

Not-So-Super Heroes

October is almost here. The decorations are beginning to emerge up and down Union Street. The catalogs for Halloween costumes have been filling our mailboxes for a couple of months now. The pages are filled not only with ghosts and goblins, but with every superhero get-up one can imagine: Batman, Thor, Captain Marvel, Spiderman, Captain America, Wonder Woman, and Baby Yoda. Children love Halloween because they get to transform into an alter ego, one with special powers and super-human strength. Who can blame them? There are many days when I'd like to leap tall buildings, to become invisible, to fly, to fend off any number of bad guys. My costume for First Kids trick-or-treating is hanging in my closet. And it will help me do none of those things.

We have our biblical heroes, too. In the past few weeks, we've met Noah, Abraham, and Sarah. In the weeks ahead we'll meet David, Bathsheba, and Elijah. Joseph makes an appearance for a fleeting moment in today's text. His story is grand and sweeping, of course. His father's favorite, Joseph's brothers plot to have him sold into slavery. Ultimately, his ability to interpret dreams makes him a powerful player in Pharaoh's court. He saves Egypt from famine and winds up saving his family as well. Joseph's chapter comes to a close at the end of the book of Genesis, which brings us to our text for this morning. [Read Exodus 1: 8-22]

Shiphrah and Puah are not two names that make many people's top ten list of biblical heroes. They're certainly not on Pharaoh's list nor are they on his radar. His focus is on maintaining power and building his kingdom. His obsession is contagious; his dread becomes the Egyptians' dread. His fear becomes the Egyptians' fear. We often hear about the fear and dread

experienced by the oppressed; here we are reminded of the fear and dread that dominate the life of the oppressor. Pharaoh's determination to solidify his kingdom becomes all-consuming. His first attempt to stem Israel's population explosion is to work them to death as slaves building his empire and tending the fields. When that plan fails, he turns to Shiphrah and Puah and commands them to kill any and all Hebrew boys they see being born. Scripture does not tell us much about these women. In the original Hebrew, it is unclear whether they are Hebrews themselves or if they are simply midwives to the Hebrew women. They are little more than bit players in an expansive drama. On one point the text is clear, however: Pharaoh fears the Hebrews; Shiphrah and Puah fear God.

Fearing God is often misunderstood. Those who most typically shout about fearing God portray God almost exclusively as an angry father ready to crush all of humanity in vengeance and disgust. Still others want to distance themselves from the fear thing entirely. They want to understand God as simply warm and loving, no more than a big cosmic teddy bear. The scriptural witness is much more inclusive and expansive and complicated than either of those options. Shiphrah and Puah demonstrate a faithful fear of God, a faithful fear that makes sense. They understand who God is. Lest we forget, "There is something dangerous about encountering God."¹ This fear is more akin to honoring God, trembling before the God who is the creator, sustainer, and redeemer, the God who is all that we are not. This God is not to be trifled with; Shiphrah and Puah's fear is well founded. Their fear is the reverent realization that the God of life is more powerful than any human being, including Pharaoh, a man understood by those around him to be a god himself. So this supposedly-godlike Pharaoh fears the Hebrews and responds by wielding terror as a weapon. Pharaoh engenders a different kind of fear, a fear that is

¹ <http://gmcelroy.typepad.com/desertscribblings/2008/08/august-24-2008-fifteenth-sunday-after-pentecost.html>

intended to bring paralysis. Pharaoh and powers like him bank on that paralysis which enables them to steamroll any dissent. In stark contrast, the God of the Hebrews—the Lord of all who is more powerful than any fearmongering king—is the one who deals not in paralysis or death, but in life. This God stands for life and acts for justice and freedom. Far from paralyzing Shiphrah and Puah, their fear of God, their faith in the one true God emboldens them and gives them courage to disobey a genocidal tyrant.

This pattern of resistance to Pharaoh’s death sentences continues in Moses’ mother, in Moses’ sister, and in none other than Pharaoh’s daughter herself. Steadily and faithfully these women say “no” to death and “yes” to life, “no” to Pharaoh’s plan for death and “yes” to God’s desire for abundant life. They do not mount a rebel army; they do not suddenly transform into someone else. Instead, in the midst of the life God has already called them to live, in the thick of using their God-given gifts in their everyday lives, these women join God’s work of salvation right where they are. They stand against Pharaoh’s death-dealing ways and strive to bring life instead. The text tells us that God “dealt well with the midwives...and gave them families.”² God gives them more than family, however. Through their courageous acts, these five women participate in God’s redemption of an entire people.

