

# JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## What Do We Do?

Exodus 1:8-21

Sunday, September 3, 2023

*Rev. Dr. Jennifer Wyant, Executive and Teaching Pastor*

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We spent the last couple of months looking at the journey Jesus took his disciples on in the gospel of Mark and now we're shifting to the Old Testament and going to spend some time in the book of Exodus. We will be looking more specifically at the questions the Israelites faced during their exodus, as God freed them from slavery in Egypt and brought them via a very circuitous route to the Promised Land.

And while these people definitely experienced a very specific set of circumstances in so many ways their story represents the experiences, fears and triumphs that many of us when we follow God on whatever journey God is calling us on, and in this way, these Hebrew people in the book of exodus present an example to us that we can learn from both in the ways they succeed in following after God and also in the times that they fail to fully trust him. This book is full of both things. Fear and Faithfulness, Doubt and Courage and so we are going to be spending some time with these people and their story as we ask our own questions on our own journeys of faith.

To do that, we should probably start at the beginning. Usually people start with Moses as a baby in the basket, which doesn't get me wrong is at the beginning of Exodus. And it's a great story. But we are going to start just a little before that because Exodus has another story to tell before introducing us to Moses. It's the story of the two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. So, let's start there:

### Exodus 1:8-21

<sup>8</sup>Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. <sup>9</sup> He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. <sup>10</sup> 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." <sup>11</sup> Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. <sup>12</sup> But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. <sup>13</sup> The

Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, <sup>16</sup> "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." <sup>17</sup> But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. <sup>18</sup> So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" <sup>19</sup> 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." <sup>20</sup> So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. <sup>21</sup> And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.

Okay, so you know how it goes, Genesis ends with Joseph's story and how he brought his family to Egypt when there was a great famine across the land and how Joseph was a big deal in Egypt and his power kept his family safe. But after he died and generations passed, a new king came to power and didn't care about Joseph and this led to the enslavement of the Hebrew people and they forced them to build cities and oppressed them and yet, there just kept being more and more Israelites. No one longer just one family with 12 brothers. They are a whole nation now and the Egyptians are afraid of them. And so Pharaoh decides to start weeding them out and orders the two Hebrew midwives to come to him. He orders them to start killing all the boy babies once they are born.

But we are told that Shiphrah and Puah fear God and so they just don't do it. Even though they are powerless and the king holds all the cards. And they could be killed for their disobedience. They take the risk anyway. I love how clever they are. Like they could have made this big noble stand and refused and the

Pharaoh would have just killed them and then done what he wanted to do. But instead, they were like: yeah sure and then just don't do it.

They do the right thing. Day after day, each mom, each baby. And when Pharaoh is like: why aren't you doing what I commanded you, they are like: oh sorry, Pharaoh, Hebrew woman are just really tough and we aren't even there when the babies are born. And because Pharaoh shockingly doesn't know a lot about childbirth, he believes them.

But in the end, Pharaoh finds another way to kill the babies, because that's how evil seems to work and there's still danger but they saved those little boys. A multitude of lives and we are told that God blessed them for it.

And like I said the series for this month is on the questions we ask God while we are on our journeys of faith. And the question I kept coming back to time and time again while reading this passage and honestly the question I have just been asking God lately in my life: "What do I do?"

Because I am sure when they were told by the most powerful person in their world to do this terrible thing, both Shiprah and Puah prayed that to God. What do we do, God?

How do we get out of this? How do we do the right thing?

The next says they feared God and so they didn't do what they were commanded to do. They chose God over the Pharaoh.

Even though I wonder if they wondered if it would matter at all in the long run.

Lately, we have been inundated in the church office with people calling or showing up and needing assistance. There have been a few days each week for the last month where I would say Pastor Pam and I spent most of our time trying to figure out how and if we can help people who need it.

And while it's not unusual for us to have people reach out, the volume of it lately has increased significantly. And we have an assistance fund, the benevolence fund, that you have donated to over the years and we have certain things we can do and give and restrictions on

it to make sure we are being good stewards of that money. And sometimes we can help and sometimes we can't. But we can, we pay for hotels for a few nights for people who don't have permanent housing, we buy tires to help people get to their jobs. We pass out grocery store gift cards and we buy gas and socks and bills where we can.

