

Celebrating God-Fearing People

Exodus 1:15-21

I have probably told you that Exodus is one of my favorite books of the Bible. Exodus is a book that tells about the deliverance of God's people, God's provision for the Israelites, the company the Almighty provides to people walking in the wilderness. The book of the Bible is full of fascinating stories.

You may remember:

- The ten plagues
- The parting of the Red Sea and the people of God walking on dry ground
- How God provided manna to his people
- How God gave the Ten Commandments, but...

The Book of Exodus begins with a time of paradoxical chaos, an upside-down world. The Jews were plunged into a world of darkness where they were enslaved and afflicted. The Egyptians had forgotten about Joseph and all he had done for their nation, and saw his descendants as thorns in their eyes. It was a time in which everything that had been in the time of Joseph was reversed or eliminated. The Israelites were in their first exile.

The story of Exodus is God's story of leading his people from slavery and exploitation to freedom and to the Promised Land. Today, I want to remind you that the Exodus account does not begin with Moses. This story of liberation begins with women who decided to stand against a super-powerful and tyrannical ruler, in order to defend life.

The Scripture reading for this morning reminds us how God's liberating power began to work in the land of Egypt. People would think that God uses the most capable, the strongest, and the wisest. Yet, that's not the case in the first chapter of the Book of Exodus.

At the time these events are taking place, women were not considered the most capable people. In a male-controlled society, women didn't have a strong leadership role. They were considered the extras of the story. This reminds us that God brings salvation to us not on our own terms, but on his. God chooses people not because of their seeming capabilities, but for their commitment.

At the time, women did not have the reputation of being the wisest (thanks be to God this perception has changed). But, what I like is the reminder in this story that wisdom does not come in the DNA, nor does it belong to a "privileged" people. The story reminds us that "*The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord*" (Proverbs 9:10).

I want to place a tag this morning on the following verse, "*The midwives, however, feared (reverence, had a holy respect for) God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live*" (**Exodus 1:17 NIV**).

The people that seem to be the extras of the story are actually the protagonists of the most cherished liberation account of the Hebrew people. Pharaoh wanted to recruit Shifrah and Puah to commit infanticide, but these two women (or group of women) had already a Master. They feared God. They had a holy reverence, a loving respect for God. They were at the orders of God.

Dear friends, when you are at the orders of God there are certain things you cannot do, say, or engage in. These women, Shifrah (Beautiful) and Puah (Splendid), made the decision to work for and with God instead of Pharaoh. These beautiful and splendid women said *NO* to evil. They chose freedom over imperialistic fears and threats. They sought vigilance over violence. They exercised discipline over destruction. And, they did all of this at their own expense.

That's exactly what God-fearing people do. God-fearing people choose life over death. They choose love over hate. They choose respect and admiration over dehumanization.

Here is something I want you to see. Shifrah (Beautiful) and Puah (Splendid) did not simply assist in the birth of the redemption of the Israelites. Indeed, they hastened its coming as they highly respected, venerated, and feared the Lord of hosts.

These women engaged in the first biblical act of civil disobedience. When Pharaoh called the midwives to account for what was happening, they answered, "***Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive***" (Exodus 1:19).

Pharaoh feared the male Israelites, but underestimated the vigor of Hebrew women. Pharaoh was about to learn that behind (or perhaps in front of) every successful leader, there is a strong, wise, courageous and hardworking woman who, along with God, is opening the way to a bright and meaningful future.

If we revisit the Biblical story, we have to acknowledge that:

1. There was a Moses because there was a Jochebed, and there were beautiful, splendid, women (Shifrah and Puah) that were willing to disobey and stand against unjust laws to protect every single male baby.
 - a. God fearing people (women) have been instrumental in God's story of redemption.
2. God provided protection and encouragement to the Israelites through Rahab who said to the spies, "*I know that the Lord has given you this land*" (Joshua 2:9).
3. There was a King David because there was a woman by the name of Ruth who was loyal, loving and caring towards her mother-in-law. Later on, this same Ruth became the grandmother of the greatest king of Israel, David.
4. Samuel was a great judge and an important prophet because his mother Hanna dedicated him to the service of the Lord from his early years.
5. Through Esther God brought salvation to the entire Hebrew nation.

