

Foundational Stories Series
“Shiprah and Puah: The Coolest Women You've Never Heard Of” OR
“Faithful (Yet Sneaky) Disobedience”
Sermon on Exodus 1:8-2:10 (9/6 & 9/7/14)
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Well, today marks a major shift for us here at McCabe United Methodist Church. Not only is it Rally Weekend with our fall discipleship programs kicking-off...but, after *two* full months of sermons based on stories from the first book of the Bible – the book of Genesis – we have now moved into the second book of the Bible, the book of Exodus.

I thought about changing the title of the series as a way of marking this momentous occasion...but the title *Foundational Stories* is still so very appropriate when considering the stories of Exodus.

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Thus far in our series we've been getting to know the people who first chose to follow *our* God as *their* God. Back in Genesis chapter 12, God had invited a guy named Abraham to follow, Abraham said “yes,” and then God made a very important – *foundational*, even – promise to Abraham.

When Abraham said “yes” to God, God then promised Abraham three things: that he and his wife, Sarah, would have many descendants...that their descendants would inherit the land we call Israel...and that their descendants would not only *be* blessed but that the world would be blessed *through* them.

Land, descendants, and blessing. That was the foundational promise, or covenant, God made to Abraham thousands and thousands of years ago. God continued that covenant through Abraham and Sarah's son, Isaac, with his wife, Rebekah...and then through Jacob, the younger of Isaac and Rebekah's twin sons.

For about the last month, the stories we've heard in worship have centered around Jacob's family: his four wives – Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, Zilpah – his twelve sons – Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Benjamin – and his one daughter, Dinah.

In Genesis chapter 32, we read about an overnight wrestling match Jacob had with a mysterious stranger who turned out to have been God. At the end of this wrestling match, Jacob was given a new name: Israel, which means “to wrestle with God.” It is this new name that gives the name for Jacob's people – the Israelites – *and* for the land that was promised to Jacob's grandfather, Abraham – the land of Israel, which is often referred to in the Bible as “Canaan.”

If you have heard of “the twelve tribes of Israel,” those are the descendants of each of Jacob's – Israel's – twelve sons.

So there was a tribe of Reuben, a tribe of Simeon, a tribe of Levi, a tribe of Judah, a tribe of Dan, etc...I think you get the picture. However, I'm getting just a little bit ahead of myself.

Anyway...Jacob – now Israel, though still often referred to simply as Jacob – had lots of children and those children began having lots of children.

At this point, the readers of Genesis are supposed to remember the second part of that three-fold promise God made to Abraham: God had promised Abraham many descendants...and now *that* part of the promise was coming true through Abraham's grandson, Jacob, and his growing family.

Jacob's large and growing family was not without its problems, however. And, thanks to some pretty severe sibling rivalry, Jacob's son, Joseph, was sold by his brothers into slavery, eventually arriving in Egypt.

I am not going to take the time to outline much of Joseph's story, but, over the course of his years in Egypt, Joseph became a trusted advisor to the Egyptian Pharaoh – the Egyptian king.

After many years in Egypt, a great famine came over both Egypt and the land of Canaan, Joseph's homeland, where his father's family still lived.

Thanks to a dream Joseph had interpreted that *predicted* this famine, Egypt was prepared and had stored up enough extra food during their good years to help feed their people during the hard, famine years. Those living in the land of Canaan were not so fortunate, however – including Joseph's family.

Jacob, not knowing that his son, Joseph, was, like, practically in charge of Egypt, sent his other sons to Egypt to buy food. Through a very circuitous set of circumstances, Joseph and his brothers ended up reuniting and reconciling. Then, with the permission of the Pharaoh, Joseph invited all of his family to come live in Egypt. And they did.

Interestingly enough, as Jacob and his family set out to move from the land of Canaan – the promised land – down to Egypt, God spoke to Jacob and promised Jacob that he would eventually return to Canaan.

The last few chapters of Genesis center around Jacob's death and burial. But it is *Joseph's* death that is the final event of the book of Genesis.

And at the time of Joseph's death, it is important for us to keep in mind that Joseph, his brothers, and all of their family members, were *still* in Egypt.

It's important for us to keep that in mind because the book of Exodus is about how Jacob's descendants – the Israelites – *left* Egypt and journeyed back toward their promised land of Canaan. The name of the book itself points us toward its story: an “exodus” is a mass departure or emigration.

