

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Zachary C. Nyein

Gospel Reading: Matthew 16:13-20

August 23, 2020



What an incredible opportunity to have Ruby Sales in our midst during the 9 a.m. hour with the Micah Project today: A healer, truth-teller, lover of justice, and just a radiant human being. If you missed it be sure to find the archive later online.

Hers is a remarkable story — In 1965 her life was saved by Episcopal seminarian and fellow civil rights activist Jonathan Daniels, who took a bullet for her in Hayneville, Alabama. Sales herself later received a doctorate from the Episcopal Divinity School, and now serves not only as a public theologian but, I would contend — though she might disagree — a public pastor. Ministering and caring for our world by inviting us all to deeper self-examination, truth-telling, and the possibility of redemption. A fundamental question that has become a motif throughout her work is this. Simply: where does it hurt?

This classically maternal inquiry places her squarely in the tradition of the often overlooked midwives in Exodus — Shiphrah and Puah. Even in families where all the kids are named after Bible characters, I've never seen one with enough daughters to resort to Siphrah and Puah, which is sad because they are two badass women.

As the story goes, there's a new Pharaoh in town who "didn't know Joseph" — which is to say he didn't know the Israelites, their story, or their God, and not knowing them, he becomes a bit paranoid. There is strength in numbers and as the Israelites multiply, so do Pharaoh's fears. Though the Israelites have shown no signs of unruliness, Pharaoh turns to public fear mongering as he ponders aloud what might happen in a war if the Israelites sided with the opposition. It is in this environment of fear and paranoia that we see the genesis of the Israelites' horrific oppression, enslavement, and ultimately, infanticide — as Pharaoh orders the Hebrew midwives to kill all their baby boys, presumably sparing the daughters only to be trafficked as property of the Egyptian men.

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Not counting the cost, the morally resilient midwives resist and persist in their task of protecting and preserving fledgling human lives at all cost, and at great risk of their own lives. When interrogated as to why Hebrew baby boys keep surviving despite orders to the contrary – the women coyly respond that they are not like mannerly Egyptian women – no the Hebrew women give birth so fast and aggressive we can't even get to them. Oh these are some lyin' and knivin' midwives. Michael Curry.

See they fear God more than Pharaoh. While Pharaoh plays to baseless fears in the face of a growing minority population, the midwives are not afraid of him.

No, far more than Pharaoh, Siphrah and Puah fear God. But not in the sense of being afraid of God. No a different kind of fear – one that actually generates courage and compassion as they put their trust in God the Great I AM, the ground of life itself. These women know in their bones that to welcome the awesome and mysterious gift of life into this world is the holiest work there is, and a joyful privilege for those called to it.

It is also precarious. Before the pandemic I had the opportunity to volunteer with a new project here in Atlanta called Pickles and Ice Cream, as part of a cross-disciplinary leadership program for young professionals. Named after those nearly universal pregnancy cravings, Pickles and Ice Cream (or P&I) was created by Healthy Mothers Healthy Babies of Georgia, an organization focused on maternal and infant health, along with pre and post-natal education. P&I was designed as an online resource to distribute educational materials for pregnant mothers, connect them with doctors, and even providing affordable Doulas to walk with them through the process. You see we have a maternal health crisis in our state. Did you know that nearly half of our 159 counties have no OB-GYN and 40% of all labor and delivery facilities in the state have closed over the last 20 years? Georgia currently has a comparable maternal death rate to that of some developing nations. This adversely affects all women in our state – rural and urban. It affects black women the most. Maternal mortality for black women in Georgia is nearly 6 times the national average for white women, with 96 deaths per 100,000 births. Just one instance of how the effects of systemic inequality, and yes the legacy of slavery itself, continue to perpetuate Pharaoh's message that some babies – in our context black and brown babies – are somehow expendable.

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Well, the good news is that a lot of great work is being done to reverse this trend. And as we were hearing from Elise the Executive director one of the things that impressed me so much is she was saying you know – we are really a broad coalition. We present the data, we diagnose the problem, and because so many different kinds of people care about this – we have pro-choice, planned parenthood folks who support us, and we with right to life, pro-life type organizations who partner with us. We're really are all in this together.

