also failed to remember the lessons that the previous Pharaoh learned when he worked alongside of Joseph. These Hebrews were foreigners, and outsiders can be scary. We like things to stay the same, but times change. We may feel tempted to remain in a place where we are comfortable and keep things the way they have always been. I, like many of us, sometimes get in cruise control where I am not as attune to the valuable

perspectives that outsiders bring. When newcomers arrive, they have fresh ideas. And the Egyptians learned that by overcoming their resistance, these Israelites actually had some good ideas. By embracing what these newcomers could teach them, the Egyptians discovered a way to survive and thrive in spite of a horrible famine.

But over the years some Egyptians forgot the value of their new neighbors. They listened to their worst selves and actually believed these friends who came to help them and live peaceably alongside them were the problem. Now Pharaoh proclaimed that these potential partners threatened the Egyptians' way of life. So the new Pharaoh forgot the lessons of Joseph: that you are better off working together, learning from each other, rather than living in fear and isolation.

The new Pharaoh's distrust for these Hebrews festered and grew until he started telling his followers bold-faced lies. The king said that the Israelites were gaining strength with the intention of rising up to fight against Egypt in a war. That was a lie! But unfortunately gossip is often a more powerful motivator than the truth. Pharaoh mistakenly thought that antagonizing and demonizing others was in his best interest, rather than working together for peace.

Since Pharaoh had declared that these Israelites were a threat to national security, he did whatever he could to oppress them. Like Machiavelli and other political leaders, this new Pharaoh believed the ends justify the means. He enslaved the Hebrews and set in front of them ruthless taskmasters and bitter and harsh building projects. Despite the king's efforts, the Israelites were resilient and continued to multiply.

Pharaoh's first plan did not work, so he moved onto plan B. Pharaoh had become so obsessed with his goal that he no longer saw right and wrong. He called Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives, and ordered them to kill all the baby boys that they delivered for the Hebrew women. But these women's motherly instincts kicked in: they were compelled to preserve life and human dignity, even if they would have to face the wrath of a desperate, cruel tyrant. These women had the courage to stand up for what they knew to be right. They understood that it was more important to fear God than it was to fear that petty king.

Susan Andrews, former moderator of the Presbyterian Church (USA), tells how she was inspired by meeting a woman who is a modern day version of Puah. "Alice Winters has been our Presbyterian mission coworker in Colombia for over thirty years. In the Colombian church, eighty-five percent of the pastors are under the age of thirty-five. In a culture where death and violence are an everyday existence, these pastors have had to risk their lives to stand up for peace and justice every single day. Alice has taught biblical studies in the Presbyterian seminary in Baranquilla to all these pastors. Combining the evangelical joy of the New Testament with the prophetic social justice vision of the Hebrew Scriptures, Alice has shaped a transformational vision for the leaders of the small, but mighty, Iglesia Presbiteriana de Colombia. Alice is single, but

she has, with passion and love, given birth to an entire church. And the gospel is being proclaimed in Colombia with passion and energy, day in and day out.”¹

Shiphrah and Puah showed their passion and faith through their disobedience. Pharaoh called Shiphrah and Puah before his royal court and asked them for an explanation. The midwives made up a completely implausible story about how the Hebrew women gave birth before they arrived to help, but even the evil Pharaoh could not bring himself to punish Shiphrah and Puah, who were simply acting with basic human decency. Now the king moved onto Plan C: he asked his own people to throw the Hebrew boys into the Nile. Three times, Pharaoh tried to force other people to carry out his evil plans. Pharaoh first enlisted the taskmasters, then the Hebrew midwives, and finally the Egyptian people.

Imagine how Moses’ mother felt when she heard she was pregnant. She lived with constant dread and worry each and every day. There should be excitement and joy when a healthy baby is born, but Moses’ mother was unable to celebrate because any Egyptian who discovered her child might turn the boy in and the Egyptians would kill Moses. Life was not fair for Moses’ family.

And today we still know how life is unfair. The loyal employees at American of Martinsville and other area businesses who have lost their jobs know that life is not fair. Many workers have given thirty-plus years of their lives dedicated to the same company only to find that they receive little more thanks than a handshake as their job goes overseas. The country of Georgia knows that life is not fair. Georgia has done everything the West has asked it to do and has held free, democratic elections. Yet Russia, like Pharaoh, has seen its neighbor and potential ally as an enemy, not respecting the sovereign independence of Georgia. Children who are born into physically or emotionally abusive households know how life can be unfair.

Moses’ mother hid her son for as long as she could, about three months. Imagine her fear every day: every person walking outside her home could have taken her son from her. Babies cry: they can’t help it. What if the wrong person heard her son’s cry? Moses’ mother did everything she felt able to do for her son, but ultimately reached the end of her rope. This mother did not know where else to turn; she placed her son in a papyrus basket and put him in the Nile, trusting that God would provide for her son, even when she could not begin to imagine how he would be saved.

Moses’ mother’s desperate trust reminds me of the true story of one night when a house caught fire and a young boy was forced to flee to the roof. The father stood on the ground below with outstretched arms, calling to his son, “Jump! I’ll catch you.” He knew the boy had to jump to save his life. All the boy could see, however, was flame, smoke, and blackness. As you can imagine, the boy was afraid to leave the roof. His father kept yelling: “Jump! I will catch you.” But the boy protested, “Daddy, I can’t see you.” The father replied, “But I can see you and that’s all that matters.” The son trusted his father and jumped safely into his father’s arms.

¹ Susan Andrews preached the sermon entitled “Puah’s Purity” at Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church on May 9, 2004. The sermon is published in *Perspectives: An Online Publication of the Office of the General Assembly*. (June-July 2004 issue).

When we are desperate, the Lord is ready to catch us in God's loving arms of mercy, as Pharaoh's daughter caught Moses in her nurturing arms. Pharaoh's daughter realized and even said out loud that this was a Hebrew child and she knew what they were supposed to do to Hebrew boys, but when she was faced with that precious baby boy, she could not be complicit in the evil her father had decreed. Moses' sister, who was probably Miriam, had followed the basket to watch over her brother. God gave Miriam the courage to speak up to the princess. Miriam offered to find a Hebrew woman to nurse the child and, of course, went home to her mother. Miriam shared the good news: the princess had saved Moses' life and she could be reunited with her son as his maid.

God's gracious deliverance comes through five women: Shiphrah and Puah, who disobey a king and protect Hebrew boys, Moses' mother, who hides her son, the princess, who defies her father to adopt a son, and Miriam, who looks after her brother and speaks up. At first glance, it does not seem like a fair fight. Pharaoh has riches, political power, and armies at his disposal, but God thwarts his plan through these five women who have the courage to stand up for what is right. Who would imagine in that patriarchal society, where women were subjugated and discounted, that God could use five seemingly ordinary women to derail the evil plans of a harsh dictator? These five women are not unique or special: all they need is a little courage and faith to do what they know in their hearts to be right.

When we do not know where to turn, do we believe that God can save us? I believe it. God's Holy Word in Exodus shows us that life's events are not random or coincidental. God has a plan for humanity and for us. The oppressive hand of Pharaoh is strong, but the good news is that God's hand is stronger still. Be on the lookout: Where are the modern-day Shiphrah and Puahs standing up to resist the Pharaohs of this world and their evil plans? How can we join God in fighting against injustice? Thanks be to God for the ways our Lord offers gracious deliverance to those who trust in God. Amen.