

Introduction to the Faces of Faith Sermon Series

Stories ignite our imagination. They teach us, inspire us, and challenge us. Without even realizing it, we find ourselves merging into these stories—we identify with certain characters, placing ourselves in their shoes.

We also share our own stories, so others can get to know us—to understand what has shaped us and made us who we are today. Sharing stories is how we give each other strength and inspiration.

Stories are how we make meaning of our lives.

They help us hold together what might otherwise fall apart.

They take the scattered pieces of our experiences—joy and loss, fear and hope—and give them a shape we can carry.

Stories don't just explain the past.

They tell us who we are.

They remind us what's worth holding on to.

They point us toward who we're becoming.

It is my hope that each week, you will not only be inspired by the stories of those we read in scripture, but also recognize yourself as one of the **faces of faith** at Grace—and feel encouraged to share your story too.

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Stories ignite our imagination. They teach us, inspire us, and challenge us. The story we tell this morning—might just tell us something about what it means to be faithful in perilous times

I. Reframing Power: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Resistance

How many of you have heard of the story Shiphrah and Puah before? Now how many of you have heard of Moses?

Most people recognize Moses's name but not many recognize the Shiphrah and Puah. But this story in scripture is like the introduction to Moses story.

But these two women, I forgot how much I love their story, they are the face of radical resistance in an empire (in this case the Egyptian empire) that is committing genocide.

In fact, Shiphrah and Puah are one of the first acts of civil disobedience in scripture.

See Faithful resistance begins with ordinary people (who many haven't heard of) who choose to say no to fear and yes to life. It's the beginning thread of liberation that weaves our faith story together.

II. The Logic of Empire.

The story begins in Exodus, the second book of the Bible. How many of y'all sung the song Pharaoh pharaoh at summer camp or bible school or something?

A new king (a Pharaoh) has just come into power. We don't know much about the new "king" - in fact his name is not even recorded in the scripture. And we don't know - he could have been a kind and generous person when he rose to power -and he looked after all of the people in his land. But as Abraham Lincoln said "Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power." But what we do know is he is intimidated by the Israelites, the foreigners. He doesn't know the old stories—he doesn't remember Joseph, or how an Israelite once saved Egypt from starvation. All he sees are foreigners. And they're everywhere. And the more he looks around and sees more and more people who aren't white men who are running things, he gets increasingly insecure.

See the Israelite people are having children. Neighborhoods are growing, crops are thriving, and the streets echo with laughter in a language that isn't Egyptian.

And Pharaoh's heart continues to harden.

“They are not like us,” he says.

And so, Pharaoh begins to imagine all the terrible things that could happen. See deep down its insecurity

What if they rise up? What if they take over? What if they side with the liberal enemies?

Fear has a way of making fiction feel like fact.

And just like that, the divide is drawn.

“We” and “they.”

Insiders and outsiders.

People with power—and people who must be controlled.

That’s where the story turns.

If the problem is the Israelites are increasing in number, and thus a threat to Pharaoh’s continued power...what is the solution?

Pharaoh doesn’t begin with violence. He starts with strategy.

“Let’s give them jobs,” he says.

Let’s make them useful.”

“Let’s assign taskmasters. Maybe that will slow them down.”

But the work is backbreaking. It’s forced. It’s cruel.

What started out as just - they are not like us - how do we know we can trust them to not take over? Then became let us make sure we put them in their place with economic suppression, inhumane working conditions, unfair wages.

But the Israelites remain.

Pharaoh watches the numbers rise and fear continues to swell in him.

So he tightens his grip. He doubles their labor. He builds cities on their backs. He drives them into the dirt. let's have them do our dirty work, let's oppress them so that they will know their place, that they will know they are less than.

Oppression becomes policy. Labor becomes slavery.

And when that STILL doesn't work—when the people of God refuse to wither—Pharaoh's fear boils over.

THIS is where our story for today begins:

Unchecked rhetoric of us and them leads to the unchecked treatment of the other - and then ultimately escalates to violence. How those in power speak about the other - leads to violence.

III. The Hands of Resistance: Shiphrah and Puah

Shiphrah and Puah are midwives. Now remember this is Ancient Egypt. They didn't have OBGYNs and hospitals. They had midwives. That was who delivered babies.

These women, They were used to whispers.

Used to being called in the dead of night, slipping through alleyways and back doors to the sound of labor.

Perhaps Shiphrah carried herbs for pain and infection in her satchel... and prayers on her breath.

Perhaps Puah kept a cloth tied at her waist... and stories from her grandmother folded in her memory. Just like the birthing stool that had been passed down.

