

THE MIDWIVES FEARED GOD

These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. The total number of people born to Jacob was seventy. Joseph was already in Egypt. Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation. But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, 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." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and 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.

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, he gave them families.

Exodus 1: 1-21

Have you ever heard of something called "The Butterfly Effect"? It is sometimes summed up in statements like: if a butterfly flaps its wings in Brazil it can set off a tornado in Texas. It is often misunderstood to mean that even the smallest of events can have the largest of impacts given the right leverage; that the miniscule atmospheric disturbance of the butterfly in some way directly causes the large-scale event of a tornado or hurricane. In fact, it is meant to indicate almost the opposite.

The concept was first described around 1961 by Edward Lorenz, a meteorologist and mathematician, a pioneer in using a computer to create climate and weather models. His early description of the phenomena had the un-poetic title "Deterministic Nonperiodic Flow," and it led to a branch of advanced mathematics that is now called "chaos theory," which, incidentally, is also the model Nate and I have been operating under for the last few months.

Lorenz's theory, as it concerns weather models, is that since even the tiniest of variations (such as a change in atmospheric pressure) can compound as the model progresses and set things moving in a different direction, you can never really tell which event alters the outcome. It's not that the flapping of the butterfly directly causes the typhoon; it's that, in a complex system, you can't really predict which of the many variations have no effect at all, and which one finally tips the system and changes the outcome.

In other words, you can never really predict what will be the result, if you give a mouse a cookie. Or if you give a moose a muffin. Or if you give a child a chance to grow up in a healthy environment. Or if you give a refugee or an immigrant a welcome. Or if you give peace a chance.

Which brings us to Shiphrah and Puah, the two midwives named in the reading from Exodus. They are not exactly household names, even among those of us who regularly read and study the Bible. I don't remember ever moving little cut-out Puah and Shiphrah characters on a flannel-graph board in Mrs. Kregel's Sunday School class. No one that I know of has included them in their list when considering names for a daughter. Other biblical women's names, sure: Sarah, Hannah, Leah. But Puah or Shiphrah? Hardly ever.

And I don't recall ever seeing their names in the lists of outstanding women in the Bible, along with Miriam, Deborah, Sarah, Ruth, and Mary the mother of Jesus. But what may be most remarkable is not that their names are forgotten now, but that they were ever remembered to begin with.

Are there stories in your family about some great-great-grandparents or some distant aunt or uncle—stories that have been passed down in your family from generation to generation? Often stories like these not only become legendary and entertaining, but they come to define something about your family and reveal something of who you are today. Stories like these may explain why we are tight with our money, or why we vote Republican or Democratic, or why we'll never drive a Chevy or a Ford. Sometimes you hear one of these legends of your ancestors and you immediately recognize some personal trait of your own, whether it is stubbornness or telling bad jokes or unconditional love for your children.

The stories that make up the Book of Exodus are part of the collective memory of Israel, particularly as the Hebrew people made the transition from an extended family or clan—the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—to a tribal federation and then to the nation of Israel. The story of Exodus and the experience of liberation from oppression in Egypt continued to be not just a treasured memory about crazy uncle Moses, but the singular defining narrative in the life of Israel. It came to be how a whole people understood their identity, individually and collectively. And once these stories and legends were written down and edited and compiled, the Exodus story became the paradigm for how the rest of what we call the Old Testament understood what God was all about. The God that emerges from these stories is a God who takes notice of things here on earth; who hears the cries of those who are victims of injustice; who takes their side against their oppressors; who intervenes on their behalf; who delivers and liberates them. And then what follows from that is a God who invites us into a new way of life that is built upon this model of justice and regard for the interests of the powerless and the poor.

But it all comes back to the Exodus story. In the Book of Deuteronomy and other places, it says that when your children ask you what is the meaning of all these rules and regulations and rituals that we follow, the way you respond is not with abstract theological lectures or moral platitudes. You remember and tell your story: "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand." It is the story that is remembered to this day every year at Passover.

It is important to remember the story. Some remembered the oppression, the forced labor, the quotas of brick production, the dehumanizing tyranny of the Egyptians over every aspect of their lives. But fortunately, there were others who remembered names, the way we remember those unlikely heroes of our own time, like Rosa Parks and Sojourner Truth. Some remembered the name of the man who became the star of the show, and who gets top billing

for the rest of the story—Moses. But others remembered two of the most unlikely players in this drama—Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives who feared God.