And I'm telling you this for a few reasons. First, because we live in this area I think its easy to not think there's such great need all around us. But second, I want you to know that it's not us, Pam and me, that's doing it. It's you. It's your generosity and faithfulness that lets us help how we can and when we can. It's one of the ways this church is every week these days trying to be light in our community or at least trying to push back against the darkness.

But is the hardest part of my job. Because it doesn't feel like enough and sometimes we can't help. We aren't set up for the support that so many people need so we try to connect them to places that can help them instead. I could spend every single dollar we have in the benevolence fund on hotels for people who can't find housing and the housing crisis would remain unchanged. And every single person who got two or three nights in a hotel would still not have a house at the end of it.

And I can pass out all the money in Kroger cards and grocery prices would still not go down at the end of it.

And I can't fix the epidemic of domestic violence or the rising cost of healthcare or the prison system or fix the limited access to mental health resources or any of the other problems that have led to people knocking on our door.

We can pack 87,000 meals and we can do the same next year and next year but there will still be hungry children needing food.

The problems are bigger than me.

Bigger than this church even though I know this church stands so large on the horizon in Johns Creek. I know why people come here looking for help. But in the face of all the problems, it feels like what we do is so small. A drop in a bucket.

And so sometimes I drive home overwhelmed by the enormity of the world's grief.

And so I ask God: What do we do? More specifically,

“what do we do in the face of all this suffering? All this injustice? All this grief in the world?”

And God didn't really answer and so I drive to work the next day and the chances are good someone else calls for help.

And we try our best again.

And then when I was supposed to be writing a sermon on Exodus 3, completely by accident I got on sermon Exodus 1 instead.

And I remembered the Puah and Shiprah and what they did. And how they were two women, who quietly saved a generation. Not with violence or a big public stand but with a quiet faithfulness to do the right thing despite the great risk.

I thought about how they just did their jobs and didn't do the evil thing that was asked of them. They didn't set the Hebrew people free. They didn't overthrow Pharaoh.

The Pharaoh would eventually find other ways to kill Hebrew children.

But.

In their quiet faithfulness, they created a path forward. They set the scene for a mom to place her baby in a basket on the Nile, to send her daughter alongside it in the reeds. They set in motion a story that would span the next 120 years. That would end in freedom.

That would end in the promised land.

Without them, there is no Exodus.

Shiprah and Puah, small against the backdrop of political forces and systemic evil much greater than them, simply doing the right thing.

And we remember them all these millennia later. When we don't even know that Pharaoh's name.

I'm sure they asked God, “what do we do?”

And I wonder what God told them.

But I know what they did.

It probably felt hopeless.

But they did what they could.

And I am reminded of a quote that comes from the Talmud: “do not be overwhelmed by the enormity of the world's grief. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are free to abandon it.” Pirke Avot 2

And I think for me this is the sticking point and maybe for you, when the problem seems so large that it could not possibly be solved, it feels difficult to even want to start. If it cannot be completed then why bother.

But God did not ever once call us to solve all the world's problems. And what hubris is that to think that we could.

But God does call us to serve others. To help those in need. The widow, the orphan, the stranger. To be the hands and feet of Christ.

To be faithful in what we have. To share what we've been given.

To say yes when we can.

To say no when we have to. Even if it feels like a risk.

We keep being light. We keep doing what we know we should. We keep doing quiet acts of small faithfulness.

Even if we don't see the end result. Even if Pharaoh just finds another way to cause harm.

And I know it's a holiday weekend and so I shouldn't ask you to do any work, but here's the challenge for us: to do the small act of faithfulness this week. To help someone even if it feels imperceptibly small against the backdrop of all the world's suffering. To have eyes to see what it is that you are supposed to do and ears to hear the answer that God give you to the question: What do I do?

There's that story you know about the little boy and the starfish? After a storm, he discovered his whole beach filled with starfish who would be unable to make it back to the water before they died. And how he begins to go and throw them back into the water one at a time and how an old man sees him and mocks him for even trying: son, there are miles of starfish on this beach, you cannot save them. Why are you even trying? You won't be able to make much of a difference?

But the boy just bends down and grabs another starfish and as he throws back into the sea, he says: “it made a difference to that one.”

Which is just another way of saying: do not be overwhelmed by the enormity of the world’s grief. You are not obligated to complete the work but neither are you free to abandon it.”

**Amen.**



11180 Medlock Bridge Road Johns Creek, GA 30097  
770-497-8215 [www.johnscreekumc.org](http://www.johnscreekumc.org)