

Callings: Shiphrah and Puah and the Right Thing to Do

Exodus 1:15-21

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July 27, 2025

When I was growing up, I had an aunt by the name of Mary Lou. If you have heard me talk about Mary Lou in the past, please forgive the repetition. Her story is worth hearing more than once. Aunt Mary Lou was 24 years old, married, mother to a young son, and teaching elementary school when she contracted polio. It was 1955, the same year that the polio vaccine became widely available. She just missed it. As was true for so many people, polio ravaged Mary Lou's body. Though she survived, she was left a quadriplegic with minimal use of one hand, her toes, and one arm she moved with the help of a sling attached to a pole attached to her wheelchair. She slept every night in an iron lung and used a respirator to breathe, taking breaths between words as she spoke and bites as she ate.

When I need a shot of courage, enough to believe that I can do something that feels nearly impossible, I think of Aunt Mary Lou. After the early stages of adapting to the new limitations of her body, Mary Lou grabbed ahold of life and didn't let go until almost forty years later. She returned to teaching by tutoring math and language arts at home. She began designing fashion for people with disabilities using a sewing machine she could work with her toes. She was a tireless advocate for disability rights, even becoming president of the California Association of the Physically Handicapped.

I began thinking about Mary Lou this week as we were preparing a celebration of the 35th anniversary of the ADA. I did a little research into the history of the ADA and discovered that, while there were certainly prominent politicians who helped this bill become a law, this civil rights bill addressing the rights of disabled individuals was the work of many, many people over a long stretch of time. I'm sure that Mary Lou was one of them.

Mary Lou considered the work that she did a calling. She truly felt that God had called her to advocacy and improving the lives of other disabled people, which makes her, and all the people who contributed to the passing of the ADA, great examples for our current sermon series entitled Callings.

As Christians, we believe that God calls all people to ministry. In First Corinthians 12, Paul outlines many of the callings God might put on someone's life - a call to be an apostle, a prophet, a teacher, a miracle worker, a healer, a helper, a guide. Yet, there are all sorts of other callings as well - times when God calls us to use our gifts, our passions, and our experiences in some way that furthers God's message of love, justice, and hope.

The biblical witness in the stories of ordinary people God called to do extraordinary things. The whole Bible is the story of God seeking to build the kingdom of God on earth and depending on humans - fickle, clueless, easily distracted humans - to help. Someday, quite possibly today, God will call each of us to step out in courage to do something that promotes God's kingdom values - love, justice, compassion, feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, visiting the prisoner. So, how can we prepare ourselves? One way is to look at the Bible stories of those who have gone before us.

This week, we are going to consider the calling of two midwives - Shiphrah and Puah - and the small but important part they played in the unfolding of God's mission. 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. 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. David Olson, retired professor of Old Testament at Princeton, writes, "A tempting political strategy for new leaders, whether an Egyptian pharaoh or a Nazi Hitler, involves trying to solidify power by singling out a relatively weak minority or outsider group and calling them an enemy."

Pharaoh not only stokes a fire of fear of the Hebrews, he begins a campaign of systematic oppression. His first plan is to put the Israelites in forced work gangs and control them that way. Soon, the Egyptians take the Israelites as slaves, making their lives miserable with hard labor. But the scripture says, "The more they were oppressed, the more they grew and spread".

Pharaoh moves on to step two - he wants to make it impossible for the Hebrews to procreate. And that, at last, is where Shiphrah and Puah come in- because Shiphrah and Puah are Hebrew midwives, and Pharaoh sees them as just the tool 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 Shiphrah and Puah are clever and brave and not the kind of women to just obey the Pharaoh out of fear. 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.

When Pharaoh learns that they have not been killing the Hebrew baby boys, he confronts them and asks why. They make up a story about Hebrew women being strong and delivering quickly, before the midwives can get there to help. Their outright defiance of Pharaoh is outrageous - and dangerous. They risk their lives to protect God's people, to assure the further growth of this community. They succeed in saving the lives of the Hebrew boys and, unwittingly, the life of a particularly special boy who would grow to be a man named Moses and eventually defeat Pharaoh and lead the people in escaping from Egypt.

Jewish scholar Francine Klagsburn writes about the story of Shiphrah and Puah that this "may be the first known incident of civil disobedience in history" while Rabbi Jonathan

Magonete speaks of it as “the earliest, and in some ways the most powerful, example[s] of resistance to an evil regime.”

There are many lessons we can take from the story of Shiphrah and Puah. They are the same as lessons I took from growing up with Mary Lou as my aunt. One, of course, is to have courage. God called the midwives to save the lives of these baby boys, and despite the risks to themselves, they found a way to do it. There are times when we, too, are called to act in some way with courage we don't know we have. We can say “no” and stay safe by turning away and remaining passive. Yet, through stories like this one, we see over and over again in the Bible that our faith calls us to find our courage and take action when people are oppressed, marginalized, or mistreated.

Another take away for us is that Shiphrah and Puah use the knowledge and gifts God has already given them to curtail the Pharaoh's efforts. 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.

Right now, we are living in a climate in which acts of oppression and the stoking of fear of “the other” are quickly becoming normalized. These behaviors fly in the face of all that the kingdom of God represents. As Christ-followers and inheritors of the kingdom, at any point God might call on us to stand up, defend and protect and that might feel scary or overwhelming. Yet, we can take comfort in knowing God has already given us the knowledge and gifts we need to embody God's justice and love in the world as a response to what is happening around us. Perhaps it will be in advocating for those who don't have rights or whose rights are being taken away. Perhaps it will be in speaking truth to power. Perhaps it will be in refusing to be complicit by being passive but, rather, actively countering the actions we see unfolding every day with fierce love and radical acts of compassion.

As you go into this week, I encourage you to listen for God's call. What might God be asking you to do to be an advocate for justice or a bearer of hope? What is the world's need that you are passionate about addressing? Whatever that is, take courage from the story of two midwives who thwarted a Pharaoh and for the people in your life who, like Aunt Mary Lou has for me, have shown you what is possible when we trust in God.

May it be so. Amen.

