

I want to tell you about two women that I think we need to know. They are Shiphrah and Puah and they were midwives about four thousand years ago, give or take a few hundred years depending on who you ask. Why do we need to know them? They made a difference. They did the right thing. They did the right thing and so there was a story to tell.

In order to truly understand them, though, we need to back up a little further and know the whole story.

We need to back all the way up to Abraham. You remember Abraham? He was the ancestral patriarch who first heard God's call to *go!* He heard God's call to live a life set apart, a different way of life, one that would show something about God to the people whom he encountered.

I wish I could tell you it was a stellar performance but it wasn't. In fact, there are times when I take comfort in the knowledge of how lackluster Abraham's performance as a marker of God's presence in the world was. I think to myself, "well, if this is a model of faith, this man who shuttled his wife off to another man's harem to save his own skin – twice – then maybe my minor failings aren't so bad after all. I've never even suggested to someone that it is reasonable to send one's spouse into a harem, let alone done it."

No, Abraham is not a model citizen, certainly not by today's standards. But we'll talk about him more another day. What is sufficient to know is that God wanted to bless the world by calling apart a unique group of people who would give witness to their fear of the Lord, their respect and their love for God, so that others would know. And whatever his failings, Abraham took this calling seriously.

And Abraham had two sons, one with his concubine and one with his wife, Sarah who happened to be his half-sister. They were Ishmael and Isaac. There's a little bit of an inheritance dispute, again, a story for another day, but the story continues on our side of the family tree with Isaac. Isaac married his cousin Rebekah and they had two sons, Esau and Jacob. There was another bit of an inheritance dispute and the story continued with Jacob. Jacob was a piece of work. If one likes Jacob, we may gloss over his flaws with a few kind "bless his hearts". "Bless his heart he's such a mess." If we are not favorably inclined toward him, the adjectives liar, cheat and scoundrel all apply in equal measure. Through his polygamous marriage to the sisters Leah and Rachel, Jacob had twelve sons. (I think there may have been some concubines involved in that marriage also.)

I would say that if God was looking to set aside a unique group of people, well, mission accomplished!

Despite the fact that Jacob had twelve sons, again, the storyline continues with one in particular, Joseph. Jacob had a bad tendency to play favorites among his sons which resulted in bad blood between them and well, to make a long story short, Joseph's brothers decided he needed killing and were only prevented from doing so by some slave traders who agreed to take him off their hands and thus he wound up in Egypt.

It turns out that Joseph was, in the words of noted Hebrew scholar Leong Seow, "a hunk and a looker," which ultimately worked to his advantage. Joseph's story is incredible – he went from prison to become the prime minister of Egypt.

Nothing reunites families quite like political success and nepotism, and when Joseph's brothers are in great need, they all bury the hatchet and God's unique group of people

chosen to show the world something of who God is relocated to Egypt. That, by the way, was Genesis in five minutes.

As soap-operatic as that presentation appears, this is God's group of people. The story is told to show how God interacts in human history through God's people. It is the story of God's faithfulness to God's covenants even when we fail. The object lesson intended is that when God's people know who God is, we know God's will also.

Indeed, Brevard Childs puts it this way, "In the Old Testament, to know God is not a mystical experience or merely an interpersonal relationship. Nor is it a feeling of spirituality. Rather, the knowledge of God is defined throughout as obedience to his will, *which has a content...* knowledge of his person and will are identical and both are grounded in his self-revelation."¹

In other words, if we know God and we know of God's faithfulness, we know as well what God expects from us. God revealed God's very self in the making and keeping of covenants with God's called, chosen people. And with that covenant comes expectations. I hesitate to use the word expectations because I fear it conjures up a lot of bad associations. When we talk about God's expectations, I suspect for many people it evokes a slavish adherence to a very, very culturally conditioned description of morality. There are any number of mores that have been baptized in the name of God's expectations of us with somewhat mixed results. I get this. But the mere fact that the language of God's expectations of humankind has been hijacked through the years does not eliminate the reality that God does, in fact, actually have expectations of God's people.

¹ Childs, Brevard. Old Testament Theology in Canonical Context. (Fortress, Philadelphia, 1985.) p51. Emphasis mine.

There is a way in the world that God endorses. We are not simply left to the mercy of our own desires, fears and other lesser motivations. Simply put, God expects God's people to *do the right thing*.

The intonation, *do the right thing* can sound very moralistic and high minded. And certainly there are times when what precisely *the right thing* is can be very hard to discern. Plenty of ink has been spilled on the topic of what is virtue.

Our chief concern today is not when *the right thing* is hard to know. We are presently concerned with when *the right thing* is easy to know and hard to do.

Which brings us to Shiphrah and Puah.

Returning to the story of God's unique group of people, it is the same place but not the same time. Many years have passed. Joseph is long since dead and God's people have no political power. They are many in number but insignificant in influence. The kings have reduced them to slave labor to support their pet building projects: tombs for the god-kings they called Pharaohs. The Hebrew people are subject to kings who are revered as gods by their people. God's covenant seems dead and forgotten. But it is not. It's not. God does not forget God's covenants.

And it seems that at least some people have not forgotten God.

