

HOLY SUBVERSION

Exodus 1:13-2:10

A Sermon Preached by Hannah Faye Allred

12th Sunday after Pentecost | 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Good Morning Friends!

Midwifery care has certainly been on my mind lately... But it has always held a very special place in my heart. The births of both my children, my daughter Jane and my oldest son Henry, were delivered with the help of midwives. So when I looked ahead to the lectionary texts for my very first Sunday back from maternity leave, I had no other choice than to pull us out of the New Testament to the book of Exodus so we could sit with the story of these two brave women, Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives, who did so much more than attend to births of the Hebrew people, (already a monumental task) but these women bore witness to an entire generational movement by protecting the Hebrew people from near genocide and continued enslavement by the hands of Pharaoh.

We are all familiar with the story of Moses... a little baby placed in a basket to float down the Nile river, only to later return to Egypt to free his people from bondage. But make no mistake, this is not the story of Moses saving the children of Israel. This is the story of the mother's of Israel saving Moses and transforming his entire generation in the process.

For me, what makes this story so compelling is the bravery and subversiveness of these women in the face of tyrannical power. Terence E. Fretheim, in his commentary on Exodus, uses the phrase "divine irony," to describe the coup d'état these women throw. The fact that a cast of five women, one of whom being the daughter of Pharaoh, are seen "bucking a male-dominated system, putting their very lives on the line for the sake of life itself," is the ultimate irony. "The most powerful man in all of Egypt is outsmarted by his lowest subjects," he says.¹

Their methodology is steeped in irony as well. They develop a resistance strategy that's not a brazen act of defiance. But subtle. Quiet. And uses Pharaoh's own tools against him. These enslaved women ignore their orders. The great Nile river, called in as a backup plan to drown the male Hebrew babies, is the very vessel used for Moses to float right into Pharaoh's backyard and adopted by his daughter. And if that wasn't enough, Pharaoh inadvertently ends up funding his own future rival as his daughter pays for Moses' mother to nurse him until he is of age to return to the palace under his care.² When the midwives were called back to face Pharaoh, they shrug their response and lie... "These women, they're too vigorous. We never make it in time." Shiphrah and Puah are cunning and heroic in the most unassuming way.³

Their actions are perhaps the first documented example we have of civil disobedience. Most recently, we've seen this "good trouble" as late Congressman John Lewis called it, in our streets across the country through the peaceful protests in response to the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many other innocent Black Americans.

¹ Terence E. Fretheim, "Exodus," in *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James L. Mays (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 23-38.

² Ibid

³ Nyasha Junior, "Exodus," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 56-59.

We see from our scripture lesson how God works in and through individuals who stand up and speak truth to power like these midwives in the book of Exodus, or racial justice activists of the 21st century. In the case of Shiphrah and Puah, they are rewarded for their efforts by God blessing them with families, the scripture says. But not all biblical narratives have such a happy ending. And many individuals throughout scripture are often severely criticized, and even killed for their efforts. Unfortunately, the same can be said for our own history as racism and the fight against it has taken more lives than any of us will ever know.

Personally, I believe that standing up for what is right by getting into a little “good trouble” is one of the most holy things we as Christians are called to do. You won’t find a more personally challenging, clearer call to action than what is asked of us in the pages of scripture. But I do want to challenge how we as 21st century Christians understand this call to action. Because sometimes, the greatest revolutionary moments, most profound protests, and life changing acts of resistance don’t come from grand gestures, but our own personal transformation stories. Our own personal beliefs, commitments, and everyday actions.

It says these women were emboldened to risk their lives and disobey Pharaoh’s orders because “they feared God.” They refused to bend to the ways of an earthly dictator, because they answered to a greater authority, the God of life itself. Like it says in Proverbs 2 *“those who fear the Lord find the wisdom of God.” “[God] stores up wisdom for the upright and shields those who walk blamelessly, guarding the paths of justice.”* So as these women were called into the presence of Pharaoh, they did so by firmly, and bravely remaining true to their god-fearing *faith*. All the while, quietly participating in an act of holy subversion of their own in pursuit of what they knew was right.⁴

All Summer long, our theme has been Not Such An Ordinary Time. And I don’t think any of us foresaw how fitting that theme would feel as the year continued to unravel into a deeper health crisis and racial unrest. But as Christians, we are called to walk blamelessly, to guard the paths of justice, no matter how ordinary or extraordinary the moment may be. Our book of order states that “God sends the Church to work for justice in the world: exercising its power for the *common* good; dealing honestly in *personal* and *public* spheres; seeking dignity and freedom for all people...”⁵

Tomorrow begins the PC(USA) Week of Action, when we are being asked to do the “hands and feet” work that is required to dismantle the systemic racism that has plagued our nation since its inception. Each day we are charged with a different task and area of focus, all of which falls under the umbrella of Anti-Racism work.⁶ Some of you in this congregation were alive to remember the March on Washington, or perhaps you grew up in a Jim Crow South. Maybe you have been doing Anti-racism work your whole life or you are just now learning what white privilege and systemic racism is and means for you personally. But all of us are here, now. And all of us are being called to attend the birth of a new generational movement. We are tasked with creating a just and equitable world for our children. And such a world is not built in one fell swoop. But by small everyday faith that leads to commitment that leads to action. Margaret Mead said it best: *“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change*

⁴ Proverbs 2:5-8 *“...then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly, guarding the paths of justice.”*

⁵ Book of Order, W-5.0304

⁶ <https://www.pcusa.org/weekofaction/>

the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”⁷ I suppose the question for us as a congregation is.... How committed are we? It’s easy to attend a Black Lives Matter rally, to post on social media that you stand with Black lives.... But it’s much harder to live each and every day with the faith and commitment required to do anti-racist work within ourselves... But that is what this moment is going to take for us to bear witness to a rebirth of America. It starts with each of us.

How fitting is it that the actions of these two midwives ended up saving the very generation that would later grow up alongside Moses, the generation that would mark the end of Pharaoh’s brutal enslavement of the Hebrew people. The generation of Hebrews that would mirror the bravery of their midwives and embark on a subversive plot of their own, to rise up against pharaoh and follow Moses across the Dead Sea, out of Egypt, and eventually into the Promised Land.

There’s a lot I want to pass on to my children. I want to raise them to be kind, to live boldly and love fiercely and always fight for justice, but it won’t mean quite as much if I don’t work to create a more just and equitable world to pass on to them that values those same principles. I want to give them a taste of the promised land. Let’s strive for that, together.

⁷ This quote has been attributed to Margaret Mead, however it does not appear in the corpus of her writing. For more information on the source and how she came to be credited with the saying, see: <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2017/11/12/change-world/>