

The Rev. Dr. Brandon Crowley:

Please join me for a moment of prayer. Almighty and loving God, fill us with your Holy Spirit and grant unto us, your children, visions of a better world, a world where none are impoverished, where resources are shared and all peoples live with reciprocated respect. And Lord, may we no longer just pray to you for justice, but bestow unto us through your Holy Spirit the boldness, the courage and the energy to do justice, to actually love kindness and to walk with you in earnest humility. This we pray in your name, let the people say amen.

Audience:

Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Brandon Crowley:

To the president of our university, to our interim minister, the Reverend Dr. Stephanie Paulsell, Thank you for this gracious invitation. To the Memorial Church staff and to you, the community of learners who make up this great congregation I say to you good morning and thank you again for the opportunity to share words of hope from my heart. Many thanks to our first reader, Ashley, for reading the entire section of Exodus chapter one. And for the sake of preaching, I want to focus on verse 17. It reads on this wise, "But the midwives feared God. They did not do as the King of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live."

The Rev. Dr. Brandon Crowley:

With the time that is allotted to me this morning I want to talk from the topic a tale of two midwives. Throughout the annals of time, the great contributions of women have been disregarded and omitted from the dominant narratives and literary canons of our history because of the blatant architecture of systematic sexism. The structural elements of sexism and patriarchy have caused many, if not all of the cultures of our world to normalize and internalize the male perspective while consequently discounting and otherizing the economic, political, and historic roles that women have played in the evolution of humankind. For example, during Black History Month we commonly think of names like Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, James Baldwin and Medgar Evers, but rarely do we hear the names of black women like Ruby Bridges, Ella Baker, Pauli Murray, Ruby Sales, and Fannie Lou Hamer. These black women led local civil rights organizations, served as lawyers for school segregation lawsuits, passed out flyers and made calls to Congress.

The Rev. Dr. Brandon Crowley:

For a while. Dr. King may be the lyrical genius, the prophetic visionary and masterful orator of the civil rights movement. It was the women of the movement who put feet, hands, legislation, and organization to Dr. King's prophetic words. As strategists and activists, black women were the backbone of the modern civil rights movement. Without their organized labor, the civil rights movement would have never developed or flourished to the extent that it did. But like most cases of historical sexism, the contributions of black women in the civil rights movement have been overshadowed by the domineering personalities of the men in the movement and such is the case in our scripture text this morning.

The Rev. Dr. Brandon Crowley:

Often when we think of the Exodus narrative, our minds go directly to male characters like Moses, Aaron, and even the story's evil antagonist Pharaoh. In movies like The Prince of Egypt and in Negro

spirituals like "Go Down Moses," Moses the character is portrayed as having single handedly saved Israel by delivering the words of his famous speech during the march on Egypt entitled, "Let My People Go." These situations position him as the lone architect of the Hebrew civil rights movement. However, this assumption is misleading and it is not based on the facts of the broader narrative. The first Hebrew stride towards freedom did not begin with Moses. But way before Moses was even born, the initial Hebrew protest against Pharaoh's imperialist threats was actually organized by two women by the names of Shiphrah and Puah who were employed as midwives. And while there are only six short verses in the entire Bible about these two women, their bold actions galvanized a revolution of resistance that liberated the entire nation of Israel.

The Rev. Dr. Brandon Crowley:

Chapter one of Exodus begins by revealing that Joseph, the one Hebrew who managed to climb to the top of the economic Egyptian ladder as a sort of a vice president in Egypt, that this Joseph has just died and there arose a new King over Egypt who knew not the contributions of Joseph. And the text says that it was this new Pharaoh who noticed that the Israelites had multiplied too greatly, that they'd gain too much social and economic prominence and were now more numerous and more powerful in Egypt than many of the Egyptians themselves. So out of fear, Pharaoh decides to enslave the children of Israel because he was threatened by the Hebrewing of Egypt. Fearing that the growing population of working immigrants might aid an enemy in an attempt to overthrow the Egyptian economy, Pharaoh devised a plan. He devised a plan to contain the population of Israelites. He commanded Shiphrah and Puah to kill all male children. Often when we read this text, we are so worried about the boys in the narrative that we fail to remember the inhumane treatment of their mothers. Like enslaved African women in America, Pharaoh treated the Hebrew women like breeding stock and like animal like creatures without hearts, souls, or emotions.