6. We can celebrate our Savior Jesus Christ because with paramount determination Mary said, *“I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled”* (Luke 1:38).
 - a. Women have always been a leading force in God’s salvific actions in the world.
7. We have Timothy because Lois and Eunice instructed him in the faith.
8. There are many more heroines... the list goes on and on...

Wesley had his mother Susanna.

Personally, my life has been impacted by a number of great women. I still remember many of the lessons that Dulce (Candy), my Sunday school teacher, shared with me. My mother has taught me valuable lessons. My wife encourages and helps me to keep pressing on to fight the good fight of faith. Even my mother-in-law has contributed to my personal growth. She provides me with opportunities to practice patience.

One of the reasons I picked this text for today is because in ancient times, it is believed that midwives were barren women. Regardless of their physical limitations, I believe that they were impregnated with God’s fear, and for that reason, they became the mothers of God’s freedom for his people.

I chose this text because it reminds us that as the people of God, we need to celebrate the commitment of women (and all people alike) to give life, not only by the act of birthing, but by the act of loving, caring, protecting and nurturing. That’s what midwives do. They may not be physically able to conceive and give birth, but they are deeply involved in the life-giving process by:

- Showing up
- Attending and listening
- Encouraging and coaching as long as they are needed
- Rolling up their sleeves and bringing forth new life into the world.

Midwives were motherly figures. You and I can be a motherly figure to someone in this world. The term motherhood cannot be reduced to gender or the act of giving birth. Motherhood does not belong only to a certain group of people. Motherhood (fatherhood/parenthood) is the act of loving, caring for, protecting, educating, and nurturing life in any and every stage.

You can be a motherly figure. Every time you tutor, advocate, help, mentor, support, provide, encourage, give company, love, nurture, educate, you exemplify attributes that define the true meaning of motherhood. Life-giving is a life-long process, and we all are called to participate in it. Our response to this call is what makes us mothers/parents.

When I think about this concept of motherhood in the Bible, a unique event in the life of Jesus comes to mind. It was a busy season in the ministry of Jesus. The Master was teaching, healing, and doing great things for the people when a woman, in celebration of the person of Jesus,

shouted in front of a large crowd, “*Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you*” (Luke 11:27). Commending Christ, this “unidentified” woman also honors Mary, Jesus’ mother.

Well, there is no doubt that mothers have always played a significant role in the rearing of children. Personally, I praise my mother (and also my father) for the many ways they have impacted my life in a positive way. I thank God for showing me his love through my mother who has nurtured, instructed and protected me all these years.

I put myself in Jesus’ shoes at the time of this event, and I can see myself commenting on this woman’s affirmation. I can see myself saying something like, “Yeah, she is a great woman. I owe much of who I am to her. She is a true model of what it means to be a servant of the Lord.” This would have been my response, but it was not the way Jesus acted at the offer of such praise. Instead Jesus replied, “*Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.*” Really? What’s going on here? This is an interesting way to answer. What did Jesus mean?

Again, I believe Jesus was and is leading his listeners to go beyond the celebration of just a certain group of people for their natural endowments. I believe that Jesus is calling us to celebrate all who embody God’s word and qualities; those who are meek, humble, caring, loving, and living representations of Godly virtues. This the reason why I believe that Mother’s Day calls us to celebrate not so much the gift of bearing children; although, this is part of the celebration, but the commitment of women (and all people alike) to give life, not only by the act of birthing, but by the act of loving, caring, protecting and nurturing.

I want you to see the ending of this story told in the book of Exodus. “*And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own*” (Exodus 1:21 NIV). Women who were barren ended up with a family of their own, because they did what motherhood calls all of us to do.

I believe that God gave these women the gift of becoming biological mothers. I believe that God can do that. However, if that was not the case, I can see these midwives adopting the Hebrews as their own families, and the Hebrews adopting these midwives as family. In the end, the bond that kept the Hebrews and the Egyptian midwives together was love, not blood.

Today, regardless of civil categories, I want to say Happy Mother’s Day to those who fear God and have responded to the call to love, care, protect, educate, and nurture life. To all of you, God-fearing people, Happy Mother’s Day.