

Wise Women Leading the Way - Shiphrah & Puah's Story- *Ex. 1*

Norwalk Christian Church, January 25, 2020, Epiphany 4, Year A, Non-Lectionary Worship Series

“Look at all these women!” Those words were spoken in our church basement last week by our Congresswoman, who was here visiting our ELL program. She was here visiting the program, learning about what is done, who does it, and why they do it.

Her office called, searching for a human services organization, someone doing good in Warren County that they could visit to get to know what's going on in the county better. We proposed our ELL program. And so we gathered Thursday morning, snow on the ground, Gary Fox outside clearing the snow away, so the Congresswoman and her staff could squeeze into a tiny room filled with volunteers and students--all women.

Betsy did amend the Congresswoman's statement and said we now had one man helping, her husband. All these women, and Betsy's husband, making a difference.

At the table sat the students and a few volunteers. Three of the women came from different cities in Mexico. Three of the women came from Somalia by way of refugee camps. All of the women now live here, in Norwalk. They came to fight for a new life, most of them doing it all themselves, their husbands out of the picture or still in a refugee camp, caught up in the mess of unjust laws and regulations that split up families for years if not forever. They came to our county, our state, our city to find jobs, housing, education--to create a new life.

One of the students, Zaaharah, was late arriving, and she walked into the room, packed with some people she did not know, a bunch of white Christians, her in her hijab, and she walked in like she belonged. Sat at the table at the seat reserved for her, and she had the biggest grin.

Congresswoman Axne asked one of the students, Foos, what this group meant to her. Immediately, she started talking, for almost two minutes she talked, barely taking a breath, all in Somali. Barawqo interpreted. “She said...a lot.” We all laughed. Then Barawaqo said, “Foos says, speaking of our teachers, you--our church members--“They brought me in as one of their sisters.”

“Look at all these women!”

That phrase could be the name of our sermon series. During the season of Epiphany, this time between Christmas and Lent, we've been looking at stories of Wise Women in the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet there's a theme developing. Each week, Marti and I are picking different stories that resonate with us. And so far, every story we've told has involved a foreign woman. Someone who comes to the aid of the Jews, someone who shouldn't know the God of the Hebrews, but she does. She stands up for herself. She

fighters. And she prepares the way for God's mission to be done. Look at all these women in God's story, their stories often untold, forgotten, and ignored. But without them, the story would've ended long ago.

We, of course, know about Moses, the great leader of the Hebrew people. We picture him standing at the burning bush, raising his hand as the Red Sea parts, climbing up Mount Sinai to talk with God as he received the Ten Commandments, and leading the people through the wilderness.

But Moses' story begins with two Egyptian women. Before there's ever a Moses, there's Shiphrah and Puah, Egyptians who were tasked with being midwives for the Hebrews.

When the story of Exodus begins, we are told that the descendants of Joseph had now become "fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them."

It sounds like good news. The promise made to Abraham had come true. God had made Abraham's family into a great people; but there is bad news: "Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph."

Forgetting all that Joseph had done, this new king, whose name we are never told, looks at the vast number of Israelites in Egypt, and says, "They are more numerous and powerful than we are! We must stop them or else, in the event of war, they will join with our enemies and defeat us."

Why is it that people in power can get so worked up about others gaining power?

This king is scared, and so he orders these midwives to kill every Hebrew baby boy that is born. They can make it look like an accident, they can be blatant. He doesn't care. All he cares about is control, power, and genocide, the extinction of the Hebrew people.

And guess what these remarkable, fierce women do?

Like Rahab who lies to the king of Jericho to protect the Hebrew spies, like the Persian Queen Vashti who tells her drunk husband, nuh-uh!, they resist. They let the boys live. Every one of them. How could they not?! They're midwives! Their job is to bring life into this world.

And the king of Egypt is enraged. You can almost see him stomping around, smoke billowing from his ears like Elmer Fudd being one-upped by Bugs Bunny.