The Rev. Dr. Brandon Crowley:

Pharaoh's social phobia morphed into a living nightmare for the Hebrew people. But the passage says that the midwives resisted. I love how the passage reads, it says, "But the midwives feared God." They did not do as the King of Egypt commended them, but they let the boys live. They did not comply, but instead they performed a type of nonviolent resistance that was subversive in nature. In the words of Emily Townes, "Pharaoh's decree created a troubling in the souls of the midwives. Their womanist faith led them to practice a subversive ethic of care all because they feared God." And isn't it interesting my friends that in this text, disobedience is synonymous with respecting and fearing God. In this text, fearing God is not a mystical or other worldly sense of awe that falls upon a person. For Shiphrah and Puah their fear of God manifested itself as a direct call to civil disobedience in response to the injustices of empire.

The Rev. Dr. Brandon Crowley:

And when Pharaoh inquired as to why they were not executing his plan, they responded in these words, "The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women. They are so strong before we can get there, they've given birth." Now it's important to notice that their response was organized and direct. Like the staged refusal of Rosa Parks to give up her seat, the resistance of these midwives wasn't arbitrary. They were strategic. They had a plan and they even had a unified answer to Pharaoh's possible inquiry. But for centuries, biblical readers have pondered if Shiphrah and Puah allied or deceptively told a half truth in order to preserve the lives of the Hebrew boys. Did they perhaps deliberately delay their arrivals to deliver the Hebrew children? And if this is the case, if Shiphrah and Puah did tell a half truth, it is

important for us to remember as modern readers that the hypothetical lie or deception of these midwives takes place within the context of slavery.

The Rev. Dr. Brandon Crowley:

Like the white supporters of the underground railroad who lied to slave hunters about the enslaved Africans and runaways sleeping in the cellars and basements of their homes, the midwives in our text this morning were strategically deceiving the Egyptian tyrant in order to cover up their disobedience of his ungodly edict. For this reason, we should see their alleged deception as a holy act of retribution. It was a powerful renunciation of power and an effective mode of protest considering who Shiphrah and Puah were and the agency that they possessed as midwives. I say this because in chapter three of *Jesus*, and the disinherited Howard Thurman commented on this very matter of deception when he said these words, and I quote, "Deception is perhaps the oldest of all techniques by which the weak have protected themselves against the strong. Through the ages," Thurman says, "At all of the stages of activity the weak have survived by fooling the strong."

The Rev. Dr. Brandon Crowley:

Beloved, the faith of Shiphrah and Puah pressed them. Their faith, their belief in God pressed upon them to actively aid these boys to live by any means necessary, even if it meant that they had to play the roles of spiritually subversive deceivers. And like most extraordinary legends, these two women had complex and complicated identities. And there's an ambiguity in the translation of the original language of the text that adds to this complexity. The truth is, to say it simply, we are not sure as to whether these women were Hebrew midwives or Egyptians who were midwives to the Hebrews. Now I hear my preaching professor, Reverend Gomes saying to me, "Don't you dare try to solve that conundrum in this short sermon, but instead look at the two options as possibilities for preaching." So I want to do just that. If they were Hebrew, isn't it interesting that these two women who had somehow risen high enough in the Egyptian social network to be in direct conversation with Pharaoh, that these women risked losing their professions and losing perhaps even their own lives so that a generation could live and prosper?

