

Exodus, the Corona Virus, and the God of Life:

Old Stories for a New Time

Pine Bluffs UMC March 29, 2020

Good morning to each of you! While I cannot see your faces in front of me, you are with me today in spirit and prayer. We are missing our worship services and our meetings but the Holy Spirit is with us now and always. The Spirit is with us as I write this message and with you as you read it in your homes, safe and protected. For this I give thanks and praise Emmanuel, God with Us.

As I was planning this message I found one from the Rev. Dr. Janet Hunt on her web site [dancingwiththeword.com](http://dancingwiththeword.com). I would like to share it with you now as I felt it was so appropriate for this time of uncertainty, grief, and pandemic concerns. She writes:

For as long as I have been a pastor, I have been a “lectionary” preacher. For the most part that has seemed to be a faithful and effective way of guiding and grounding our shared worship. Even in an ever changing world, somehow there has always been something in the assigned texts which speak to the moment. While that is no less so today in the current crisis with which we all grapple, it makes sense to me right now to go deep into one story and to seek to follow it through.

For this is also so. Ten days or so ago when the seriousness of what is before us began to become undeniably apparent to me, I was without words. I could not begin to wrap my head around what this was, what it meant, and how to move forward. As you may well know or can imagine, this is especially a problem for one whose entire call is rooted in finding and speaking words—words of comfort, words which motivate, words which call into account, words which ground us in hope. And while I still find myself back there at times and I expect I will continue to at times before we find ourselves in a new and different place. I did hear some meaningful and helpful direction from one who had been there before. In Pastor Matthew Crebbin’s reflections in a blog post *Lessons from Ministry in the Midst of a Disaster* he reminds us to tell the stories. In particular he references the Exodus story as especially meaningful in the midst of a disaster. I, for one, cannot think of a better place to begin.

**Exodus 1:1-7** *These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. The total number of*

*people born to Jacob was seventy. Joseph was already in Egypt. Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation. But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.”*

What I especially love about this story is that even in the first few verses, even as the one who first recorded these ancient events captured them to be passed along in written form, even here we get hints of the ending. Indeed, even as the writer set the stage, simply delineating the people of Israel who first resided in Egypt, we are reminded that God is on the side of life, that God is the origin and protector and provider of life, for as we hear, *“they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.”*

**Exodus 1:8-14** *“Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, ‘Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.’ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.”*

Early on, though, we start to hear how devastating things have become for the Israelite people. The new king did not know, did not remember, did not care to recall who Joseph was and how the Israelites had come to reside there in the first place. The new king is acting only out of fear of the ‘other,’ it would seem, for we are given no reason why he would issue such edicts to oppress them. What we do know is that fear is catching. So many stories tell us of unscrupulous people trying to take advantage of this pandemic and sell us products at exorbitant prices or push an antidote on us for a huge price for something that is worthless!! People trying to use their positions of power for harm and not for good, and yes, what do we know that is in all of this? We hear that God is still at work. The more the Israelites are oppressed, the more they keep multiplying and spreading.

Fear is spreading. I have certainly seen this in my own community where for the last two weeks, grocery stores shelves are emptying faster than those who stock

them can possibly keep up. We try not to watch the news programs about the COVID 19 virus nonstop because we can get so caught up in the bad news that we become overwhelmed by it. I have also seen amazing signs of life, especially where people have heard the call to care for the most vulnerable among us. [I was at the Market recently and saw two of our members restocking shelves as there had just been a truck delivery. The call had gone out for help and they responded. I just had a text message from another member offering to go to the Market for me today and now I have a bag of groceries on my front porch.] I have seen an abundance of support in our community where those services who previously depended on an older population to volunteer, now are being helped by younger folks whose time has been freed up and who are giving back in this way. And yes, we have all seen it in public health workers and in medical personnel who step into and beyond their own fear and keep showing up and doing what they always do to bring healing to the sick and comfort and hope to those who are afraid.

Back to the story. For the first fourteen verses are only a prelude for what comes next.