It's an unlikely coalition. Just like today's story includes an unlikely coalition of women bound through their common compassion, as Shiphrah and Puah conspire with the daughter of Pharoah himself. There's dispute among scholars as to whether Shiphrah and Puah were Hebrew midwives or Egyptian midwives to Hebrews who had come to know the God of Israel – which would make sense, because why would Pharoah trust the Hebrews to begin with.

Regardless, they were already on the margins – as midwives were often thought to be barren and destitute – reliant on the charity of others. And yet, these women together with Pharoah's daughter practice nothing less than courageous and compassionate civil disobedience in the face of the powers of death and oppression to bring forth life and liberation, joining forces across the aisle – or Nile – to raise up the baby Moses who will one day lead the Hebrews to freedom.

It's a motif we see again in Matthew. the most Jewish of the four Gospels, which frames Jesus as the new Moses. Insert for Herod for Pharoah and again we find a paranoid tyrant on the throne – threatened by rumors of a tiny baby boy born “King of the Jews.” Replace lyin' midwives with lyin' magi, and after they are warned in a vision to return home by another road, we once again see a powerful ruler outsmarted by the clever ingenuity of dreamers on the fringes. In his rage, Herod like Pharoah orders the killing of all the baby boys in Bethlehem, and the Holy Family flees for refuge. Later, Jesus like Moses will climb his own Mt. Sinai to give his sermon on the Mount – proclaiming God's dream of a world where blessed are the poor and meek and humble in heart. Still early in their journey with Jesus, today he asks the disciples “Who do you say I am?” Peter, with all his flaws but having seen enough to get a glimpse – gets it right in this moment: You are the Messiah, he proclaims.

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Messiah. Make no mistake, this is a political term – signifying a military ruler, a conquering king, a liberator. Even as Jesus will demonstrate God’s mysterious sovereignty through a cross and crown of thorns, it is on this irrefutably political confession that Jesus’s church is founded. To confess Christ as King is to fear God more than Pharaoh – to hail God not than Herod. To sing the songs of God not Caesar. To fear God more than any name on a ballot this November, more than any earthly power: real or imagined, human or inanimate. To confess Christ as Lord, King, and Messiah is to claim God as the ultimate power in our lives.

Friends, as we gather for worship this Sunday between two political conventions, faced with the perennial challenge of figuring out how to be a church that is politically engaged – that is to say, concerned with the wellbeing of society and its ordering towards God’s intentions – without being partisan. And so the question I want to leave you with is this: How might this confession of God as the ultimate power in our lives free us – free us – as the body of Christ from the fear of one another, from the fear of difference, from the fear of difficult conversations, from the fear of any human in these challenging days. How might this confession of God as the ultimate power in our lives free us like those faithful women of ages past to seek and build and celebrate unlikely and compassionate coalitions as we find common ground, together.

We need some Shiphrah’s and some Puah’s and some daughters of Pharaoh with the courage to cross the Nile and the aisle for the sake of our children. We need some lying midwives unafraid to ask the world where it hurts – to tend to the cravings and the discomfort, to meet the pain and greet it with tender compassion in a world rife with difficulty and injustice, and tragedy, yes – but also one that I believe is pregnant with new life and possibility – pregnant with God.

See, these “lying” midwives ultimately confront the real lie is that the forces of evil and darkness which beset the people of God will ever have the last word. They confront the real lie that any human being should be enslaved to another human being. And so we need some saints who know that the follies of human power and pride are not the only parts of history that repeat themselves – so too does the deliverance of God: in arks and baskets, manglers and tombs, in life and death we are met and held by the God who calms our storms and soothes our souls: The Redeemer Peter came to know, follow, love, deny, and finally give his life for.

In the words of Debie Thomas, the one he claimed as “The Messiah” would later become his. What would it mean for him to be yours?

What is exerting undue power and pull in your life? What is God inviting you to release? I don't know what you're going through this week. Maybe you face a tough decision. Maybe it's situation in your family or an illness. Maybe you're contending with the weight of debt or a financial burden. Maybe you've asked where it hurts and what you've seen has broken your heart. Know that God is with us. The spirits of Siphrah and Puah, of Jonathan Daniels, and all our ancestors surround us. We have another helper. We need fear no one but the one who casts out fear itself and fills us with courage and compassion to face the days ahead, together.

May it be so.

Amen.