

Shiphrah and Puah: Midwives of Freedom

Dear sisters and brothers,

when I prepared myself for this service, I thought a lot about my own baptism here at this church more than 20 years ago. I was already 8 years old and remember that day very well. The memory that stuck with me most was the one of all the Sunday School children joining me while I was being baptized and then giving me a very special gift: a necklace made of paper loops similar to the one we gave to Roland some minutes ago.

At first sight it's merely a colorful, handmade necklace but if you take a closer look at it you will notice that it is made of many parts, tightly connected to each other, creating „one body“. One of those paper loops had my name on it and I clearly understood that day that it symbolized that I was now part of the church family, somehow connected to all the other children and adults that I saw in church every Sunday.

Now today we are celebrating the baptism of little Roland and it is up to us to welcome him and his mother Isokem into our church family. I would like to encourage that by sharing a story with you that has so much to do with living our lives as Christians in community and solidarity with each other. I would like to reflect on the story of Shiphrah and Puah, two midwives who put their own lives at risk to save the lives of others... not alone, but together they managed to free themselves and others from the powerful structures of their time.

But let me start from the beginning...

I'm sure you remember Joseph, the dreamer who was sold to Egypt and became the most powerful man after the Pharaoh. Because of the great famine his brothers and their families came to Egypt and settled there. They built houses, had children and as the years passed, a whole people had grown out of 12 families. They multiplied and became more numerous every year.

Yet they were strangers with their own heritage, their own culture, their own identity and their own religion. Maybe just a little too strange for the Egyptians...

Many Egyptians reacted to their multiplication with fear. Fear of losing their own identity, fear of losing control and power in their own country. The Pharaoh who was then in power, had a very different attitude to the Israelites than the Pharaoh who had welcomed them to Egypt in Joseph's days. He saw a great threat to his people and tried to reduce that threat by enslaving the strangers.

He put them to work and made them do forced labour. Maybe he was thinking: „If we make them work hard enough, they will be too exhausted to trouble us.“ Or: „Under these circumstances they surely won't want to have children and keep on multiplying“ That's what immigration policy was like at the time when Moses was born.

Anyhow, for the Pharaoh this idea of „birthcontrol“ wasn't sufficient. His plan was much more inhumane than that. He called the midwives to his palace and declared self-righteously that when they assist Hebrew women during birth, they should kill every new-born son and only let the daughters live.

Two of the midwives receiving this cruel order were Shiphrah and Puah.

Imagine. Just imagine them: I see two women who have chosen to become midwives. Maybe because it was the only profession in which women were in control those days. But much more likely because they wanted to be part of the miracle of birth... assisting women in birthing life...sharing in the amazement and awe every time a healthy baby was born... healing women, physically and mentally.

The word mid-wife literally means „with- woman“ and as I picture them doing their work I see them with the women, sharing their pain, their hopes and fears, their dreams and visions. I can picture them encouraging desperate women, giving them part of their strength and hope, that they draw from every baby that they help deliver.

Let us return to Pharaoh's order with that picture in our heads. Let us think about it in all its cruelty: ***„When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them upon the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him; but if it is a daughter, she shall live.“***

Did Pharaoh know what he was asking of them? Did he realize that his order was a contradiction to everything that characterized their profession?

He probably didn't take one minute to reflect on the stress he laid upon them. He was only concerned about his national security and would have never imagined that two ordinary women would dare to disobey him, no matter how great the cost of their cruel actions would be to their own sanity and that of others.

What a huge mistake to underestimate the power, strength and courage of these remarkable women. Shiphrah and Puah knew who they were. They knew that their vocation meant assisting life, not death. And they had their own cunning plan of disobeying the Pharaoh's orders and yet making him think that they were on his side.

They just kept on doing what they had always done: bringing forth life and assisting every women, no matter whether she was Hebrew or Egyptian. It was not a violent battle, no long- planned revolution but rather a quiet, secret, intimate act, involving goose-bumps and a racing heart. An act of kindness and mercy for those who were suffering so much pain and misery in a foreign land already.

And yet so much risk was involved. I can think of so many factors that could have held them back. Wouldn't it have been so easy to hide behind the order of the Pharaoh and the powerlessness involved in that? They would have always had an excuse for their actions.

And then just imagine the fear they must have had every time they were called to the birth of a Hebrew child. Fear of being caught... fear of being punished... fear of losing their own lives. It takes a lot of strength to overcome all that fear, not only once but over and over again.

„Where did that strength come from?“ I asked myself and the Bible text offers two very obvious answers. It was the „fear of God“ and the support they drew from each other by working together that made them so powerful.

I must admit that I stumbled over the expression „fear of God“ more than once. But I found out that it cannot be compared to the fear they had of the Pharaoh. It rather means that they were respecting and loving God, having faith in him and praying for support and for guidance.