Today's story from Exodus chapters one and two lays the groundwork for why the Israelites – often referred to in today's story as “the Hebrews” – ended up leaving Egypt. And they did not leave Egypt simply because God had promised them the land of Canaan and they wanted to go home. The Hebrew people ended up leaving Egypt because, over time, things got very bad for them there.

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As we learned at the beginning of today's reading, the Hebrew people had been in Egypt long enough for a Pharaoh to have come to power who was *not* the Pharaoh for whom Joseph had worked.

And the writer of Exodus makes it clear that this new Pharaoh – this new king – did not even *know* about Joseph.

So enough time had passed since Joseph's death that whoever this new king was hasn't heard anything about Joseph – and Joseph had been a prominent enough leader that a few generations must have passed by this point.

We also know that a few generations have likely passed because we learn right away that this new Pharaoh was nervous about how numerous the Hebrew people had become – worrying they would take over the country if their numbers kept increasing.

So, the new Egyptian king made the Israelites slaves, forcing them to do hard labor...and this king hoped that, now that they were slaves, the Hebrews would stop multiplying. But multiply they did...perhaps at even higher rates than they had multiplied *before* they became slaves.

And at that point, the Pharaoh invited in Shiprah and Puah to share with them his evil plan for the elimination of the Israelites.

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This is a bit of a tough story to find a sermon theme for, let me tell you. There is all sorts of fascinating stuff in it, for sure – but to find a sermon theme and to find some good news from God in it? That's another matter.

Well, sometimes when I'm having trouble identifying a clear theme for a sermon, I'll take to Google images to see if any imagery based on the story will help spark some direction. But, when I searched Google images for pictures of Shiprah and Puah, not much worthwhile turned up.

I did find a picture from a book called *The Brick Testament* and, in this picture, the author had created [in Legos](#) the scene of Shiprah and Puah receiving instructions from Pharaoh.

(You may recall from today's story that Shiprah and Puah were Israelite midwives and, one day, Pharaoh summoned them and instructed them to kill all the Hebrew baby boys...but to let the girls live. Population control in a most cruel and deadly form.) After finding the Lego image of Shiprah and Puah before Pharaoh, I did come across an artist's lovely rendering of Baby Moses' birth.

This particular image is a beautiful little scene with everyone in it looking happy and serene and just altogether joyful about the birth of this baby boy.

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While both of the images I found were helpful in their own way, they did not spark the kind of inspiration I was looking for – so I changed my Google search to look for images from a different part today's story...the part of the story that's about Moses being put in the Nile River in a basket. So, I did a Google Image search for “baby Moses basket” and I must say I was quite disturbed by what that search revealed.

When I did a Google image search for “baby Moses basket,” the search revealed dozens and dozens of pictures of basinet-style baskets, sold by pretty much every baby product company in existence. They almost all have something called a “baby Moses basket” that's a somewhat primitive-looking basinet with that kind of *straw* look about them. And, if I'm being perfectly frank, I find such a product name to be disturbing because of the Bible story behind the name.

I mean, the story of why baby Moses was put in a basket is *not* a sweet, little story. If only this story were simply about baby Moses cooing and napping one lovely afternoon whilst lying comfortably in his beautiful straw basket. But that's not what it's about. This is *not* a sweet, little story.

This is a story about a desperate family who put their baby in a river basket because it was the only thing they could think of that might save their newborn son's life. Why would you want to name a baby product after this story??? And this is only one family's story in a sea of other Hebrew families who were living with the exact same fear and desperation as Moses' family.

Today's story is a story about a cruel, paranoid leader who didn't want his nation's slaves – immigrants from another country – to become too numerous.

And, short of some sort of mandatory birth control policy, how do you do that? You kill off either all of the girls or all of the boys. He thought his plan was brilliant and he didn't care that it was evil.

What the Pharaoh did *not* think about was the fact that people will do almost anything to protect children – and not just their own children. I think that's because we generally understand children to be so innocent: the world hasn't yet corrupted them, so they don't deserve the harsh treatment adults sometimes seem to deserve.

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Now. The Pharaoh had made two distinct decrees, both of which were unfathomably cruel: first, he decreed that the Hebrew midwives, Shiprah and Puah, kill all of the boy babies they helped to birth and, when that plan didn't pan out, the Pharaoh then decreed that the Egyptians themselves should kill any Hebrew boy baby they found.

