

Shiphrah and Puah

Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

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Ben Wayman

It's time to stop fooling around. The gospel, friends, is political. Let me repeat: the gospel is political. Christianity is political. Jesus was political. That's because politics is about people and people are at the center of God's heart.

Two weeks ago, we received a message on our church Facebook page that said the following: "Why would you support a hate group, why get a church into politics. You are the number one reason all churches should pay Taxes. I'm disappointed that you would follow a false narrative such as BLM. I will pray for you and the church to find wisdom and compassion for others as I have been touched by the BLM killing and destroying peoples lives."

We responded by thanking this person for their prayers and sent them the piece we published in the Greenville Advocate explaining why we think it's important for the church to say Black lives matter. Much more can be said, of course, but what I want to challenge this morning is this person's presumption that one should not "get a church into politics."

Christians are political because we are the recipients of good news about how human beings are now free to live under the Lordship of Jesus. We are political because we have a reality-rooted conviction about how people are to live together as God's creatures. The church is our politics.

Now I need to be clear that when I say "the church is our politics" I am not talking about American politics. We're not political in the way people typically think of politics as voting Republican, Democrat, or Independent. Rather "church" – this community – is how we're political. As one of my teachers puts it, "the church doesn't *have* a politics, the church *is* a politics." That means that just being faithful to Jesus is itself a witness to the world of how God would have us live as God's friends. As church, we love the world God loves and we care how our neighbors are treated. Sometimes we do this caring through American politics, but we *always* do this through the church. This is fuzzy for a lot of people, so my plan this morning is to show why the church should either make the rulers of this world confused or terrified by our opposition to the status quo.

This morning I will be unpacking how the church is our politics by focusing largely on our lesson from Exodus. Romans and Matthew will help us too, but the story from Exodus is so good I can't help but dive in deep there. Here we go.

"Now a new king arose over Egypt..." you don't get any more political than this. So here we have a new king over Egypt who doesn't know and doesn't care about Joseph. This means he's set on dismantling the previous programs and policies that cared for the people of God. What's more, he's a king who is paranoid and anxious about God's people. He's racist, xenophobic, and

prone to conspiracy theories like the one where the Israelites will cross the border and join ranks with the enemy.

The king's response to the Hebrews is so common it's scary: he deals shrewdly with them, oppresses them, treats them brutally and orders to kill them. The idea that his subjects might become the majority is more than this fearful king can handle and so he engages in power politics that oppress and disregard God's image in human beings.

But power politics are not all that powerful after all. And the resistance, the protest to these politics, is led by two Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah who we are told feared *God*. Aside from Moses at the very end of our story, these are the only names we are given. And we only get Moses's name to explain its meaning: he was "drawn out of the water." It's as if the author of Exodus is shouting to us, SAY THEIR NAMES! Shiphrah and Puah's names must not be forgotten. Forget Pharaoh's name, forget the ruthless Egyptian taskmasters, forget the Egyptian masses – the whole city – who oppressed and killed the Hebrews. Oppressors have been and always will be active in history. But do not forget Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives who feared God and outwitted the king. Ordinary women with ordinary gifts, made extraordinary by their community of faith. Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives.

SAY THEIR NAMES. George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery. SAY THEIR NAMES. Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner. SAY THEIR NAMES. Sandra Bland, Dana Martin, Michael Brown. Like Shiphrah and Puah, when we say their names, we join a holy resistance to the politics of this world that deny the image of God in other human beings.

In her book *Womanist Midrash*, associate professor of Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas, offers a gripping retelling of how Shiphrah and Puah might have carried out their revolution against Pharaoh's unjust and brutal rule. Here's how she imagines it went down:

Shiphrah and Puah call all the birthing-women to assemble, telling their overseers that they are passing on Pharaoh's instructions. One Egyptian lingers longer than the others; Puah shoos him out with the ancient womanist refrain 'This is women's business.' He leaves. Hundreds of women come to the place of Shiphrah's tent. Many bring daughters, granddaughters, and nieces whom they are apprenticing in the profession. Some are pregnant; others are nursing. It takes more than a day for everyone to gather, eat, and rest from their journeys. And there is talk. Shop talk, women's words, shared experiences, and new techniques: herbs to stop bleeding, herbs to bring on labor, teas to increase milk production, ways to limit pregnancies.