It is clear that Shiphrah and Puah feel a greater responsibility towards God than towards the Pharaoh. They hear his call to stand on the side of freedom and life. They trust in his promise to keep them safe and receive his offer of love and hope in the face of injustice, destruction and death. Faith, love, trust and hope... those are the pillars of their strength. And their solidarity with each other, with God and with the Hebrew people.

If each of them had been alone they might have reached a point where all their love and faith hadn't been enough to choose the path of civil disobedience. It was only together, connected in their love to God, that they could pursue their plan. They acted in concert with each other, backed each other up in times of crisis and had each other to share their doubts and their fears, their hesitations and hopes for the future. They needed each other, just as we need each other to be able to face the Pharaohs of our time. Alone the road towards freedom and justice can be so endless and exhausting. With a friend and a network to support you and a faith in God, that is stronger than all your fears, the rockiest road towards liberation is bearable and manageable. Not only for the powerful but for everybody. This is what the story of Shiphrah and Puah clearly shows us.

Their boldness, strength and togetherness acted as a model for many women to come: Miriam, Jochebed, Pharaoh's daughter and others. And it suggests a way for us to fight against systems that limit our choices, dreams and lives.

Shiphrah and Puah's path towards freedom wasn't easy. We are told that the Pharaoh did notice that they were not carrying out his plan. He called them to his palace and asked them why they had let the male children live. Their answer was short and simple: „Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and are delivered before the midwife comes to them.“ And here the miracle happens: He believes them. Their plan succeeds. Their cleverness and mutual support frees them from his power and his oppression

In the course of the story the Pharaoh finds other ways of pursuing his „birth control plan“ but as far as Shiphrah and Puah are concerned, he doesn't have the power to use them and instrumentalize them for his cruelty.

Can you hear their relieved laughter once they had left the gates of oppression behind? Can you see them, holding on to each other and running towards a free life? Can you imagine the whisper going around that two women had managed to disobey the Pharaoh and to actually get away with it? And can you sense the hope deriving from that? Hope that set courage and strength free that finally found its climax in the exodus.

The Israelites managed to strip off their chains of oppression with Moses as their leader... Moses, one of those babies that Shiphrah and Puah had saved.

Let us leave Shiphrah and Puah with that image in our heads and turn to our own lives, to our own choices and the Pharaohs that limit us today.

I never realized what a privilege it is to rejoice over every new born baby, regardless of its sex, as we are doing it today. We are in the middle of celebrating a joyful service for four baby boys. Just imagine what it would be like to have to hide them...to mourn about the fact that they are not girls... to worry every day about what their future will be like. In some countries this would be the case, but luckily we have no traditions and no orders that make it necessary to hide a newborn baby. Yet in many ways we find ourselves facing power structures that make it so difficult to survive for many people and most of all for the children of our time. My profession as a teacher shows me that children in our society don't have the priority that they deserve and that they need modern Shiphrah and Puahs at their side to guide them through life and fight for them at one point or the other. My conversations with desperate mothers and fathers taught me that financial limits, rigid regulations, foreign policies and an inflexible school system are a threat to many lives and leave so many people behind with a feeling of powerlessness, isolation and despair. Our system is based on the idea „survival of the fittest“ and if you are not fit or influential you can only hope that a Shiphrah or Puah comes your way to back you up and see you through. When life gets tough we need hands that reach out to us. We need observant eyes that see what is happening and don't look the other way whenever they encounter misery and injustice. And we need loving hearts, only obedient to God's call and his messages of fellowship and justice.

We are called upon as Christians to be disobedient at times and fight with the weapons that Jesus taught us to use: patience, courage, decisiveness and most of all: love.

That doesn't mean that we have to risk our lives on a daily basis... it merely means that we support each other and those fighting against power structures based on a system discriminating against everyone who is weak or different and a society that sacrifices the lives of many for the benefit of few.

I have met them, the Shiphrah and Puahs of our time... here at Peace Church. I have met the midwife who comforts, heals and strengthens mothers who are alone and desperate at times. I have met a pastor and a network of friends supporting those in need and giving them their hope and dignity back. And I have met a community of children, caring for each other and taking on responsibility for anyone smaller and weaker than themselves.

We have commended Roland to God's love today and we pray for friends and angels to be there whenever fears, doubts and difficulties arise in his life. Of course we can only wish that he won't encounter many pharaohs on his path of life but we all know that part of growing up will be to handle them.

My wish and prayer for Roland, for his family, for you and for me is that whenever we encounter the Pharaohs of our time, who show us their power and suppress our lives and dreams, there will be a Shiphrah and Puah community to back us up... to encourage us... to fight for us... to heal and save us- here at Peace Church or wherever our paths might lead us.

The necklace that the Sunday School children made for Roland is a symbol for the unity, solidarity and love that we have to offer. Alone we are weak and ordinary, like the pharaohs expect us to be. United and strengthened by the power and love of God we are strong and we can make a difference... for ourselves, for each other and especially for Roland, Tobi, Russel, Femi and the many other children we meet every day.

Amen.