

# *“Live In and Out of Murky Waters”*

Exodus 1:8—2:10/Matthew 16:13–20

Part V of VII in the sermon series:

“For Such a Time as This:

Seven Lessons for Living Through Pandemic Times”

Based on Esther 4:14

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine

Associate Minister

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: [home@first-church.org](mailto:home@first-church.org)

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

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*Prayer For Illumination:* May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

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Today we continue the sermon series: “For Such a time as this: Seven Lessons for Living through Pandemic Times.” If there ever was a book where we could glean something about what it might be like to live through Pandemic Times, it’s surely here in the Book of Exodus. Over the summer, the lectionary texts have set the stage for God’s continuing work for God’s people. Today, we turn the page to hear more about the story of the Hebrew people.

Some of the work on this sermon started with a continuing education seminar I attended a few years ago with Dr. Anna Carter Florence, a Homiletics professor at Columbia Theological Seminary. It is her offering in that seminar that opened new pathways to hear this remarkable story of strong, courageous and faithful women willing to

not follow the rule of law, but instead flip power and authority on its head. I am grateful for her word that helped shaped this sermon this morning.<sup>1</sup>

The setting for the story that Stacie read a few moments ago, as you know, is ancient Egypt, in the capital city along the river Nile. In the text, we, too, wade into the murky waters, to get a picture of the challenging history of the Hebrew people. These rich stories provide the interesting origins to Moses.

These stories, and these faithful, defiant, and bold women are what laid the foundation for everything that Moses was able to do. And in the end, it is the actions of these women, that sets the whole of the exodus story into motion. Shiphrah, Puah, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter, it is their actions and their refusal to cooperate with oppression that make everything Moses did possible. It is through their decisions and their choices that God begins the liberation of a whole people from bondage.

The Hebrew people had been in Egypt for almost 400 years by the time of these stories. They came with Joseph and his family and the Hebrew people lived for many years as a full part of the Egyptian community.

But as time passed, as the Hebrew population grew and as they became more and more prevalent within the Egyptian society, things changed. And when a new king came into power over Egypt, a king who operated out of fear, things changed for the worst.

This king feared the Hebrew people, and despite them being so much a part of their society, he saw them as 'other.' It was us vs. them for this king and the king worried by sheer numbers alone, they

could turn on the Egyptians, they could fight with their enemies and overthrow the Egyptian empire.

The new king is fearful, intimidated and worried. And when one is fearful, intimidated and worried, he is rarely at his best self. He creates new laws that are designed to oppress the Hebrew people and make life impossible for them to prosper. He wants to beat them down and keep them under control. And when that doesn't work, and they grow further in number and spread across the land, he decides to enslave them and puts them to work in the harshest conditions he could offer.

But God's people are resilient, and even under the most broken and unjust systems new life finds a way. Here, even in slavery, even under life-threatening conditions and brutal work, the Hebrew people are "fruitful". They multiply and grow in strength.

And while the Hebrews grow in strength, the king grows in his fear of them. So he goes even further and decides to destroy the Hebrew people all together, by making sure they have no future. Pharaoh knows: target the boys of the people you want to dominate, and eventually, you will destroy them.

It's Genocide. He has every new born baby boy killed.

To accomplish this, he decides to call for the Hebrew women responsible for delivering babies. They are the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah.

Quick side note: names are important in the bible...the king in these stories, the pharaoh, the one who was seen as a demigod to the Egyptians...he isn't given a name in this story, but the people that are named... are these poor beaten down slave women, these midwives

have names... Shiphrah and Puah... their names... in Hebrew... mean “Little flower” and “Lovely” which make what happens next all the more ironic...<sup>2</sup>

The all-powerful pharaoh of Egypt who has statues and temples carved in his honor, developed an unjust policy out of fear of losing power... he calls “little flower” and “lovely” forward to enforce his law for him. But instead, “Little flower” and “Lovely” defy his orders and then lie to his face about it.

I can only imagine what that would be like. Being brought before the leader of your people. Being commanded to participate in something so blatantly wrong, and then having the strength and courage to go against it.

The bible tells us that “lovely” and “little flower” decide to disobey their king because they respected God more than they respected their king. Because they saw that their king’s laws and ways of governing did not align with God’s justice.

These are themes we will continue to see throughout Exodus and really throughout the bible as a whole. Here we see our worldly understanding of authority, power, and justice turned upside down and questioned, so that we can better understand God’s authority, God’s power, and God’s justice.

In God’s eyes it’s not the mighty and powerful that are favored, it’s not the ones with their names in history books. Rather its unexpected people, the faithful and righteous people from the fringes, people who are often overlooked by history. These are the ones who are called by God, these are the ones who God names. These are the

ones who step up to lead God's people and change the course of history.

Resistance is a powerful thing.

We also hear the story of a mother, desperate to keep her baby alive. She is willing to put her three month old baby in a woven reed basket which is lined with the ancient equivalent of Kevlar, and put him in the river in between the reeds. And she knows he may not survive. She sends her daughter, the baby's older sister, into the reeds to stand watch. Wading into the murky waters, trusting in a God of life.

