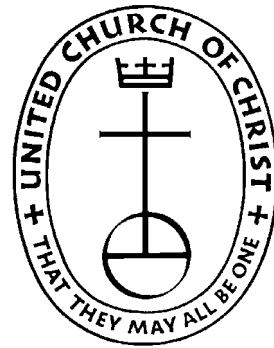


Women of Defiance: Shiphrah, Puah and Yochebed

A Sermon By —
JERALD M. STINSON
October 18, 2009



This sermon discusses both the anger and courageous resistance necessary for promoting justice and peace and the letting go of negative memories and experiences necessary for inner peace.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

Rev. Jerald Stinson
October 18, 2009 (#1377)
Exodus 1:8-2:10

First Congregational Church
(Long Beach, California)

Women of Defiance: Shiphrah, Puah and Yochebed

The stories in the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, are valued by Jews, Christians and Muslims. Their significance is not in their historical accuracy, but rather in a wisdom that has touched and changed lives over the centuries.

This week and next I want to look at the Torah stories about Moses' birth. In those stories, Moses plays no role other than being a child in danger; the focus is not on him but rather on the courageous action of five women who made his survival possible. Today I will look at three of those women.

The first book of the Torah, Genesis, ended with the stories of Joseph being sold into slavery in Egypt where he managed to rise to a position of prominence and power. When famine spread throughout Israel, Joseph brought his entire family to Egypt and a Hebrew community was born.

Listen to our text from Exodus:

A new Pharaoh – one who did not know Joseph – came to power in Egypt. Pharaoh said to the Egyptians, “Look at how powerful the Israelites have become, and how they outnumber us! We must deal shrewdly with their increase, against a time of war when they might turn against us, join our enemy, and escape out of the country.

So they oppressed the Israelites with overseers who put them to forced labor; and with them they built the storage cities of Pitom and Ra'amses. Yet the more the Israelites were oppressed, the more they multiplied, until the Egyptians dreaded the Israelites. So they made the Israelites utterly subservient with hard labor, brick-and-mortar work, and every kind of field work. The Egyptians were merciless in subjugating them with crushing labor.

So the storyteller paints a picture of oppression, violence and slavery. Then we hear of two women:

Pharaoh spoke to the midwives of the Hebrews – one was Shiphrah and the other Puah – and said, “When you assist the Hebrew women in childbirth, examine them on the birthing-stool. If the baby is a boy, kill it. If it is a girl, let it live.

But the midwives were God-fearing women, and they ignored the Pharaoh's in-

structions, letting the male babies live. So Pharaoh summoned the midwives and asked why they let the male babies live. The midwives responded, "These Hebrew women are different from Egyptian women; they are more robust, and deliver even before the midwife arrives."

Women in the ancient world were of little consequence, so Pharaoh ordered only male children killed. The two chief midwives, probably Egyptians, found a way to circumvent his order. But like many biblical women, lacking power in a patriarchal society, Puah and Shiphrah used cleverness and deceit to act morally. Lying was necessary in order to be loving.

UCC minister Joyce Hollyday wrote: "I have often thought that if I ever had a daughter (and if I didn't think she would spend her whole life explaining and spelling it), I would name her Puah or Shiphrah. I love those women! They are competent, courageous and quick-witted." She said, "I picture them as close friends, bound by their commitment to bringing forth life during a difficult time."

Puah and Shiphrah engineered what was perhaps the first act of civil disobedience recorded in the Bible. They must have rehearsed their story, knowing Pharaoh would demand an explanation of why male children were still being born. Could two humble midwives deceive one seen by the Egyptians as a god? They told the Pharaoh that Hebrew women unlike weak, pampered Egyptians, were strong and robust, so vigorous that they gave birth before the midwives could reach them. Deceit in order to save lives, and it worked. Pharaoh bought their story.

Augustine supposedly said, "Hope has two children. The first is anger at the way things are. The second is courage to do something about it." Puah and Shiphrah were angry at the order to kill the children and they had the courage to do something about that.

Joyce Hollyday linked the story of the two midwives to Albertina Sisulu's resistance to South African apartheid. Sisulu, a nurse and midwife in the black township of Soweto, found her own ways to resist the Pharaohs who ran her nation in its darkest days.