The Rev. Dr. Brandon Crowley:

Shiphrah and Puah could have played into the politics of racial betrayal as sellouts of their own for the sake of furthering their own careers and futures as Pharaoh's little helpers. But they didn't do that. They risked all that they had for a worthy cause. And then the second option, if they were Egypt, it would mean that Shiphrah and Puah had more empathy for other human beings than they did loyalty to Pharaoh's Egyptian purity codes. In other words, Shiphrah and Puah were more human than they were Egyptian. They didn't just feel bad about the plight of the Hebrew boys, but they lived out their empathy by practicing radical and compassionate action.

The Rev. Dr. Brandon Crowley:

So this morning, my charge to you is simple but challenging. Like Shiphrah and Puah, we to live in a nation where acts of injustice are commonplace and acquitted in the halls of government. But like in the book of Exodus, God is still speaking to those of us with agency in our hands saying, "Be courageous, be different, resist selfish and capitalistic temptations and always put the needs of others before your own." Beloved, will you be like Shiphrah and Puah and answer God's call to courageousness, or in the end will you be found just going along with bias, political norms at the expense of an entire generation? Justice in this world demands your participation. But if we are honest with ourselves, sometimes the

work of justice can seem so insurmountable in the shadow of evil empires that we don't see how our little efforts even matter. But this is just another reason why this story is so important.

The Rev. Dr. Brandon Crowley:

If you look at the passage, it could seem as if Shiprah and Puah were unsuccessful in their attempts to stop Pharaoh. Because if you keep on reading past our assignment this morning, you will find out in chapter one verse 22 that favorably seemingly ignored their feeble attempts to do good and he then jumps over Shiprah and Puah and incites the crowds, the general public. He incites his base to take matters into their own hands. It could be argued that Shiprah and Puah failed. However, I beg to differ. Shiprah and Puah actually teach us that although our works may seem small and unsuccessful in the moment, we should never grow weary in our pursuits to do well. The two of them couldn't see it from their vantage point, but they had accomplished something major just by standing up and speaking directly to the tyrant. By standing up, they set into motion events that would eventually dismantle the entire empire itself.

The Rev. Dr. Brandon Crowley:

Sometimes it's actually the seemingly insignificant things and persons that set entire movements into motion. These two midwives were heroines who sacrifice their own lives to protest against the dichotomizing identity politics of a prejudicial leader. And their story, my friend, should inspire us in the world today in 2020 to do the same. The question is, will you answer the call to courageousness? Maya Angelou once spoke of courage in this way. She says, "I am convinced that courage is the most important of all virtues because without courage, you cannot practice any other virtue consistently. You can be kind for a while. You can be generous for a while. You can be just for a while or merciful for a while, even loving for a while, but it is only with courage that you can be persistently and insistently kind and generous and fair."

The Rev. Dr. Brandon Crowley:

Beloved, this is the call of God to you and for you this morning. Will you take a risk like Shiprah and Puah and be courageous enough to do what you feel called to do even if it is subversive and different? Will you be courageous and come out and to the forefront in support of that group, that person, that situation, perhaps your own identity and do all that you can to make the world a better place for others outside of yourself? One of my favorite Negro spirituals that is performed in the sacred dialect and beautifully broken English of my ancestor says it like this. It takes my question of will you be courageous and turns it into a direct statement. It says, "God don't need no coward soldier." The title of the song speaks of courage, courage in the face of adversity. The song, of course, is referencing what was required of slaves, daring to escape to freedom. You couldn't be a coward and run from dogs and slave hunters.

The Rev. Dr. Brandon Crowley:

And in the world today God is still saying to us, "God don't need no coward soldiers because the task at hand is too great and lives are still at stake." The world needs people, people who are bold, not for celebrityhood notoriety to be seen or known, but simply because the time is right right now to do right. So I leave you this morning with the words of our second lesson. I command you, the peoples of this university and citizens of this world, to keep alert, stand firm in your faith. Be courageous, be strong, and let all that you do be done in love so that one day a tale can be told of your life that is just as

inspiring as the tale of Shiphrah and Puah. Go into the world and be courageous. This is the word of God for the people of God. Let the people say, amen.

Audience:

Amen.