With his first decree, the Pharaoh didn't want his own Egyptian people to have to get their hands dirty with the killing of Hebrew babies...but, since Shiprah and Puah were sneaky and did not do as Pharaoh said, he had to change his tactics. "If the Hebrews won't kill their own baby boys," Pharaoh thought, "I guess we Egyptians will have to do it ourselves."

This is a terrible, terrible story. And I say shame on those baby product companies for naming their bassinets "baby Moses baskets."

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All of that said...I *love* Shiprah and Puah. It was incredibly risky of them to continue to help with the birthing process of their fellow Hebrews – it was incredibly risky of them to keep doing their job as midwives – while, then, also defying Pharaoh's order that they should kill all the newborn baby boys.

(Plus, it's just so clever what they told the Pharaoh when he asked them why the baby boys were not being killed at birth: "Why, Hebrew women just must have their babies much quicker than Egyptian women," Shiprah and Puah said to the Pharaoh. "By the time we arrive to help, their babies are already born." So sneaky!)

I have no doubt Shiprah and Puah knew they were risking their own lives with this defiance. Surely a man who would order the killing of baby boys would have no problem whatsoever killing two grown women who defied his orders.

Shiprah and Puah's behavior in this story – although it was deceitful – was incredibly brave. Their refusal to follow the Pharaoh's deadly orders was an amazing act of civil disobedience.

Shiprah and Puah knew that, if they were to be faithful to the God they knew and loved – the God who knew and loved *them* – if they were to be faithful to God, they just could *not* follow Pharaoh's orders. So they didn't.

But Shiprah and Puah were not the only brave women who defied Pharaoh's orders in this story. Even in Pharaoh's own household there were women who did not abide his cruelty.

Remember when I said that people will do almost anything to protect children – even when those children are not their own children? The last part of today's story demonstrates this fact powerfully well.

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My sermon title today focuses only on Shiprah and Puah being “two of the coolest women you've never heard of” – or, if you've heard of them, you maybe don't hear about them too often. But, even though I only mention Shiprah and Puah in my sermon title, there are really *five* women in this story who act bravely in an effort to defy Pharaoh's cruel decrees:

There's Shiprah and Puah (of course)...there's Moses' mother, who hid her baby boy from the Egyptians for as long as possible...there's Moses' sister, who kept an eye on Moses after their mother placed him in the river basket...

And, finally, there's Pharaoh's own daughter who found Moses, had compassion for the baby, and agreed to raise him as her own son – even though she was fully aware of the fact that her father had decreed all Hebrew baby boys should be killed.

This is a terrible, terrible story...but there are five women in it who do some truly amazing things.

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Several years ago I read a book by Christian writer, Donald Miller, called *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*. The book is a memoir of sorts and, in it, Donald Miller explores the idea of “story:” the idea that our lives tell a story...and that it's up to us whether the story of our lives is a good story, a bad story, or simply a nothing kind of story.

In this book, Donald Miller also talks about how God is the “storyteller” of the universe – that God has stories for each of us to tell with our lives...and that we can say “yes” or “no” to the story God has for us.

We learn from the Bible that the kinds of stories God has for us are stories fraught with sacrifice, with pain, and with great risk – today's story from Exodus is only one such example. Yet, in the end – after the sacrifice, the pain, and the risk – the stories God offers us also include incredible joy. //

There is a story God is telling through the Israelites and it's a story we Christians have become a part of through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ: Jesus, whose life and death is our ultimate example of the risk, the pain, and the sacrifice God sometimes asks of us.

Yet Jesus' own story was bolstered by thousands of years of his peoples' story.

And his peoples' story is absolutely chock-full of stories like today's: stories of people risking their lives – risking pain and death – to do what is good and noble and faithful. People who put the well-being of others before their own...people who, despite their fear, listen for God's will and who choose to live the story *God* is calling them to live.

Indeed, as we learn in Genesis and Exodus, God is telling a story through the Israelites. But God is telling a story through each of *us*, too.

I don't know about you all, but I want my life to tell the story *God* wants my life to tell – and, I don't know about you all, but I want that story to be a good one. Even if there's risk. Even when there's pain. And even when there's sacrifice. Because I know that, in the end, there will also be incredible joy.

Thanks be to God. Amen.