He calls the midwives in. This unnamed king calls in two named women, Shiphrah and Puah, and asks them, "Why have you let them live?!" And they lie. They tell a good one. One that everyone else chuckles when they hear it, but this king apparently believes.

“Oh, mighty king! We would obey you, but these Hebrew women are more vigorous than the Egyptian woman. We head out with our bags, ready to be midwives, but before we arrive, they’ve already given birth!”

What the text doesn’t say, but implies, is that, surreally, they are not they only midwives in Egypt. They’re just the two named. I can imagine what happened. The midwives get together, just hearing about the edict from the King of Egypt. Shiphrah and Puah summon them all together. They devise a plan. They recruit other women to join them. And together, they defeat the King’s plan.

They recruit this team of women. They resist together. Together they risk it all. And they are victorious. Because of their courage, an entire generation of Hebrews are born and have a chance. One of those children was named Moses.

And we are told that the God of the Hebrews rewards Shiphrah and Puah with families of their own, suggesting that they were--like many ancient midwives--barren themselves. The barren, helping other women give birth, and receiving God’s blessing.

Look at all these women!

When Marti was pregnant with Finn, we were blessed to meet a remarkable woman named Addy. Addy was a *dulah*...basically a midwife without the official certification.

And we hired Addy to help Marti give birth. We had a doctor, who was great. Smart. But we needed more than a doctor. We wanted a coach. See, when our first child was born, the Doctor took matters into his own hands. “I prefer to deliver babies on Mondays and Tuesdays.” And he did what he needed to do to make things happen the way *he* wanted them to happen.

And we went along, because we were new. We were vulnerable. We didn’t know any better. But we decided--that wasn’t going to happen again. Birth is a gift. And Mom, not the Doctor, is in charge

So we hired Addy. And Addy did what midwives have been doing for centuries, all the way back to ancient Egypt.

See, a midwife does not deliver a baby. Midwives know what modern medicine often forgets. It’s not the doctors or nurses, midwives or doulas that deliver babies. The mother delivers the baby. A midwife’s job is to help the mother do what she is created to do.

When the mother doesn’t think she can go on, the midwife tells her she can. The midwife walks alongside the mother in the birthing process as a guide, a support, an

advocate for the mother's own ability, coaching the mother to do what she was created to do--what no man could ever do, by the way--bring a new life into the world.

And I can't think of a better example--a better model for ministry--than a midwife.

On Thursday, in that church basement room, there was a room filled with midwives. These remarkable women, refugees, migrants, and immigrants who have endured so much to fight for a better life, they have within them all they need to succeed and thrive. But they need a midwife.

Someone who can coach them. Who can teach them what they may not yet know. Who can model for them. Someone who can help them do what they were created to do.

And as they've been doing since the beginning of human civilization, other women stepped up to serve as midwives for these women. As Foos said, "They brought them all in as one of their sisters."

Look at all these women, and Betsy's husband, too.

Because midwifery isn't just for women. Everyone, regardless of your gender identity, are called to be midwives. To walk alongside of people, be it your own children, friends, family, people in the community, your employees, your church sisters and brothers, young and old--we are called to be midwives. To help people birth new things, new opportunity, new possibilities.

To recruit others like Shiphrah and Puah recruited the midwives. To resist the tyrants and tyrannical forces in our world that oppress and control. To risk whatever we need as we stand up to unjust laws and unfair expectations, to stand alongside of women and men, cheering them on, helping them become what they are created to be.

We don't do it for them. We do it with them. And in the process, guess what happens.

We are changed. The life they birth changes us. And because we are there to witness their new life, we, ourselves, are reborn.

Thank you, Shiphrah and Puah, who have led the way. Thank you for making God's story possible and reminding us all that no one can stand in the way--not tyrants, not our own doubts or fears--nothing can stand in the way of what God has created us to be.

May we follow their example as we all--women and men--become midwives for God's mission.