

**Shiphrah and Puah -
sermon on painting & text**
Exodus 1: 8-22



If you look at the picture in the front of your service sheet today, you see the painting of an Old Testament story by an Indian artist. At first sight, it is not the image we'd have of a church community. I will tell you later what made me choose this story for a Sunday on which we celebrate the whole wide range of a church family: we have baptised a baby and welcomed new members. The family grows. New sisters and brothers express their love for the church, their care for its people, and their wish to belong.

The impulse to use this painting and the story of Shiphrah and Puah for my sermon today came from the Women's Bible study. We are currently exploring a beautiful wall-hanging by an Indian theologian and painter. It is full of biblical women's stories. Some weeks ago it was the centre of an all-age worship. Ever since it is our inspiration on Tuesday mornings. Lucy D'Souza, the painter, invites people to first of all ponder over the painting, then listen to the biblical text, let the painting and the story touch us, and then connect the story & the picture with our own life situation.

So, let me invite you to look at the painting first. What we see is a woman dressed in a yellowish sari squatting on the ground & holding a baby in her arms. The colour of the seam of her dress connects her with the ground under her feet.

Two women dressed in red and green are standing at either side of the new mother. The one in red is directly attending to her, helping her hold the new born, and also touching her gently with the fingertips of her outstretched hand – a tender act of intensive attention and care. This woman focuses on mother and baby, whereas the lady in green is keeping an eye on the outside world. It needs the two of them to protect mother and child. The woman with the green sari is holding her arms wide open as if to embrace & protect all of them. Her movements flow with the strokes of the painter's paint brush. The feet of both standing women are able to move fast and firm. Their bodies express undivided attention. Their hands offer love and tenderness.

Their eyes are quiet but watchful.

They are holding a bright yellow tent over the mother who's just given birth, and thus providing a shelter against the dark all around.

The darkness is painted in black with patches of blue and red. It is interrupted by spots of water and sky – if you like – and love and life. It stands for a world in which life is never easy, but in which there is always enough to survive.

In the Indian tradition yellow is the colour of religion, and the colour mothers wear for 7 days after they have given birth.

Green – which one woman wears – is the colour of merchants, and red is the colour of love, fertility, and fullness of life.

Shiphrah and Puah, two fearless and courageous Israelite midwives oppose the evil plan of the Egyptian pharaoh. All new born baby boys were to be killed immediately after their birth – only because a madman emperor fears the slave people could outgrow the Egyptians in numbers and then turn against their slave masters.

What led me to preach about this story is the aspect of community, solidarity and friendship which it reveals to us.

Shiphrah and Puah embody togetherness, community and solidarity.

Their creative partnership offers a model of how to live in community.

Working together, they speak to us of the necessity to draw strength from one another as we give birth to new visions, as we face new ways of life, as we have to cope with worries, sorrow, grief, and fear, as we try to strengthen and sustain each other and share with each other who we are and what we have.

Pharaoh had no idea what he was asking.

How could a midwife, whose very vocation is grounded on the hope of assisting in birthing life, drop the vocation by allowing death into the birthing-room?

All the Pharaoh could see was his imagined threat to Egyptian national security.

All he could see were two ordinary women who had no power, whom he considered weak, and who would certainly obey him...

But Shiphrah and Puah knew who they were.

They knew their vocation meant assisting in life, not death.

They did not obey. Risked their lives, but saved them.

And then imagine: the tale went out... mothers whisper to one another after they have given birth... Others happen to hear, when they draw their water...

They pass it on:

They told Pharaoh no. They really did it.

The truth is that Pharaohs in some form or fashion, will always exist.

And as Shiphrah and Puah face the Pharaoh of their day, so we must face ours.

We must face with courage and power that which threatens life and freedom in the world we live.

And Shiphrah & Puah's story makes us of course ask:

How could they do it?

How were these two women in a world of the powerful and mighty able to make their choice for liberation?

How did they find the courage to be defiant.... to choose civil disobedience over compliance, safety and the gratitude of the Pharaoh?

Even as they loved and feared God, and knew that they were agents of healing and not death..., how did they make their stand so boldly?

And the only possible answer is:

Together!

It was together that these two women were able to choose freedom over obedience.

Pharaoh tried to impose his power on them. But instead, these two claimed the power of life, the power of a right to live, the power of God, - a power which brought blessing and hope.

And as it is with them, so it is with us:

Shiphrah and Puah acted in community, in concert with each other.

They gave one another strength and courage and power.

It is the aspect of community that lies in the story and even more strongly in the painting in front of us that let me choose this story of birth and protection of new and innocent life for a Sunday like this.

I feel that in a way we all are Jochebeths – that is the name of the lady with the baby. Jochebeth stands for each and everyone of us who needs protection and care. The little baby Moses is a symbol for everything that we all – male and female alike – bring forth in life: children, dreams, new ways of living, thinking, believing... The innocent little human being stands for all that people of faith “give birth to” and that needs our love and care.

And since one person alone is never enough to protect fragile new life, there need to be midwives – angels and friends – to support mother and child.

They need to be there with their hands ready to work and act, with their eyes wide open to take in what is going on around, and with their minds set for a world of freedom, justice and peace.

The baby in our painting is dressed in the colour one of the midwives is wearing, expressing a strong bond between the two. The midwife in red stands for love and affection. The woman in green expresses the ability to consider, reflect, negotiate, and keep a cool mind. They are mothers and carers, politicians and diplomats – and the world needs them all!

We need them all: the carers and thinkers, the planners and builders, the guardians and protectors, the mothers and fathers – simply all of us – no matter how different we are.

Our richness lies in the many different talents that can be discovered in a community as diverse as ours! And only together can we create and maintain a sacred space in which all of us can find mutual Christian love, care and support.

As I said before: in Indian tradition yellow is the colour of religion. So in the painting the tent-like shelter in which Jochebeth can sit and rest with the newly born life in her arms, can be both:

an expression of faith and of the community she lives in. The shelter, the yellow in the painting, stands for the faith that keeps us going, the belief in love, peace and grace as one power to protect us and help us live; and it also stands for the community of believers. These are building up the church, holding it together, caring for each other, attending to those inside as well as paying attention to the movements in the outside world: in our city, in our society, in national and international politics.

The church community needs midwives, mothers and fathers, children, rich and poor. The church is the people within the yellow veil who are labouring, giving birth, nurturing, helping, resisting, and making a difference!

This is my image of community inspired by the story of Shiphrah & Puah.

May we remember to always be for each other...
those who labour,
those who give birth,
those who nurture,
those who help and support,
and those who are constantly making a difference.

And may the warmth and light of the bright yellow place
that we can build for each other
fill our hearts and minds with love and grace,
because the everlasting God calls us
to live and work together in community.
Amen.