



First United Church of Oak Park

Called by the Times We Live In
Exodus 1:8-22
The Rev. John Edgerton
December 15, 2019

“Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” So much is contained in this little phrase. Generations would rise and fall, decades pass, perhaps a century or more, a tragedy began, deliverance began. “Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.”

The Hebrew people were living in Egypt, and had been so for generations. And Egypt had been very good for them. Their ancestor, Joseph, was remembered as a great leader of Egypt, and what had begun just as a small band had grown over the years to be a great people. With their own language and culture, their own songs and stories, their own God whom they worshiped over the many gods of the Egyptians. And it was good. They lived in the Northeast of the country, where the Nile river flowed closest to the Red Sea.

“Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph,” and in his eyes, the Hebrew people were not a part of the kingdom. He said “look, the Israelite people are more numerous than we; let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they continue to increase.” And this word, increase, it is more like “swarm” or “spawn,” it is the word for what insects or reptiles do when they multiply and become pests. The king didn’t even really view the Hebrew people as people; they were outsiders, interlopers, invaders, vermin.

And so the Pharaoh set out on a campaign of terror to break the people. He started by forcing them to live under military occupation. The pharaoh moved great sections of his army into the Northeast section of the country where the Hebrew people lived. And to accommodate them, they would need garrisons—so large they were really cities unto themselves—so that the Hebrew people would always be surrounded by the presence of armed Egyptian soldiers. And to underscore to the Hebrew just how much more powerful he was than them, the pharaoh forced the Hebrews to build these garrison cities themselves.

The cities were built, the military occupation in full force, yet the Hebrew people were not broken; they continued to thrive. So the Pharaoh increased his campaign of terror. After the garrison cities were built, he declared that all the Hebrew people were now slaves, and forced them to work in the mud and the muck of the brickworks, making building materials for the pharaoh’s many grand buildings—edifices to his own greatness. Yet still they were not broken.

And so the Pharaoh hatched an even more vile scheme. He proposed to kill half of all the children born to the Hebrew people—nip in the bud this great swarming fecundity of the people. It was a monstrous plan, and one the Pharaoh hoped to achieve in secret. Pharaoh summoned the midwives to the Hebrew people in to his palace to have a private meeting directly with him.

And so we meet our heroes: two women named Shiphrah and Puah. Two women who were just ordinary people who worked to assist women in giving birth to children, who suddenly found themselves swept up into great events beyond their control. Pharaoh summoned the midwives in and told them “when you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and they are giving birth to a boy, see to it with your skills as a midwife—see to it that the boys don’t live.”

This was a monstrous order—an outrage to conscience; an affront to God to behave in this way. And so Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives to the Hebrew people, were left with a choice to make. Would they do the right thing? Would they dare do the right thing? Their decision would save the lives of innocents, save their own lives too, define the future of their people.

So influential were they that, 3,000 years later, we tell the story of Shiphrah and Puah. They decided they would trick the King. They refused to follow his vile orders. They continued to act as midwives and would not kill anyone, much less half of the children.

They would refuse but...of course...this created a problem. The king quickly realized his orders were not being followed and demanded that Shiphrah and Puah give an explanation. And then they were as cunning as they were conscientious. They said, well these Hebrews are just having so many babies and so fast, well, by the time we get there, they're already done; heck, they're practically on to having another baby. The story they told the king relied on all his own prejudices. The king believed them. He ate it up; bought it hook, line, and sinker.

Shiphrah and Puah. They found a way to live their lives, to do their work, to be who they were, to live in such a way that they slowed down and subverted the unjust actions of a mighty man. They found a way to trick and thwart the will of the most powerful man in the nation. They saved families from heartbreak, they saved innocent lives, delivered their people from destruction. They did not change everything. The people were still enslaved and God would bring a yet more complete deliverance. Shiphrah and Puah did not change everything, but for those people they helped, it meant the world.

The story of Shiphrah and Puah, it is a story about calling. Calling does not always—or even often—look like an angel visitation. Calling does not always—or even often—look like a vision from God. More often calling looks like an ordinary person, who finds the swirling currents of life pick them up and plop them down in front of a decision. More often, calling is when ordinary people must confront and decide the question of what their life will be all about. Will they do the right thing, even when it is hard? Will they dare to do the right thing. even when it is risky?

This too is calling, make no mistake. Just as surely as a visitation from the Angel Gabriel, the events of the world can make a person confront the question will I do the right thing? Dare I do the right thing? That is a question of calling from God.

Just over seven years ago, following the shootings in Sandy Hook elementary in Newtown, Connecticut, a movement was born. Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America was formed out of response to that tragedy. The women leading that movement, like Shiphrah and Puah before them, were called by the wickedness of powerful men for whom the blood of children was a palatable price. They were called to action by the circumstances of the world and, in seven years, Moms Demand Action Has been part of shifting the national conversation around guns in this country. It has not changed everything, but for those who found a way to hope again in gun reform, it means the world.

And there are people among you here today who are living proof of how calling works. There is Susan Zaruba; she saw years ago the way that children who were coming to the food pantry didn't have proper clothes, especially winter clothes. And with grit and organization and consistency she has helped thousands of children in need. It doesn't change everything, but for those kids who have a warm coat against the winters cold, in those moments it means the world.

Or you can look at Pete Todd, who works with young people in the Austin neighborhood. Youth who are so often written off, Pete volunteers time helping the youth start up gardens and even a chicken coop, and just spending time with the young people. And he's making a difference in their lives. It doesn't change everything, but for those hours when they have a safe and fun place where they can be the good kids that they are, it means the world.

You don't have to look farther, actually, than the Todd household for more examples! Audrey Todd serves as the site captain for the PADS homeless shelter here at the church. With coffee and blankets and a warm meal and a warm smile, Audrey has offered respite to hundreds and hundreds of families who are in dire straits. It doesn't change everything, but for those people who have a place to get out of the cold, a place where they're treated with respect and kindness and consideration, it means the world.

These people are following God's calling for their lives. They have had no angel visitations, no trips beyond the veil of tears to sit astonished in God's throne room. Nothing more than the circumstances of the world around them that swept them up and made them answer the question, will I do the right thing, dare I do the right thing?

They have said yes. Calling comes at unexpected times, and when it comes to you, say yes.