They have names. They are Shiphrah and Puah. Even the king doesn't get named in this story. Terence Fretheim points out the irony that in this story the despotic king is not given the dignity of a name. He's not important, He's just the king. Names are important in the bible. Naming, or the lack of a name, indicates status. Naming indicates that something is worth making note of, worth taking counsel from.

I'm not sure it's all that different today. When we know someone we name them. When we think something is significant, we remember it – indeed, we remember it by name.

What the author of Exodus seems to be saying is this: you remember that mighty king of Egypt, the tyrant who thought he could stamp out God's people? No, neither do I. But Shiphrah and Puah, I remember them. I remember when...

And the story of faith gets told.

The story of God's unique people is remembered again and we know who God is because of how God's people acted.

We don't know much about how Shiphrah and Puah reached their decision. We don't know if they sat down and discussed the Pharaoh's edict ahead of the birthing room. Did they sit and weigh the consequences?

"We were ordered us to kill these children, if we don't it could be our necks."

"But Shiphrah, they're babies! We can't do it. I can't do it. Go by yourself if you must."

"I can't. I don't know what they'll do to me, but I can't do it either. I won't do it."

I don't know. Perhaps it was nothing more than a sideways glance and a nod exchanged between them at the time of birth. But whatever it was, it mattered. They were remembered. The king who commanded the killing, his memory is simply dust.

Actually, he's probably getting stared at in the British Museum or the Louvre to be perfectly honest... under glass, significant today only for the method of his embalming.

But these women... they have names. We remember them. We know that they did the right thing.

Fretheim writes, “Without belaboring the point or making their efforts public, they do not do what Pharaoh asks. They take this action because of their trust in the creator God, the God of life.”²

To know who God is means to know what God wants from us. To know that God is a god of Life is to know that the command of Pharaoh cannot be obeyed.

They disobeyed. Indeed, they disobeyed with style. When summoned before the king and questioned, they lied with impunity and mockery:

“Oh, we can’t do that. The Hebrew women are just too robust for us. They give birth at lightening speed. Minutes, really. They just pop them right out. Now the Egyptian women, they take all day, but not the Hebrews.”

Their knees may have been knocking, but they stood toe to toe with a man who could order their deaths and mocked his unjust, immoral expectations.

And the text then says they were blessed by God.

It would be easy to dismiss their actions as transactional, some sort of crackpot belief that it wasn’t with fear and trembling that they obeyed God, but rather out of a gamble that God would reward them for good behavior. That would be to miss the point.

The point is not to do good in order to be blessed. The point is that when we do the right thing we are a blessing. When we do what is pleasing to God, we are blessed.

Fretheim concludes, “As Deuteronomy in particular never tires of saying, positive human response to the will of God generally means that life and goodness will abound.”³

Let’s go back to Abraham and all the others. It’s not that they got it right all the time.

They didn’t. I was channel surfing last week and happened on an episode of the Jerry

² Fretheim, Terence. Exodus in *Interpretation*. (John Knox, Louisville, 1992) p32.

³ Ibid. 33

Springer show. I didn't even know it was still running. And like watching a train-wreck in slow motion, it took a few minutes to shake myself loose and get the channel changed. And it occurs to me even now that if the patriarchs were around today, they would be on that show. But despite the manner of their lives, despite the times they got it all wrong, they were trying to follow God. They were trying to live a positive response to the will of God, to quote Fretheim. Or more plainly: they tried to do the right thing. As did Shiphrah and Puah. And so these stories are told and they make up the story of faith. They make up our story!

We are a part of the story of God's unique people. And that means that what God wills for us matters.

In the letter to the Romans, Paul calls that being transformed by the renewing of our minds. He writes to them, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Living the life of faith is not necessarily always easy, and I don't mean to be pedantic about saying it, it's just that sometimes that is hard to remember. Living faithfully with God's will, indeed discerning God's will, can be a challenge because we don't know everything about God. That's why we need community - we need church - so that we may be about the cultivation of the faith skills that equip us to do what we know is called for.

It's not the stuff that is really complex that will make up the day in and day out of faith and living with integrity as God has called us. Rather, it is the day in, day out ordinariness of cultivating a life that is not conformed to a broken world but is rather

transformed that enables us to live with integrity.

At some point, we may face a question of faith that is of monumental proportions and the way will be clear, and like Shiphrah and Puah, we'll know what to do and the only problem will that will face us is the will to do it.

And at other times, we'll face dilemmas where the way is just unclear.

I'm reminded of a story I read not too long ago. A couple came to a rabbi with a question of conscience. They weren't sure what to do. The law (God's will) was, to their minds, unclear. The rabbi responded, "I understand you're unclear on this commandment and how to live with it. That's fine. By my count, that leaves 612 commandments that are clear for you. That should be plenty to keep you busy. In time the other will become clear."

We don't have 613 commandments. The commandments of the Old Testament are part of our faith story, just as Abraham and Sarah, Joseph and his brothers and Shiphrah and Puah are part of our story and we are part of theirs. We don't have 613 commandments. But we have myriad opportunities to do what we know is right. It's plenty to keep us busy.

And if we keep busy with the work of living as God's unique people, with doing what we know is right, two things will happen.

First, we will in time grow in faith. We will be transformed by the renewing of our minds and we will discern what God is calling us to do in the tough times as well as the easy ones. And second, we will continue living out the story of faith to which God has called us.

In the name of the father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.