

Tell Me a Story: About Shiphrah and Puah  
Sunday, August 24, 2014  
Exodus 1.8-2.10  
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In a few weeks, my husband and I will have owned a house on Fendall Avenue in Richmond, Virginia's Battery Park neighborhood for seven years. We're ready to no longer own that home, but that's a story for another day! It's a lovely house, about a century old, in an old streetcar suburb of downtown Richmond. There's a commercial boulevard just half a dozen houses away that once housed the community movie theater, the Mom and Pop grocery store, the florist, and at least a dozen other small businesses. Today people are trying to renovate those buildings, a community development organization is haggling with the man who owns the boarded-up theater in hopes he might finally sell and allow it to operate again, and hopeful business owners are trying hard to make a living as neighborhood cafes.

We bought that old house for a number of reasons. We value old homes and their stories. For the past 15 years we have chosen to live near work and school with some walkable shopping and dining nearby rather than commuting hours per week. The Richmond neighborhood was up-and-coming for young couples with one or no children, and you could get more yard and square feet for your dollar than in trendier, more fully restored old neighborhoods. Personally, I was drawn to the community because it was more diverse in age, race, education, and general socioeconomic identifiers than anywhere we had ever lived. I wanted my children to live in a place where they took for granted how different people are. Different would be their norm. Diversity would be second nature and not a value to be cultivated.

But I didn't fully understand that the addition of a young, white, growing family would change the place. I thought my intentions to value and welcome and reach out and share life would be enough to push back against the "yuppie gentrifier" label. I didn't know about the weight of the term "privilege" seven years ago. I didn't know just how much privilege I had. I wanted to live in a neighborhood with a story. And stories, well, we have plenty of those now.

My most cherished stories, as you have well heard me say before, come from the front porch of our Richmond home. The porch where we would gather at night with one or half a dozen neighbors. The porch was where the stories got better as the sun set and

the candles burned. Sister Shaw was my neighbor just two doors down. She'll be 85 this October, Lord Willing, she adds. She lived in that neighborhood since she was a little girl, and we heard often about the day she and her Mama were coming home from church and saw the for sale sign in front of a little, one-story ranch house, new to the neighborhood and unlike the old four squares all around it. Her mother bought it, and Mrs. Shaw still lives there.

It took months, maybe a year or two, before Mrs. Shaw told me she was the first woman in her family to not clean a house for white people or work at the big downtown department store in a custodial role. She moved to D.C., instead, and worked for the federal government. She was the first one in her family to get a job like that. She worked under two presidents in the departments of the Treasury and then Housing and Urban Development. She was a hard and faithful worker except for one day: Tuesday, August 27, 1963. She and her coworkers all skipped work to meet in the heart of Washington, D.C. and march with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It was one of her favorite stories to tell when the night had gotten late enough. Fifty-one years ago this week, she and friends and colleagues and strangers filled the heart of the city to stand up against the laws and practices of its leaders.

Stories change us. Faces who become neighbors change us. The realities of privilege and gentrification and do-gooder non-profits led by white folks from the suburbs wanting to save black folks in the city changed me. Sitting beside Sister Shaw in the candlelight and hearing her stories changed me. I'm still processing those lessons and trying to figure out what to do with them. Particularly when a minority group of people is singled out for being "other" and "different" or perceived as being a threat to battle, I wonder which side I am on. My heart and my intention may be on one side, but if I remain silent...if I do not act for justice...then my silence may just support a position that harms and oppresses.

In the biblical stories we're reading, Joseph and his family were beneficiaries of great privilege. After the shocking tragedy of selling Joseph into slavery in Egypt, last week we read the reunion story of Joseph's brothers traveling to Egypt to buy grain during the great famine. After they have wept and hugged and forgiven, the Pharaoh blesses Joseph to invite all of his family to move to Egypt and live there in safety. Seventy of them in all, record Genesis and Exodus, move in under Joseph's care.

But time passes, and one Pharaoh is replaced by another. The Israelites are flourishing in Egypt, and the new Pharaoh doesn't like it. He doesn't know what a help Joseph was to the people of Egypt. He doesn't know that the former Pharaoh invited the Israelites

to live in the land under his protection. He either hasn't heard those stories or does not listen well enough to understand them.

David Lose notes, the new Pharaoh has “conveniently forgotten that for generations the Israelites he names as possible terrorists had been considered allies and honored guests. And so he first enslaves them and then turns to even darker means, telling the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill all the Hebrew baby boys that are delivered. (Ironically, it is the girls who are apparently of no account to Pharaoh that he should fear, as first these two women, and then three more -- Moses' Hebrew mother and sister and Pharaoh's Egyptian daughter -- who are his undoing.) But they refuse. They do not kill the boys. They lie to Pharaoh, telling them that the Hebrew women give birth too quickly, delivering the babies before the midwives arrive on the scene.

It's a courageous act of civil disobedience that changes history, for one of the boys that is spared will be called Moses and he will lead the Israelites out of Egyptian captivity. He will deliver God's law to the Israelites and bring them to the promised land. And it all starts here, with two women willing to say 'no' to an act of injustice.”<sup>1</sup>

“The things we do this week -- our actions, decision, choices -- will, in fact, ripple out with consequences foreseen and unforeseen, for good or for ill, for the health or damage of the world. That question isn't whether, but what...what will we do this week to make a difference in the world. Some of these actions may be big, bold, and courageous. Others may be small, hardly noticeable. And yet they all have the potential to ripple out, affecting countless lives.”

