

“THE POWER OF FEAR”
Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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(transcribed from audio file)

The scripture reading for today's worship comes to us from the first chapter of Exodus 1:1-22

These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. The total number of people born to Jacob was seventy. (Joseph was already in Egypt.) Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation. But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians subjected the Israelites to hard servitude and made their lives bitter with hard servitude in mortar and bricks and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live.” But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to

them, “Why have you done this and allowed the boys to live?” The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” So God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live.” NRSVue

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Fear is a powerful thing. Fear is a powerful motivator and there are two different types of fear that are motivating people to do big things in our scripture passage today.

The first type of fear is the King of Egypt, also known as Pharaoh. His type of fear. Now the scripture doesn't explicitly say if Pharaoh is afraid of the Israelites, but it does quote Pharaoh saying, *“Come let us deal shrewdly with them or they will increase and in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.”* And then our scripture passage goes on to say *so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.*

The king of Egypt and apparently the Egyptians were afraid of losing power and control. They were afraid the Israelites might increase in numbers and fight against them. This fear of losing power and control motivates Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, to oppress an entire group of people and creates systems and structures to keep them oppressed and under this control.

That fear is so strong that he even creates a state policy of murder. He tells the midwives when you act as midwives to the Hebrew women and *see them on the birth stool, if it is a son, kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live.*

This new king, his law is to order people whose job was to usher in new life, he ordered them to extinguish it, to kill it. Because of the fear, because of this king's fear, murder becomes law.

And then you have Shiphrah and Puah. Their type of fear is a fear that probably needs to be translated as reverent or honor. It is a fear of God, a faith in something so much bigger than them that guides their lives. An awareness that the opinion of this new king, this Pharaoh, is not nearly as important as the opinion of God. Their

fear of God, their faith motivates them to save lives. Because of Shiphrah and Puah's fear of God, lives are saved. Fear is a very powerful motivator.

And then we have laws. Laws that help direct our daily lives. They shape society and they guide communities into what is acceptable behavior and what isn't. For example, it is unacceptable and it is unsafe to drive at 90mph down the highway. That's why we have speed limits. Not like I have ever done that before.

In Delaware there is a law that says it is illegal to whisper in church. A lot of you would be in trouble. I know that. A lot of you would be in trouble. It is against the law to whisper in church. I'm sure it stemmed out of a desire to make sure that people were respectful and quiet and heard the good news of the gospel. They didn't have microphones back in the day so I'm sure it was well intended and I bet it had support at the time. People probably even tried – tried their very best.

But laws guide and shape and direct a society. They have purpose, but what do you do when a law tells you to murder baby boys? For Shiphrah and Puah there was a law that told them to murder and Pharaoh was crafty, right? He didn't just send soldiers in to murder a bunch of people, he framed it in such a way as to make it sound like the very act of a Hebrew baby being born, existing was illegal, and so they must be killed. So, what do you do when the law leads to innocent children dying? When a king's fear leads to a law that orders you to murder. What do you do? Well, for Shiphrah and Puah their faith led them to action.

Verse 17 says that the midwives feared God. They did not do as the King of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. They let the boys live. One might argue that they were following God's laws. The Ten Commandments do not murder, but they hadn't even received the Ten Commandments. That's not until Exodus 20. We're in chapter 1, folks. Moses hadn't been born. We're just getting started. They don't have the Ten Commandments.

The scripture merely says that the midwives feared God and that led them to reject the policy that ordered them to murder. This is potentially a Holy Spirit moment. What we know is that the faith was put into action and it was an action that saved many lives.

When I was sitting with this scripture passage this week, mulling over Shiphrah and Puah's actions I kept thinking that for such time as this and that phrase is famous for the Book of Esther which is not what we are reading today but it comes from when Mordecai tells Queen Vashi in the Book of Esther that, who knows? Perhaps she

has been made queen for such a time as this, to help save her people. Perhaps she is in the position of queen at that time for a purpose, to save her people. And I think that is true for Shiphrah and Puah as well. Shiphrah and Puah's faith led to action and that saved countless people and who knows, perhaps they were midwives for such a time as that. We don't hear about them again. This is the only snapshot we get. We know that God gave them families because of their actions and then that's all we get, but we do hear about this powerful story of their faith that led to an action that saved many.

Now we all have our own jobs and rolls and circles of friends, co-workers, families and sometimes it can feel heavy to think of all the things we could or should do as we live out our faith as Christians. I think it is important today to ask ourselves, what is ours to do? Ask yourself, what is yours to do? What and where are you for such a time as this? What action is your faith leading you to do?

It is 2026. It is not back in the day when Exodus happened and so in 2026, we do have the Ten Commandments. We do have Leviticus 19: 33 and 34. We have the gospel of Matthew and Mark where Jesus tells us the greatest commandment is to love God and our neighbor. The second is to love our neighbor. We do have the gift of the Holy Spirit guiding us and convicting us, so what is yours to do for such time as this?

I want to end by talking about the beginning and the end of this chapter. So, first let us not forget the end of this chapter. I want to remind you that it got worse before it got better. Shiphrah and Puah were heroes and still Pharaoh continues and responded by commanding all the people to murder. That's the last verse of the chapter.

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So, it gets worse before it gets better, but the beginning of this chapter reminds us of good news. Some of you remember the beginning of this chapter and you're thinking, how is a bunch of genealogy good news? Right? There are all those names. It says, *these are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah*, and then there are more and more names. What it's saying is that these people that the story is about, these people who we know will be liberated, they have a history. They have a memory. They have a remembered promise of the God of their ancestors. There is a past promise from their God amidst this current struggle that we just get the beginning of today.

So, while we are just in Exodus 1, we must remember that God had been with them and is with them and we know that eventually in time the people are liberated. Until then we have stories. Stories of god-fearing women like Shiphrah and Puah, and if you want to do some light reading, you can continue on in Exodus. There are other inspiring people of faith in the Book of Exodus that can encourage us as people of faith in 2026.

May you have a faith like Shiphrah and Puah that leads to god-fearing neighbor loving action.

Amen? Amen.