Terence Fretheim reminds us that, “In the process of carrying out their rather mundane responsibilities they are shown to have a profound effect on the future of their people. There is no indication in this story that their courageous activity ever becomes public; it could easily have been forever lost amid all the movements of kings and nations. But the deeds of the women are made known somehow, and their names remembered, while the king of Egypt in all his pomp and splendor remains forever nameless.” (*Exodus*, p. 36)

Who could have predicted that the actions of these two seemingly powerless, marginal women would play such a large role in preserving the life of the great-great-grandfather of a Hebrew slave named Amram? And who could have predicted that the son of Amram would be rescued and adopted by the daughter of his enemy, the Pharaoh? And who could have seen that this baby, named Moses, would grow up in the house of privilege in Egypt, only to one day come back and lead a slave rebellion that not only liberated the Hebrew people but overthrew an empire, a superpower?

No one could have predicted this outcome, and least of all those two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah.

When they resisted the immoral demands of the king, when, in their own way, they said no when saying no was more important than obeying the authorities in power, it wasn't because they had set out to overthrow a tyrant. It wasn't because they could somehow see down the road to how things would eventually work out. They had no idea whether their actions would be successful or futile. So, as the text reiterates, the midwives feared God more than they feared the king, and more than they feared the consequences of their civil disobedience. They feared God in a different way. They may have been afraid of the king and the power he wielded, and rightfully so. But they trusted God and the power of suffering love even more. And it is because they feared God in this way that they could act fearlessly in the face of overwhelming power.

Moses and Aaron will be called upon later in this story to directly confront the king and to publicly challenge the legitimacy of his tyranny. But these two women, whose deeds are portrayed here at the beginning of the story, represent the subtle voice of God, the quiet hands of God at work in the world. Just as adamantly opposed to the tyranny of the dominant culture, just as defiant as Moses and Aaron, but in more subtle, quiet ways, ways that are indistinguishable from their everyday occupation. They have so thoroughly integrated their everyday lives with their faith, their vision of God's purposes for the world, that there seems to be no agonizing over the right thing to do, no struggling with conscience. It is as natural to them as giving birth.

And there have been midwives at work in the world ever since.

The film “Weapons of the Spirit” that we viewed together years ago documents the rescue of Jewish refugees in the 1940s by the villagers of Le Chambon, in central France. And many of these rescuers might have been as forgotten as Shiphrah and Puah except for the work of people like filmmaker Pierre Sauvage. One of the villagers he interviewed for the film was Emma Hértier. Madame Hértier, who was by then a white-haired farm wife, was asked why she risked her life for these strangers whom she had never met. She simply shrugs her shoulders

and replies, “It was the normal thing to do.” And she is right. It is the normal thing to do for those who fear God. That is precisely what it means to fear God. Not to quake in terror at the power of a tyrant, but to entrust your life to the God who honors the worth of each human being, no matter their race or nationality or income level. And to entrust your life to this God to such a degree that facing up to the forces of death and dehumanization is not only possible, it becomes the normal thing to do.

The things we will do in the coming days and weeks and months—the ordinary actions we take, the decisions we make, the things we say, the choices we make—all of these mundane details of daily life will ripple out in ways we cannot predict or plan or even see. Will they make a difference in the world and in the lives of the people around us? The Butterfly Effect suggests that they will, but in ways we can’t predict. And so, instead of trying to calculate, we do what God calls us to do—love your neighbors, even those of a different tribe; give yourself a way for the sake of others; welcome the stranger; and not just welcome, but make the well-being of others as important as your own well-being.

We may not be called to act in large and dramatic ways, like Moses or Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Emma Hértier. It may be that we are called to be more like Shiphrah and Puah—to realize that every day we hold in our hands the power to bring life in the face of a kind of death, to speak truth in a time of lies and distortions, to bring hope in situations of despair, to be restorers rather than destroyers of life.

It may be that we are called to pursue justice in such a quiet and anonymous way that the remarkable thing would be if our names were remembered at all.

May it be so.