We also hear the story of pharaoh's daughter, the princess, who comes to bathe in the river. She finds the basket and opens it to find the baby. She took pity on him.

As the Princess shares the truth, "this must be one of the Hebrews' children, Miriam, keeping close watch on her baby brother, steps out of the reeds and offers to go and find a Hebrew woman to nurse him.

The Princess knew what she was supposed to do when she found a baby boy---she was supposed to turn the basket over in the waters and drown him. She knew what the law (her father's law) required and she was supposed to uphold it. But standing there in the murky waters, the path ahead seemed unclear. These two young girls took action to save the boys' life. Miriam, went to her mother, the baby's mother, Moses' mother, so that she could nurse her son.

The Princess took a big risk, offering to pay the woman's wages if she would nurse him. Later when the child grew up, the woman brought him to the Princess and she took the child as her son. Without these women who dared greatly, who brokered a deal to save a baby in a basket, there is no Moses, no Exodus, no liberation of the people of

God. Sometimes it's difficult to see life in the murky waters.

Sometimes in the midst of challenging circumstances, like the ones these women faced, it helps to tell the truth. To clarify our decision making and navigate turbulent times one needs to start by telling the truth.

Resistance is a powerful thing.

And truth-telling is huge.

Like Shiphrah and Puah, Miriam and the Princess defy what was expected of them and found clarity in what they saw in front of them, along the banks of the river, in the reeds.

When I read this text, I am inspired by the courageous actions of the women. I am reminded that when our relationship to God is clear, our other priorities fall into place.

Pastor Jill Duffield notes that in the story of Shiphrah and Puah it is evident how clear their relationship is to God. The midwives respect God. The knowledge and acknowledgment is that God must be obeyed and not Pharaoh. The fear of God gives them the fortitude, courage and bravery to spare the Hebrew babies.

When we know who God is, we stand a better chance at not conforming to this world but, instead living a life of service, justice and love. Sober judgment accompanies a clear understanding of who God is and subsequently, who we are". Such a confession becomes foundational for God's work in and through us.<sup>4</sup>

I do not imagine that Shiphrah and Puah planned to risk their lives and stand up to Pharaoh the day they decided they would respect God no matter the cost.

Then the two girls from completely different backgrounds, standing in the murky waters, knee deep among the reeds with a little child in between them chose a path that neither of them thought. They chose a new way forward, one that God opened for them.

I don't know about you, but lately I've been feeling like I am standing amidst the murky water (living in it really), uncertain of so many things. Things I used to know, suddenly seem cloudy and complicated. The air has the tinge of fear and anxiety. And lots of things feel unknown.

There are times when we feel so sure of what is right and what is wrong. So sure of the direction life is taking us. Then there are other times when we are adrift in a basket at the mercy of the rippling waters, unsure of anything or anyone, unsure of what the future holds.

I think the Book of Exodus has a lot to say about people in murky waters like these.

Sometimes we find ourselves with a stark choice to conform to this world and remain safe OR proclaim a truth, fear God and be bold regardless of what comes next. Sometimes we find ourselves staring at stark contrasts of which direction to turn or a choice of good and evil; of choosing light and life OR darkness and despair. What these stories about living in and out of the murky water tell us is that God will, in fact, give us the words and the fortitude when we most need it.

Maybe you find yourself these days, in an uncomfortable space, in a place that is not offering you joy, a situation that is not allowing you to be your best self. Maybe it's in the workplace. Maybe in the life

you thought was too perfect to be shattered, and here you are wading in murky water, where your purpose now seems cloudy.

Alert and aware of your surroundings, prepared for any dangers that come. God provides a way forward, even when the way is not clear. God provides a way to step out of the murky waters and live in a new and hopeful way.

God does God's best work in the uncomfortable, unclear places of our lives. It is in the murky waters where "God's liberating work begins."<sup>5</sup>

Living in and out of murky waters means we have to take a risk, trusting that someone may meet us there in the midst of it and help us to reimagine the way out.

God will catch us, guide us, and in time--set us free.

May it be so for us, like it was for the women back then.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Anna Carter Florence, MTSO Day of Homiletics in 2017. Re-enacting the scripture "The Girls in the Reeds"

<sup>2</sup> Rev. Trip Porch, Indianola Presbyterian Church Sermon: "Defiant Origins" and sermon collaborator.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. Dr. Anna Carter Florence, [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003dc9/the\\_girls\\_in\\_the\\_reeds](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003dc9/the_girls_in_the_reeds)

<sup>4</sup> Jill Duffield, Looking into the Lectionary, Presbyterian Outlook, 8.16.2020.

<sup>5</sup> Rev. Amy Miracle, BPSC.org. "In the Reeds".

## The Gospel Matthew 16:13–20

A reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 16.

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

L: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

P: Thanks be to God.