She lived next to a school. Her door was always open to children fleeing when police stormed the schoolyard. They would jump the fence and fill her house knowing she would not open the door, even to police officers with guns drawn.

As a midwife, like Puah and Shiphrah, Albertina Sisulu went among the shacks of Soweto and its squatter camps to usher new life into a frightening world of racism

and violence. She told of one-room dwellings where a whole family would be present as a mother gave birth. But still, she felt hope at the cry of each newborn child.

In a sense, Sisulu, married to liberation leader Walter Sisulu, became a midwife to a liberation movement. She constantly resisted apartheid. For 17 years, she was “banned,” prohibited from writing or speaking publically. She spent 10 years under house arrest. She was tried for treason and imprisoned many times.

Her husband, tried alongside Nelson Mandela, spent 26 years in the awful Robbin Island prison, before he and Mandela were released together. Of the eight Sisulu children, two were imprisoned and three forced into exile. Albertina said of her youngest daughter, “It was worst when they arrested the little one. We couldn’t see her for almost a year. We didn’t know where she was. And when she came out of jail, she was mentally affected because they tortured her.”

But Albertina said, “That makes you feel you must work harder to see the end of apartheid. That is why I’ll never bow down to any order from the government. That is why I’m prepared to go on with the struggle until the last day of my life.”

Albertina Sisulu, like Puah and Shiphrah, courageously fought injustice, defending life and dignity for all. She lived to see her dreams come true. In 1994, elected to Parliament, she placed into nomination the name of Nelson Mandela to be South Africa’s first black president. Albertina Sisulu, a woman of courage.

In Israel this summer, I met a young Jewish woman of courage: Idan Halili. In some ways, the most holy institution in Israel is the army. Four years ago, at age 19, Idan refused to enlist for mandatory service in an army which violently enforces the occupation of Palestine. She, like many resisters, has spent time in a military prison. Calling military service a “flagrant denial of my conscience,” like Puah and Shiphrah, she chose life over death. Ilan Halili, a woman of courage.

Today is Children’s Sabbath, a day when progressive congregations of many religious traditions call for justice for our nation’s children. Marion Wright Edelman, who started this observance eighteen years ago, said, “Investing in our children is key to our nation’s economic recovery. We do not have a minute to waste as a child drops out of school every 11 seconds of the school day; is born into poverty every 33 seconds; is abused or neglected every 35 seconds; is born without health coverage every 39 seconds; and is killed by guns every three hours. No external army poses such a grave threat to our children’s and nation’s security as these facts.”

Of all the statistics, it is those about children and health insurance that especially

sadden me this year. Nine million American children are uninsured. Nine out of ten of those children have at least one employed parent. These are the children of the housekeepers at the Hilton and the drivers at the ports.

We are amidst a national debate about health care. Powerful, wealthy special interest groups are frightening people about universal health care. But like Puah and Shiphrah we have a chance to defy those who wield such power as we protect the health and life of every single child. We must be angry about the way things are and we must have the courage to do something about it.

But let me move on with the story of Moses' birth and introduce the third courageous woman – Yochebed. Pharaoh didn't punish the midwives for failing to kill Hebrew males at birth, but he did come up with a new order. Again from Exodus:

The Pharaoh then commanded all those in Egypt, "Let every boy born to the Hebrews be thrown into the Nile, but let every girl live."

There was a man from the house of Levi who had married a Levite woman. She conceived and gave birth to a boy. She saw that the baby was good, so she hid it for three months. When she could hide the baby no longer, she took a papyrus basket, daubed it with bitumen and pitch, put the child in it, and placed the basket among the reeds by the banks of the Nile. The baby's sister watched from a distance to learn what would happen.

More ancient chauvinism – like many biblical women, Moses' mother and sister are nameless in the story. Only later in the Torah do we learn the mother's name was Yochebed and his sister was Miriam.

Yochebed's child was born under Pharaoh's death sentence. Yochebed had to be resourceful and creative in order to keep her son hidden for three months. Every day must have been one of joy at holding the child, but terror at being discovered. Every time the child cried, his mother must have cringed.

Finally she knew she had to let go, so she set him afloat in a small waterproof basket near the tall reeds on the bank of the Nile. Her daughter Miriam watched from a safe distance to see what would happen. Yochebed hoped the Nile would be a river of life for her son.

