



*The Fear Of God:
Shiphrah And Puah's Holy Awe and Reverence For God*

Exodus 18:2-10

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost • August 27th, 2017

First Federated Church, Peoria, Illinois

The Rev. Zachary Lysdahl

The book of Exodus is a special book to me because I so easily see myself, the best and worst of who I am, in the people of the book. My story of faith is much like theirs, filled with temptation, fear, grace, deliverance and salvation. This morning I am eager to explore with you the story of two women in the book of Exodus, Shiphrah and Puah and their holy awe and reverence for God.

Old Testament lesson picks up with a new Egyptian king coming into power. This king did not know Joseph, son of Jacob, grandson of Isaac, and great grandson of Abraham. This is important to note because Joseph, an Israelite, came to power in Egypt after his brothers threw him into a hole in the ground and then sold him as a slave to some strangers. By the grace of God, Joseph rose through the political ranks by guiding the Egyptians and Israelites through a devastating famine. This new king did not know Joseph nor the good that God brought through him to many. The king saw the Israelites as a potential threat. There is a strange twist happening here, God promised to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph that God would prosper the Israelites, to make their population grow. That promise is at odds with the new king's wishes. In the king's words "the Israelite people are more numerous and powerful than we." (vv. 9) He saw God's blessing as a threat to his legacy, so he sought, as those warped by power often do, to destroy their opponent, to wipe them from the map, to completely erase them from the history books. To do so, he declared that all Israelite baby boys were to be killed as soon as they are born. Thus, eliminating the continued growth of the Israelite population promised by God.

This place of tension between God's promise and the evil plot of the king is where Shiphrah and Puah, the two midwives, enter into the story. The king instructed them to kill all Israelite boys upon their birth. If you have ever been in the presence of a

person who wields great authority and power, a teacher, a police officer, judge, a mayor, a senator, or the president, your mother... you know it can stir many emotions. Excitement, trepidation, enthusiasm, and fear are common. So it could be expected that Shiphrah and Puah might have had one or two of those emotions standing before the king, but the biblical text does not mention them having any of those feelings for the king.

What the word of God tells us is that “the midwives feared God.” Their fear of God is what guided their thoughts and actions. They placed God before any human instructions or the guidelines of any institution. They sought to preserve life, not destroy it.

The word fear always makes me think of my friend, Luke. He had a best friend growing up named Eli. One summer night, they had a slumber party at Eli's house. Everything was going great, until they went downstairs to watch a movie. Eli's older brother and his friends were down there and they were watching a movie no eight year old eyes should see. It was a classic horror picture. The type played on TV around Halloween. Luke and Eli did not want to come off as scaredy cats to the older boys so they stuck around and watch the movie. It did not go well for Luke and Eli. For months after Luke had terrible nightmares. The type that would re-occur, cause cold sweats, and have the same horrible ending. Luke once described that whole event as terrifying.

Fear is a powerful tool. It is a mechanism that tells us to stick around and fight or to run away when things get too dangerous. Fear is what kept Luke from going back into his friend's basement. It is also what woke him in the middle of the night and stopped him from dreaming that terrible dream. I use to think that type of fear was the fear we should have for God. The kind of fear that so deeply disturbs us that we fall inline, because I primarily thought of God as the supreme disciplinarian, punishing us for any misstep or slip up. And so Bible passages about fearing God always left me unsettled and wanting to run away.

But one of the question to wrestle with in this text is what does it mean to fear God? I have now come to learn, through the story of Shiphrah, Puah, and others that my former understanding of the fear of God was incredibly narrow, and, more importantly way off the mark. In this narrative the pair of midwives show us the true meaning of

the fear of God. The fear of God is a combination of holy awe and reverence. It is the type of fear that acknowledges our overwhelming admiration, gratitude, and love for God because God is the creator and sustainer of the universe. It is the type of fear that places complete trust in the God of all mercies who has redeemed us from our broken and sinful ways. The fear of God is a good thing. The fear of God draws us into a deep and meaningful relationship with God.

Pharaoh, on the other hand, did not fear God so he was driven to fear other human beings. In contrast Shiphrah and Puah feared God alone and were able to stand before the great and mighty Pharaoh unafraid. Pharaoh, without the fear of God was driven to fear the slaves he commanded. Shiphrah and Puah because of their fear of God were not afraid to resist the evil of the powerful king*. They turned to God with holy awe and reverence and their saving actions flowed out of it.

They have demonstrated to us what it means to fear God: to have a holy awe and reverence. They stood for God and God's commands and have become pillars of the Christian faith. Now, when I think about the fear of God I think of Shiphrah and Puah, not my friend Luke and his story of fear. When we fear God, as the midwives did, we have awe filled and reverent hearts; our thoughts and actions flow from that position. Out of holy awe we seek God and his will before the direction of a manager, instructor or a president. Out of reverence for God we follow his word even when the power strictures of this world tell us otherwise.

I close with a final thought about this passage a colleague shared with me. He pointed out that Jesus Christ can be clearly seen in the two midwives. By the power of the Holy Spirit Shiphrah and Puah delivered the Israelite people from power of evil and death. As the Gospels tell us Christ has delivered all of humanity from the destruction of death. Though the midwives actions were temporal, saving the lives of people on earth, Christ's actions are eternal, saving the lives of people from everlasting to everlasting. In Jesus Christ we have been delivered from enslavement to freedom, from death to life*.