-Scholars estimate the infant mortality rate 25-30%, and maternal mortality rate of 1-3% and 10-15% or more over the women's childbearing lifetime ^{1,2}

-Women's reproductive health was one of the most vulnerable parts of life in ancient society.³

Shiphrah and Puah

They had seen the worst of empire up close.

They walked among the Hebrew slaves.

They had heard lullabies sung in fear.

And still... still... there was something sacred in their work of helping bringing life into the world

But one day, the summons came.

Not to a birth.

To a King.

He stood above them, robed in gold and wrapped in power.

He didn't ask questions. He gave orders.

"When you assist the Hebrew women, if the child is a boy—end his life. Quietly. Before the mother knows. Let the girls live. But the boys... the boys must die."

PAUSE

I imagine that...

Shiphrah looked at the floor.

Puah didn't breathe.

¹ Bagnall, R. S. & Frier, B. W. (2006). *The Demography of Roman Egypt*.

² Retief, F. P., & Cilliers, L. (2005). "The healing hand: The role of women in ancient Egyptian medicine." *Historia*, 50(1), 1–12.

³ Van de Mieroop, Marc. (2010). *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000–323 BC*.

They left Pharaoh's palace in silence.

Maybe

That night, they sat beside the river.

They didn't say much.

The stars were dim.

And the fear was thick.

Puah broke the silence.

"What will we do?"

Shiphrah answered slowly.

"I don't know. But I know this—we were not made to be instruments of death."

Puah's voice trembled.

"He could kill us."

"He could."

"He could kill our families."

"He could."

Puah leaned in.

"And still...?"

"And still," Shiphrah said.

I suspect they didn't decide in a single moment.

There was no fiery protest.

Just a thousand small acts of resistance.

Each time they showed up to help a woman breathe...

Each time they stayed when it would've been safer to walk away...

Each time they placed a living, crying boy in his mother's arms...

Each time they left with blood on their hands—but not death.

So Pharaoh summoned them again.

"Where are the boys? Why have you not done what I've asked!"

And they stood there—tired, trembling...

“The Hebrew women...” Puah began,
They are stronger than we imagined.”
“They give birth before we arrive,” Shiphrah added.
They don’t need us.”

They didn’t know if he believed them.

They didn’t know if he would let them leave.

But they had made their choice.

They would not be midwives of murder.

They would be the hands of life.

IV. The Ripple Effects of Small Acts

Even after Shiphrah and Puah stood their ground...

Pharaoh didn’t stop.

In fact, his violence escalated.

(If we continue reading the story in Exodus we will see)

He broadened the order. Now it wasn’t just the midwives—all the Egyptian people were commanded to throw every Hebrew baby boy into the Nile.

That’s the hard part, isn’t it?

We want resistance to work instantly.

We want one brave act to stop injustice cold.

But sometimes... it doesn’t.

Sometimes, doing the right thing makes things worse before they get better.

And even so—God is at work.

Because while Pharaoh was doubling down,

a Hebrew woman was weaving a basket.

Her small act of resistance was to hide her son.

To place him gently in the reeds.

And down the river... Pharaoh's own daughter—yes, from inside the palace of power—saw the baby, and her act of resistance was to pick him up.

To say no to her father's decree, and yes to life.

And years later, that baby—Moses—would rise up and lead the people out of slavery in Egypt.

Shiphrah and Puah didn't know any of that.

All they knew was: we cannot be part of this evil.

But their small "no" was not alone.

It joined with another.

And another.

Until there was a whole web of resistance—mothers, daughters, sisters, rebels—woven by God, thread by thread, until it opened a path to freedom.

Ordinary people saying no to fear and yes to life.

Shiphrah and Puah were just ordinary people, nobodies really, trying to be faithful to God and do the right thing.

And here is the thing that we shouldn't miss - they were essentially being offered power with Pharaoh - they had a chance for him to be indebted to them - they could have secured their own protection their own well being. And they were essentially handing it away, they were opening themselves and their families to harm, to punishment for disobeying

the Pharaoh. They probably didn't know in the moment that they had POWER. They didn't know that 3000 + years later we'd still be telling their story. All they had was the belief that it mattered to God how they acted.

See...we need the Moses's and the Martin Luther King Jr's and the Nelson Mandela's and also behind every one of them we need the many people who made a way, who inspired them. Sometimes I wonder if those of us ordinary folk in Statesville, NC think that because we aren't a powerful somebody, then we don't have a part in God's story, that we don't have a responsibility in the story of God's grace, redemption and liberation.