Pharaoh makes a point of saying that the midwives should let baby girls live. We are not told why, but one can guess that Pharaoh does not consider them to be a threat to his plan to dominate, control, and consolidate power. His narrow vision looks only to limit the number of men who could fight alongside Egypt’s enemies. And he overlooks all other kinds of power, other forms of courage. The women’s twin powers of faithfulness and courage lead to Pharaoh’s

² Exodus 1: 20-21

ultimate downfall. Through these bit players, through these women that Pharaoh writes off, God writes a story of life, redemption, and freedom.

The world of Shiphrah and Puah seems long ago and far away, but you and I know that there are Pharaohs at work in the world even now. In an era of 24-hour news cycles, the persistent stream of bad news often fills us with dread, fear, or frustration at the overwhelming need for peace, healing, justice, and hope. Contemporary pharaohs of all kinds feed on and preach hatred, suspicion, and dread. Pharaohs of all stripes work shrewdly to maintain power and control on the backs and at the expense of the weak and vulnerable. Fear is their weapon of choice. A superhero would be nice right about now. A superhero with a secret weapon that could alleviate all the suffering, hatred, destruction, genocide, and despair would be terrific, but I don't expect to see one fly in any time soon. Sometimes we long for God to be that superhero, but that's not how God works either. Even in Jesus, God becomes human, not superhuman. In Jesus God becomes one of us. He is born in a stable, he laughs and cries with his friends, he rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, and he dies a common criminal's death. And God raises that Jesus from the dead. In the resurrection, God demonstrates God's power once and for all. This power brings life out of dead ends, destroys the powers of sin and death, and gives birth to the church, the Body of Christ called and empowered to share in God's live-giving work.

Neither Shiphrah nor Puah says "no" to Pharaoh on their own. Saying "no" to Pharaoh is not a solitary, singular super-hero calling. It is the calling of the whole people of God, one that has played out in bold ways for centuries. As you may know, in the wake of Hitler's rise to power and reign of terror—including his demonizing of Jews and anyone else he deemed "other," a few German church leaders sought to confront those in the church who were going along with Hitler's plans. At a gathering in 1934, a delegation of "one hundred thirty-nine

delegates including ordained ministers, fifty-three church members, and six university professors.”³ There these church people debated and approved a written declaration intended to call churches across Germany back to their highest calling, to fear not Hitler and his reign of terror but to revere, trust, and follow the God we meet in Jesus Christ above anyone or anything else. Period. As the preface to the *Theological Declaration of Barmen* reads in our *Book of Confessions*:

The declaration proclaims the church’s freedom in Jesus Christ who is Lord of every area of life. The church obeys him as God’s one and only Word who determines its order, ministry, and relation to the state.⁴

Shiphrah and Puah find their faith, their courage, and their conviction within the faith community, a community grounded in God, and God alone. It is a faith that cares for the least of these and does not allow fear of the other or fear of losing power to guide our lives. It is a faith that gives us hope and courage, assured that we will not be left to fend for ourselves but will be given family who will walk alongside us, stand with us, and welcome us home.

It is easy to shrug our shoulders and tempting to throw up our hands, insisting that the world’s problems, our neighbors’ crises are too much for us to solve. After all we don’t have super-powers. Or do we? Shiphrah and Puah costumes will not be on the shelves of Target this Halloween, but maybe they should be. These two women with everything to lose find a way to stand in Pharaoh’s way. They stare down a fearmongering, death-dealing tyrant and make a way for life and hope because they fear God, they follow God, and they trust God’s way above the ways of Pharaoh. The power of God, the Lord of Life strengthens us with courage and empowers us with hope. That’s all the power we need. Nothing Pharaoh threatens can stop us from using

³ Preface to *The Theological Declaration of Barmen*, PC(USA) Book of Confessions

⁴ Preface to Barmen

our hands, our hearts, our God-given powers to bring life into a dying world. Nothing Pharaoh
throws our way will stop God's saving work.

Thanks be to God. Amen.