**Courageous Faith: Shiphrah and Puah**

**Exodus 1:6-21**

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

September 27, 2020

Last week, our country lost one of the great Supreme Court justices of our lifetimes. Ruth Bader Ginsburg passed away leaving behind a unique and important legacy.  She not only was just the second woman to ever serve on the Court, she was the first Jewish woman. In her work and in her life, she brought a keen intellect, great inner strength, and a deep commitment to the greater good of our country.

 Of course, we may not all agree with her decisions or opinions, and many are already anticipating who will be the next Supreme Court justice and how that will play out in the coming months.  But, there are some among us who just need to live into her loss.  To appreciate the woman that she was - the notorious RBG - a spitfire and a powerhouse, wicked with words, and courageous enough to consistently stand for what she believed was right even at risk to herself and her career.

 Last week, we started our fall sermon series called “Courageous Faith” in which we are exploring different kinds of courage and how our faith can fuel our courage and our courage can fuel our faith.  With each sermon, we’re looking at a different character - or in today’s case, two characters - in the Bible and what we can learn from them about what it means to be courageous as we are called to do God’s work in the world.  We started with Abraham and the courage to leave what is familiar and embrace something new because we trust God is always at work for good - even when we can’t see it.  This week, we’ll look at a less well-known story about two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who remind me a bit of Ruth Bader Ginsburg as they share her courage to risk standing up for what is right with whatever resources you have.

So, let me set the stage for Shiphrah and Puah a little bit.  Their story is tucked in between the well-loved saga of Joseph and his Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat and the call of Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt to the Promised Land.  Maybe you remember that while he was a boy, Joseph was sold by his brothers and taken to Egypt to be a slave.  After a rocky start there, Joseph ultimately gained great power in the Egyptian government. He became the Pharaoh’s right hand man and was pivotal in saving the country from starvation during a lengthy famine.  So, by the end of Genesis, Joseph was well-loved by the Egyptians and reconciled with his brothers. Their descendants went on to live happily in Egypt until, as we hear in the opening of the Book of Exodus,

“A new king came to power in Egypt who didn’t know Joseph”.  Apparently, this happens some years after Joseph’s death and the new king doesn’t remember how Joseph helped to save the Egyptians from famine - or he doesn’t choose to remember.  Rather, he feels threatened by how the Israelites have multiplied and prospered in his land. So, he begins a fear campaign, telling the Egyptians that these immigrants will soon take over their country and need to be stopped, contained, or, better yet, gotten rid of.

His first plan is to put the Israelites in forced work gangs and control them that way, but the scripture says, “The more they were oppressed, the more they grew and spread”.  So, Pharaoh encourages the Egyptians, who once lived peacefully with the Hebrews, to regard them with disgust and dread.  Soon, the Egyptians take the Israelites as slaves, making their lives miserable with hard labor.

But, for Pharaoh, that isn’t enough.  He wants to stop them from creating more of their kind.  And that, at last, is where Shiphrah and Puah come in- because Shiphrah and Puah are Hebrew midwives, and Pharaoh sees them as just who he needs.  He tells them that when they are attending a Hebrew woman’s delivery, if the new baby is male, they are to immediately kill him.  This will help rid Egypt of these dreaded Israelite immigrants once and for all.

But...the notorious Shiphrah and Puah aren’t the kind to obey compliantly.  They are spitfires, powerhouses, and they decide they will not follow Pharaoh’s order.  The scripture tells us that they are God-fearing, or perhaps better translated, they honor and respect God.  They know that according to God’s law, killing is wrong - so certainly killing babies can’t be right.  And so they refuse to comply.  They draw a line in the sand.  This is too much.  This they will not do.

In the last year or two, we’ve seen a lot of things happening in our country that just don’t seem right.  We’ve seen children at the border separated from their parents and locked in cages.  We’ve seen police officers use excessive - sometimes deadly - force against black men and women in circumstances in which such brutality is clearly not called for.  We’ve heard stories of immigrant women being sterilized without their consent in an Immigration detention center in Georgia.  We’ve experienced the hypocrisy of politicians in both parties as they shift their position on life-changing laws and policies based on what will gain them power and popularity.

As these events unfold, each of us has to decide where we draw the line.  What is just too much?  When do we feel compelled to stand up for what we believe is right?  Of course, these are the stories we hear in the news, but we encounter these circumstances in our personal lives, as well.  At what point do you stand up for your transgender co-worker who seems to get passed up for every job promotion?  Or for your gay child who came home with a black eye again?   How will you respond when you see unsafe practices at work or in our community that could lead to further spreading of Covid-19?  What do you see happening in your family, your workplace, your community or country that just doesn’t seem right?

As people who follow Jesus, we don’t have to face these questions alone.  We, too, are God-fearing - we respect and honor God - which means our knowledge of God acts as our moral compass.  For the Hebrew people in our story and for Jews today, that moral compass is found in the law - summarized in the Shema - the first two of the Ten Commandments.  Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.  For Christians, Jesus simplified it even further with the New Commandment he gave the disciples at the Last Supper.  “Love each other as I have loved you.”

As people who believe in this commandment, who seek to embody God’s loving kingdom in the world, we are called, like Ruth Bader Ginsburg and two ancient midwives, to stand for what we believe is right.  And that takes courage.  Standing up for what is right can be risky.  As Anne LaMott once said, “Courage is fear that has said its prayers”.

Yet, like Shiphrah and Puah, we take our courage from aligning our understanding of justice with God’s.  From the assurance that we honor God, we show our respect to God, when we stand up for justice, kindness, and love.  And we take our courage from each other - from a community of believers who share a common calling.

Now, here is the other thing I really admire about Shiphrah and Puah.  For them, standing up for what is right doesn’t look like carrying the sword of justice into battle or throwing around  power and influence which, of course, they don’t have.  They get the courage and strength to do what’s right from God and they use the tools they have on hand to make it happen.  In this case, that means two things - they use their great experience with childbirth as well as the King’s own prejudices about the immigrant Hebrews.  They know that they are much more knowledgeable about how women have babies than Pharaoh is and that, if they say that somehow the Hebrew women are more brutish in childbirth than the more genteel Egyptians, Pharaoh will assume that is true.

 Sometimes, I think we feel powerless to stand up against injustice whether in our country or our lives. Yet, we, too, have tools to draw on. As citizens, we have the option to protest, to practice non-violent, civil disobedience, to write to our senators and members of congress, to educate ourselves and others.  And, of course, regardless of where we fall on the political spectrum, we have the power of the vote.

In more individual circumstances, we may, like Shiphrah and Puah, use our own areas of expertise and the wisdom we have accumulated through life.  But, above all, as Christ-followers, we have the community of people who share what we believe and the collective history of Christ-followers who have courageously spoken out for what is right.

 Ruth Bader Ginsburg once said, “Fight for what you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you”.  So, find your inner spitfire, be a powerhouse for change, and stand for what is just, what is loving, compassionate, and kind - for that is our calling.

May it be so. Amen.