**Exodus 1:15-21** *“The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ‘When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.’ But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, ‘Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?’ The midwives said to Pharaoh, ‘Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.’ So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, ‘Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.’”*

Actually, this is where the story really starts to come alive. This is where we are invited to enter in and wonder at the experiences of a handful of players—namely those lowly Hebrew women: Shiphrah and Puah. Of course, part of the irony in this part of the story is that the king of Egypt is not named, but the women are. Indeed, part of the wonder here is that the king of Egypt is taking time to personally speak to these Hebrew women to enlist their aid in his campaign of death.

Only Shiphrah and Puah have always been on the side of life. Their calling in the world was to be and do the exact opposite of that the king commanded, and they were not about to change their ways now. So they simply kept doing what they had always done. They kept working together and with the powers of life. They kept helping bring new life into the world. And oh, couldn't one say that 'life' is given a name here while death remains nameless?

And yes, a favorite part of this first chapter of this ancient story is that the women used the king's own bigotry to fool him. He already assumes that the Hebrew people are in their nature and being so different from the Egyptian people. It seems to me that they tap into that bias as they describe the women as 'more vigorous' and thus more easily and quickly give birth. They must have been tempted to 'laugh all the way home' when the king believed their lie and was forced to turn to other means to try to destroy those who frightened him so.

Certainly over the centuries there are countless ways in which this story has been experienced as empowering, speaking to varied circumstances and experiences. I myself, live in a state which is now on 'stay at home' orders by our governor. For many of us, such an order brings with it enforced loneliness and perhaps a loss of meaning as we wonder who we are and who we are called to be in a world where we cannot be and do things as we have always done them.

Yet, like Shiphrah and Puah, we are also named. And like Shiphrah and Puah, we have still been given a purpose. And that purpose is always on the side of life. And for now at least in part, this means keeping a distance from others so that we might all have a chance at life in the midst of the threat of a virus which as first travels unseen, but when it finds a host can have devastating consequences.

It seems to me that it is more than that. For even as we are physically apart, we can look for other ways to help life flourish. It may be in simple ways like picking up the phone to call or dropping an actual note in the mail (or yes, a text or an email) to someone else in a similar circumstance or worse. [I just received a lovely spring top and beautiful cross from a former member who had moved away from our community but was so thoughtful and generous in remembering me. What a pickup that was and perfect timing!] It may mean spending more intentional time in prayer with loved ones and strangers alike. And yes, it may mean, in these first days of spring, spending part of a sunny day outside, raking away the dregs of winter and being reminded that life and hope are still right here at our

fingertips. Life and hope which not only sustains us, but can also be passed along to others.

Through it all, we do so knowing from this ancient story that God is always on the side of life. We seek to live lives which give evidence that this is so. In the days ahead let us ponder what this might look like for us in a strange and too often frightening time. In a time when we are forced to do things in new and different ways, how else might we live into the same life filled purpose to which we, like Shiprah and Puah, have been called?

Like all of us here on the ground, I surely can't see into the future. However I strongly sense that we will find ourselves here in this inbetween place for some time. I am so grateful for all of you as we join together, trying to see our way into next steps together. Please take a moment to let me know how you are and what this time is bringing to you, what you are grateful for, what you find you need, and what you are learning along the way.

In this uncertain time, may you also find comfort and strength in ancient stories, especially as they remind us again and again that God is on the side of life. Always.

*Please pray with me. Loving God, we come to pray for those who are caring for the sick. It takes a kind and selfless heart to care for those who are sick, and so Father we pray for them. We pray that You would be their source of rest, their source of replenishment when weary, and their source of hope in such overwhelming times. Lord, we know in Luke 6:38 that whosoever pours out shall be given back in proportion, so we pray blessings for these caregivers. We also pray for their health that they may not fall ill. Father, protect them with a hedge of protection against the germs of coronavirus and help those who are giving to be protected as they nurse others back to health. Bless them, O Lord.*

*Bless each of us with your protection and mercy, Lord. Help us to worship you as the God on the side of life and the God who loves us so much He gave the life of His Beloved Son for our sakes. When fear of the unknown overwhelms us help us to trust in You and the Promise of your presence with us in times of trial and in times of joy. You will not abandon us but walk with us daily each step of the way. Be with us, Lord, in your abundant, unconditional love and mercy. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*