

Women's Work: Risk

Exodus 1:22, 2:1-10

Center Church, Hartford

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The story actually starts before the verses Cheryl read just now. It starts with two women, and unlike many women in the Bible, they are named in the story, which shows the honor with which they were held. Shiphrah and Puah. Midwives. Ordered by Pharaoh to murder any Israelite boy babies whose births they attended, they refused to obey that order. They concocted a story about Hebrew women giving birth too fast, before they arrived, in order to convince Pharaoh of their innocence and save their lives. It worked, a little, but so many boys drowned in the Nile that year.

Moses did not. His mother, Jochebed, perhaps tended by Shiphrah or Puah, kept him alive and hidden until he simply got too big. Then she obeyed Pharaoh's order, sort of. She put him in the Nile, but in a basket, lovingly and carefully woven and waterproofed. She sent his sister to follow the basket to see where it landed, kissed her son goodbye, and launched his little ark into the waters. His sister, Miriam, who would grow up to be a great prophet, saw him float up to where a Princess of Egypt was bathing. Then she waited.

We know absolutely nothing about this Princess, including her name. We never read another word about her in the scriptures (and get the movies out of your head right now because they all change this story considerably). She should have cast the boy into the river; clearly, she knew where he came from, but she simply couldn't. She took him into her arms, and when Miriam approached her with an idea about finding a nursemaid, the Princess agreed. So, Moses' mother again got to hold her son, at least for a couple of years.

When Moses was weaned, he entered the family of the Pharaoh of Egypt, cared for in the household of Pharaoh's daughter, until he became a man, and changed the world.

If not for the willingness of these strong, bold women to risk their lives, Moses would never have become the one to free the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. If not for a midwife, a mother, a sister, a woman of a different race and religion who adopted him, and her servants, Moses would have been

thrown in the Nile to die. And, except for his mother and sister, not one of these women shared blood with him; they were not family. They risked their lives out of love for this little stranger, never knowing he would grow up to change all their worlds. So, while Moses gets the credit, these women started the liberation project long before he could utter a word.

What a great story! But more than a story, what a great set of people to hold up as models for us in these troubled times! Women willing to take risks to save lives. Women willing to stand up to powerful people who have the capacity to do immeasurable harm to them and to their families. Women who might indeed have been afraid, but did not back down. Women who love boldly, bodaciously, mightily! We are seeing women like that around us all the time these days.

(Show pictures of women doctors and nurses in COVID gear, protestors at BLM marches, etc.)

These women are heroes. I get weary of that word being thrown around so trivially. And even wearier of those we define as “super” heroes being imaginary beings who mostly get what they want through violence. What are we teaching our children and youth when we hold up these stories to define “hero” and not stories like those in the first two chapters of Exodus, stories of people heroically, bravely, standing up to violent powers with transcendent love?

And those of us who think we are just normal people and could not really be involved in the struggles for justice in our time, Moses’ mother and sister and those midwives were “normal people” in their time. They used the skills, wisdom, and courage they already had to act for justice; they didn’t need to acquire superhuman powers or political power for that matter. They acted in the midst of what came to them in their time, with what they had, grounded in their faith.

And with one more thing: a community behind them. Shiphrah and Puah did not act alone; they acted with the cooperation of mothers and fathers, extended family members, and other midwives supporting them. Moses’ mother had Miriam and probably her husband and others in the household to help her. Pharaoh’s daughter had all her household servants and perhaps kin to support her. And they all had the faith community around them, reminding them of the constant presence of God even in times when it seemed God had deserted them. Undoubtedly very few of

the Hebrews knew what Moses' family had done to save him or that Pharaoh's daughter had adopted a Hebrew child. Many may have thought God was not acting at all to save them, all the while God **was** acting in ways they could not see, through people who were not leaders or obvious heroes. And yet. And yet.

Makes you wonder what God is up to these days, and with whom?

Sometime any one of us might be called on to act heroically, as did these women of the past or the women in the pictures I showed you. All the time we are called to be that community which supports those who are pulled to act against violence, racism, the killing and abuse of children, powerful people who exploit and harm those over whom they have power. All the time we are called to be those who remind each other that even when we cannot discern exactly what God is up to, God is most certainly up to something. And probably not what we expect or with whom we expect.

Remember these names: Shiphrah, Puah, Jochebed, Miriam, the Princess of Egypt. Tell **their** stories to your children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews, and anyone else who will listen. Describe **them** as superheroes, because they were. Then encourage those who hear the stories, and remind yourself, to be on the lookout for superheroes like them today, so that you can become part of the community that holds them up as they change the world. Amen.