Now you may be thinking - if I was asked to kill new born babies -or anyone for that matter. It'd be clear and easy to make that decision even if it took courage.

BUT I think there are a few things about this story we need to consider:

1-When you are asked to do something compromising by a superior - especially when it is couched in there is good that will come from it in the short term - it can be REALLY hard to resist. This "good in the short term" can be well me and my families life depend on it. Or what if Pharaoh is right and many of these foreigners are CRIMINALS.

2-Also there is the scenario where you are a rule follower and you just do what you are told, and you say - I don't make the rules I just follow them - Shiprah and Puah were breaking the law in their resistance.

3- I think this is the most remarkable thing about this story is that they were just 2 insignificant people in the midst of this tyrannical regime. The outcome that Shiprah and Puah witness after making their courageous move to not kill these Hebrew baby boys most likely felt disappointing to them, because Pharaoh just keeps marching on with his plans to wipe out these babies, demanding that all his people throw them into the Nile River.

If you did the right thing and it seemingly made no difference would you do it anyway?

If you stood up to an oppressor, a bully, an unjust system, and it didn't stop them would you do it anyway? Would you keep on resisting?

Would you hold on to the promise / the hope that liberation is the ultimate desire of God. That the moral arch bends towards justice?

V. So Now What?

The story of Pharaoh and his fear of a growing people—
of policies built on “they are not like us”—
of leaders turning neighbors into threats—
that story isn’t ancient history.

Pharaoh is still speaking.

And his words echo through our systems,
through laws,
through rhetoric,
through violence.

And just like in Exodus 1, it often starts subtly:

- Make life harder for the other. Harder to afford food, harder to get services, harder to get healthcare
- Deny them basic dignity.
- Make them feel like they don’t belong.
- Say it’s about “order” or “safety” or “diversity/equity/inclusion.” Or “waste, fraud and abuse”

But if left unchecked—fear turns into cruelty.

And cruelty becomes law.

And law becomes death.

This is why our resistance matters—even when it feels small.

Just like Shiphrah and Puah...

Just like the mother who hid her child...

Just like the daughter who reached into the Nile...

We may never see the full fruit of our resistance.

But we trust that God is at work in the ordinary,
and that every act of courage is a seed of freedom.

VII. Naming the Injustice: What's at Stake

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

And if you need a reason to keep resisting,
just look at what's happening right now.

According to the North Carolina Child Fatality Task Force:

- In 2023, Black infants in this state died at three times the rate of white infants.⁴
- North Carolina ranked 10th highest in the country for infant mortality.
- In 2021, the maternal mortality rate for Black women was more than double the national average.⁵

This is not theoretical.

This is not distant.

This is happening—here.

⁴ https://webservices.ncleg.gov/ViewDocSiteFile/94479?mc_cid=7af7503656&mc_eid=c5a73dad61

⁵ <https://journals.law.unc.edu/nccivilrightslaw/2024/04/combating-rising-maternal-mortality-rates/#:~:text=In%20North%20Carolina%2C%20where%20the,the%20supervision%20of%20healthcare%20professionals.>

These are our children. Our neighbors. Our mothers.

And we cannot pretend that this is not about race.

Or policy.

Or power.

Shiphrah and Puah didn't just save babies.

They stood in the gap for life when empire had chosen death.

They did what they could, with what they had, where they were.

VIII. A Faith Worth Passing Down

I don't know about y'all...

but I want my girls to know the names of Shiphrah and Puah and their story.

I want them to grow up believing that ordinary people—especially women—
can say no to fear and yes to life.

Because that's what our faith is made of.

Not just creeds and Sunday worship, and rituals.

But hands that catch life, that hold one another up,
that cradle the new, the tender, the not-yet-born future.

So I ask you:

Do we want to offer our hands and our lives
to empower, to protect, to support what is being born in our midst?

Do we want to be part of the web of resistance—
woven by love, sustained by hope, rooted in justice?

So church....it's time for talk back...

VI. What Does Resistance Look Like Today?

What does that mean for us, here and now?

Closing and Benediction:

Some among us may be called to lead movements—

like Moses, like Martin Luther King Jr., like Rev. William Barber.

But most of us will live our resistance in quieter ways—

in classrooms, in hospital rooms, in city council meetings, at kitchen tables.

The work of resistance is not just about being the leader of the movement. It's about being faithful.

Because justice was always political.

And faith has always called us to act.

Because as ordinary as we are—

we can be used in extraordinary ways

for justice...

for liberation...

for life.

Be on the lookout for stories like this, of ordinary people doing radical things for love. Let's collect and share these stories.