Finally Shiphrah speaks. She tells them Pharaoh's words. The women gasp. Some mutter. Some shout. Some of the children are frightened. Shiphrah and Puah shush them and call for calm. Shiphrah begins to prophesy: 'God has brought our people a mighty long way. And I don't believe God has brought us this far to leave us. Do not fear this pharaoh or his warriors, not his warhorses nor his chariots. God will blow them away like smoke in the wind. In our days, before our eyes God will break the

back of Egypt and wash away its might. God will raise up one of our sons to lead us and all our children out of this house of slavery. Our hands and our wombs do God's work. We will deliver the deliverer. We will keep him safe until the day that God calls him to lead us to freedom. We shall receive our freedom, dancing to woman-song if we trust in the mighty power of Shaddai, who drew us from her holy womb, whose spirit covers the earth.'

Shiphrah takes her seat. Puah speaks: 'Trust in God-Whose-Name-Is-Holy. This is what we shall do: deliver the babies; hide as many of the boys as you can ... Do not worry about the Egyptians; they will not come house to house to check on women! They cannot imagine that we would defy the pharaoh whom they revere as a living God.'

The women leave the convocation of birthing-women. Days, weeks, then months go by. Pharaoh is too busy to think about the Hebrew birthing-women. Someone mentions that the Hebrew people are still growing, in spite of the pharaoh's commandment. He summons them back to explain themselves.¹

Shiphrah and Puah outwitted the king through their ingenuity and creativity. They improvised. They did what they knew best: delivered babies, in direct opposition to Pharaoh's brutal policy, and God preserved their lives.

We don't know if Shiphrah or Puah delivered Moses himself, but we do know that their faithful resistance created a world where the Hebrews continued to bear children. Because of Shiphrah and Puah, the brutal racism of the Pharaoh, taskmasters, and Egyptian people could not prevent God's purposes or God's people.

It's interesting to me that women are far and away the heroes of the Exodus account. The Christian word for heroes is saints. So it's the women, even Pharaoh's daughter, who improvise faithfully and so become the saints of the story. The ironic contrast between the brutality of Pharaoh and benevolence of Pharaoh's daughter cannot be missed. She's not dumb. She knows the baby in the basket was Hebrew. I would guess she knew the young girl was the baby's sister who also improvised by suggesting the baby's mother nurse the baby. Pharaoh's daughter kept the story going by paying this Hebrew mother to nurse and raise her own child! What a beautiful act of overacceptance. The women of today's Exodus account are master improvisers, which equips them well for faithful resistance to Pharaoh's oppressive politics.

So much more can be said, like the fact that the word for Moses's "basket" is only used here and earlier in Genesis to describe Noah's "ark." This holy vessel contains the heart of God: us. It's no accident that the early Christians often depicted the church as a group of disciples in a boat. "We're on a boat," friends. We're the church, and we're the most hopeful political force this world has ever known.

¹ Wilda C. Gafney. *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017) 89-90.

So when Paul talks about how the church must be transformed by the renewing of our minds, he's pleading with us not to be conformed to the politics of this world. If Paul were talking to us today he'd say, "Don't buy into partisan politics! Be Christians. Feed the hungry, welcome the immigrant, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit prisoners. Do this first, and whenever policies or politicians advocate for the same, vote for them." Be transformed, Paul says, and develop the eyes to see that each one of us here has a role to play in the church in setting people free.

Paul's description of the church as a body with many members is so important for us here at St. Paul's. Each one of you has a role to play in God's plan to redeem the world. You don't have all the roles and it's certainly not you who saves anyone. God has already done that, so you can "stop thinking so highly of yourself," as Paul puts it. But have sober judgment; what's your gift you can use for the church? Paul names several gifts in our reading today. Some of you have the gift of prophesy like Shiphrah and others have the gift of generosity, like Pharaoh's daughter. One hope I have for our church in this next season of life together is that we will become people who each use our gift to set people free.

It's not an accident that the church was born when Peter confessed Jesus as "Messiah, the Son of the living God." When we identify Jesus as the anointed King and Son of God, we announce that Jesus is king and the Emperor is not. That's when we become the church. Peter's confession was a profoundly political statement, only emphasized further by the place where he made it, Caesarea Philippi, the city that memorialized the Roman Emperor and Philip the tetrarch. It's like going to Washington D.C. and announcing in front of the White House that Jesus, not Trump, is President. Peter's statement is one of political resistance and revolution.

So church, make no mistake, we are political. But we are far more than democrat or republican. We're Christian. We say Black lives matter because we're Christian. And we engage in American politics because we are commanded to love our neighbor as ourself. We do not avoid or idolize American politics and especially not American presidents.

We must never forget that we live in a world that lynched our King on a tree and continues to lynch our Black brothers. Our most political response in this hurting world is to be the church, to be faithful improvisers like Shiphrah and Puah, as we use our gifts, creativity, and courage to follow Jesus. The good news, church, is that Jesus is King.