Like Puah and Shiphrah, Yochebed resisted as long as she could; she defied the Pharaoh's order and secretly held on to her child. But she reached a point when she had to let him go, hoping someone could save him.

I suspect every parent in this room knows what it feels like to let a child go. It is

terribly difficult. The first time the child plays outside by himself or herself or climbs a flight of stairs. The first time the child gets up on a two-wheel bike without training wheels. The first time the child gets behind the wheel of a car. The first date. Going off to college. Getting married.

In all those instances, parents must let go in order that a child can mature and realize his or her own potential. Sometimes things go well; sometimes they don't. Sometimes the parent tries to welcome the child back in; that may work or it may not. There is continual letting go involved with parenting. As the children age, there may come a time when they take back the parents and reverse the roles, and then ultimately find they must let go as well.

Yochebed had to let Moses go.

Now I think letting go speaks to something broader than parenting. I remember when Bob Kalayjian returned from a trip to Nepal and came to my office excited about the Buddhist insights he had discovered about letting go.

The Buddha taught we all need to let go of our attachments. American Lama Surya Das wrote: "The Buddha said we experience the peace of nirvana by letting things be as they are. Letting go, letting be, or embodying the Buddhist term 'non-attachment' greatly reduces and even alleviates suffering. Letting go of our tight-fisted grasping is in our own self-interest as it helps erode our wellspring of dissatisfaction and anxiety.

Surya Das said: "For me, attachment is like holding tightly to something that is always slipping through my fingers – it gives me rope burn. But letting go relieves the constant painful irritation." He said, "A good example is not being able to fall asleep at night because you keep turning something over and over in your mind."

He continued: "Scientific research has shown that people who are optimistic and have an ability to accept or let go of negative memories, experiences and events tend to be healthier and live longer than people who are pessimistic and worry about and try to change things out of their control." (Note, he didn't say you forget the negative memories, but what you do is keep them from having control over you.)

There is a wonderful story of two Buddhist monks walking along a path where they came to a shallow, muddy river. A woman in a beautiful dress waited there, not wanting to ruin her dress as she crossed. One of the monks lifted her to his shoulders – something he was absolutely not supposed to do – and walked with her to the other side where he put her down and the two monks continued on their way. After a few

hours, the second monk, unable to keep quiet about this serious violation of the monastic code, asked his companion, "Why did you pick that woman up and carry her across the river?" The other monk replied, "Are you still carrying her? I put her down hours ago."

There are times when all of us need to let go of our clinging. Times when we need to let go of our desire to succeed at something, to be perfect, to be in control of something. Times when we need to let go of our need to change and fix others.

We need to learn to let go of our anger, our hatred, our passion for revenge. Can it be done? Just read the stories of some of those involved with Murder Victims' Families For Reconciliation. Those people only found peace in their own lives when they let go of their hatred for those who had harmed their loved ones.

We may have to let go of our resentment at losing a job, our anger at a former spouse or partner, our antipathy toward physical changes that mean we can no longer do all we have done in the past. We may have to give up dreams that just aren't possible any more.

But doesn't letting go contradict what I said earlier about getting angry at that which is wrong and changing it? I don't think so. I think there is a balance between the anger and courageous resistance of Puah and Shiphrah and the letting go by Yochebed. Remember, keeping Moses and raising him for three months was a courageous act of resistance by Yochebed. But there came a time, she had to let that go and find a new way to help him save his life. As we will see next week, she would not be able to raise him in her home, to be the mother to him she had planned to be – but her letting go, opened the door for him to become a unique and special person.

This coming week, think about those places in your life where you need to resist and courageously act to promote justice and peace; think about the ways you can help build a better world for all children. But also think about those parts of your life where you may be clinging to things that you need to let go.

There's a balance. Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu spent years in prison for resisting the evils of apartheid. They paid a heavy price for their advocacy of justice and equality; they suffered a great deal.

It would have been so easy, so natural, to leave Robbin Island filled with hate, clinging to a passion for revenge. But they let go of that zeal for retaliation; they let go of the hatred. They were able to genuinely forgive their captors. And that letting go, opened the door to a new kind of leadership whereby they could do even more for

peace and justice.

Puah, Shiphrah and Yochebed – three women from whom there is much to learn.
Amen.