Shiphrah and Puah did not take that possibility lightly. They knew their actions held serious consequences. They knew life itself was at stake. “In the Bible's first act of civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance for the sake of justice, the midwives refuse to obey Pharaoh's deathly command. They lie to the authorities, breaking the law for the sake of justice and life. They explain to Pharaoh with their fingers crossed and a wink in their eye, the Hebrew women just give birth too quickly before we can get there!”

It is easy to dismiss an entire group of people when you are removed from their story and their perspective. Whether you are the powers-that-be who enact legislation and policies of violence or oppression or you are living in relative comfort and dismiss the tragedies on the news as “those other people over there somewhere”, we respond differently when we know by name who is on the receiving end of unjust treatment.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1599>

Pharaoh did not know Joseph, but the midwives knew the Israelites and the midwives knew God. The midwives already spent their days and nights in the fragile intersection between life and death, and the biggest part of their job was bringing both mother and child to life on the other side of labor and delivery. To obey Pharaoh was to deny their calling and their God, so they conspired against their political leader instead.

We have wrestled with dark stories this summer of death and tragedy. We have asked, “Where is God?” and sometimes had to read between the lines or squint our eyes to imagine the divine presence in such darkness. In this week’s text, we may get an answer God is present in the actions and choices of Shiphrah and Puah. Two servant women, disregarded by the great Pharaoh, know who God is and know who God wants them to be, and they know that true faith is intertwined with action. So they choose civil disobedience and political deception. They will not obey the call for death and eradication of a people group. They choose to welcome the lives of those whom the Pharaoh says are the enemy.

The church has been criticized lately for not doing enough of that.

Blogger John Pavlovitz wrote a post last week called, “Church, Here’s Why People Are Leaving You.” Among half a dozen reasons, he criticized the church’s fondness of slactivism—activism with big voice and little consequence. “We know you like to fight, Church. That’s obvious,” writes Pavlovitz.

“When you want to, you can go to war with the best of them. The problem is, your battles are too darn small. Fast food protests, hobby store outrage, and duck-calling Reality TV show campaigns may manufacture some urgency and *Twitter* activity on the inside for the already-convinced, but they’re paper tigers to people out here with bloody boots on the ground.

Every day we see a world suffocated by poverty, and racism, and violence, and bigotry, and hunger; and in the face of *that* stuff, you get awfully, frighteningly quiet. We wish you were as courageous in *those* fights, because then we’d feel like coming alongside you; then we’d feel like going to war with you.

**Church, we need you to stop being warmongers with the trivial, and pacifists in the face of the terrible.”<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>2</sup> <http://johnpavlovitz.com/2014/08/15/church-heres-why-people-are-leaving-you-part-1/> (Emphasis added.)

We hold stories that tell us God sees, God hears, God is with us, God speaks, God moves. We listen and suddenly find ourselves stirred and moved as we hear and feel together in ways we maybe haven't heard or felt in a long time. We've been told our lives and our stories and even our tears matter. So now we simply must DO something with the stories we've heard. After all, if they don't continue to live on in us and through us in some kind of noticeable, actionable way, then they really are just a bunch of stories in an old, old storybook.

When I read them all from Genesis 1 through Exodus 1, I don't want our lives to be like the fathers of the faith whom God works wonders *in spite of*. I don't want our lives to be a series of wrestling bouts where we're repeatedly reminded of our foolish humanity and constant, anxiety-provoked mistakes. I dream for us to be midwives who help birth God's goodness into this world. I want ours to be words and actions that stand up to the demands of empire; demands that seek to destroy the hopes and lives of the poor and the weak. I want us to be servants of life who protect the most vulnerable and deny the bloodthirsty demands of the powerful.

Available on the communion table before us and on the resource table in the Harris Room are a list of action items. They aren't comprehensive solutions to world peace, but they're a start. Our women's Sunday School class has been praying at 9 a.m. for the past two weeks to unite their minds and hearts for the safety and welfare of children around the world. They invite us to join them in focused prayer at 9 a.m. each day.

You'll see an invitation to write letters through Church World Services to unaccompanied children waiting in a family residential center in New Mexico as social workers and government officials process what little documentation the children brought with them across the border.

With issues of race relations in Ferguson, funding and support of Israel, sanctions and military response in Iraq, the possibilities for using your voice are myriad. You can write and call Representatives, Senators, the President, the United Nations. We may not all agree about how to respond in each situation, but we all agree that we wish we could be a force for good.

Locally, I challenge us to respond to this notion of making a choice in our daily lives that reflects God's goodness. What small thing can we do each day to change the course of someone's life for the better? What if we woke up each morning naming something in our lives for which we are grateful and believing we have the power to impact someone's life that day for good? I challenge us to take on a series of kindness missions.

Let's put our heads together and determine ways to change the course of someone's life through a simple act of kindness.

And the last action item is conversation. Make a goal by September 1 to have a meaningful, intentional conversation with someone who is different than you. Whether it is race or religion or political party or sexuality, reach out to someone for the opportunity to hear their story. Listen to their lives just as you long for someone to listen to yours.

May we be a people who reflect God's goodness and who live into our identity as people made in God's image. May we see and hear and know as God does. May we love and act and move in God's ways. May the world be more like God's kingdom because of our very actions. Amen.