

PROMISES PROMISES
Rev. Gusti Linnea Newquist
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Based on Exodus 1:8-21

In the ancient city of Sa, along the Canopic branch of the western Nile Delta, The House of Life school of medicine and midwifery trained physicians for service throughout Egypt more than two thousand years before the birth of Jesus.

The second recorded female physician in history graduated from this school: a woman named Pesehet. Pesehet must have been a very good physician because the Pharaoh at the time elevated her to the rank of "King's Associate."

Even as Pesehet's skill set encompassed the full spectrum of medical services, she became renowned throughout the land as an expert in midwifery. She was not the only one. A stone inscription dated to this era refers to Pesehet as "Lady Overseer of Female Physicians." Perhaps even, although this is conjecture, the foremothers of Shiphrah and Puah.

We, with our twenty-first century enlightened minds, tend to imagine ancient childbirth as a horrific affair. Poor women, we think, they were so oppressed.

And they were, to be sure, but not always in the ways that we think. Certainly not as midwives in Egypt in the time of our Scripture lesson for today.

A midwife in ancient Egypt, according to Egyptologist Rosalind Janssen, was actually revered. She was a highly specialized priestess who mediated between her patients and their gods, in addition to employing fairly sophisticated gynecological knowledge.

The House of Life Medical School was, after all, connected to a temple. Not the temple of the Hebrew god, who at this stage of biblical understanding is not yet monotheistic, but a temple nonetheless. Where medical students of all specialties took vows of priestly service in a ritual of initiation to their divine role in the medical field.

Not unlike taking the Hippocratic Oath today.

A midwife in particular, according to Janssen, was ultimately a prophetess among the physicians because of her unique role in mediating life and death through the mystery of childbirth.

The oath these midwives take, to mediate between their patients in childbirth and the god their patients worship, to speak truth to power in the face of this awesome responsibility, this oath is so sacred that a midwife will sacrifice her own life before she will break that oath.

Shiphrah and Puah are no exception.

In what amounts to the first recorded act of civil disobedience in the Scriptures, the story of Exodus begins with our mid-wife-ing heroines honoring their oath before God and their patients. First by outright refusal to obey Pharaoh's order. And then by throwing Pharaoh's powerlessness over the life-giving forces of a woman's body right back in his face.

And the people multiply. And become very strong. Because of what these women have done.

But Shiphrah and Puah do not save the children by themselves.

Later in the story we learn that 600,000 Israelite men join Moses in the Exodus from Egypt. 600,000 beautiful beloved boy babies who could have been murdered through the corrupt power of a corrupt ruler. Even if only a fraction of the 600,000 were born under Pharaoh's order, two midwives working round the clock could not have saved them all.

It takes a community to resist the evil of Pharaoh, in support of the children: other midwives like Shiphrah and Puah keeping their oath before God and their patients; childbearing women demanding Hebrew Lives Matter in the face of despair; fathers and brothers plotting a time when all will be free; and at least one sister, in the story of Moses, tugging the heartstrings of a privileged Pharaoh's daughter to keep alive the child who will one day save them all.

The problem is, as we discussed in our Teach the Preacher conversation on this Scripture this week, people who have great power are still capable of great cruelty. Ruthless rulers still make bitter lives for the numerous masses that they fear. Righteous Resistance in the name of Shiphrah and Puah is still needed for the sake of the children.

And no one can do it alone.

It still takes a community to resist the evil of Pharaoh. We know that too, in our own twenty-first century way, in the Presbyterian version of Baptism.

The sacramental ritual is a *communal* initiation for us, a commitment we make to all children everywhere when we baptize one child right here. When we promise to guide them and nurture them and strengthen them and protect them. In the name of the God who also comes to us as a child. Whose infant life is also threatened by the first century version of Pharaoh. In the name of the God who, as an adult, embraces the children who come to him. Because to them belongs a glimpse of the way things really are, when we lift the veil. The way things could be.

On behalf of the children, in the Presbyterian version of Baptism, we all renounce evil and its power in the world. In whatever Pharaonic form that power takes. And commit to protect those Pharaoh threatens most.

Which is why this year on Back to School Sunday here in Shepherdstown, in the middle of a global pandemic and an economic meltdown and a much-needed national reckoning on racism, we declare that baptismal oath proudly and emphatically. In the blessing of our children and those who work to educate them:

We say: God chooses children over Pharaoh! And so do we.