

Five Strong Women "By Water and the Word"

Beverly C.S. Brazier

Exodus 1-2

Visual Aids: Pitcher of Water, 5 containers

I have a pitcher of water – and five containers. Notice when I pour the water into each of them, **(do it)**, the water takes the shape or the form of the container that holds it. I know that it is not a new concept for you – and certainly not original to me – but I want to explore its truth this morning in five concrete ways.

Water is a powerful symbol...it flows through the story of Exodus...sometimes a gentle stream and other times a torrential downpour...a river to drown newborn boys, a river that saved the life of baby Moses, a sea parting – a gift of freedom, a sea closing – death to Egyptians, terrible thirst in an arid wilderness. Water from a rock – a gracious gift of God. Water is essential to the Exodus story and it plays a strong role in the stories of each of these five women: Shiprah, Puah, Jochabed, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter.

Five women by whose brave and brilliant acts, the life of a Hebrew baby was saved. The river that was meant to drown him floated him to safety, buoyed him up and in the arms of a foreign princess and from there back to his mother's breast – and that baby, when he grew up, along with his sister and brother, was the instrument through which God saved the Hebrew people.

When, as the prophet Amos says, justice will pour down like a mighty river, it will surely begin flowing in ways like these: the trickles and torrents found in the lives of five faithful women. The first two we will deal with together: because they acted together and worked in team, risking their lives for a newborn Hebrew baby. **(Pour water)**

Read: Exodus 1:15-22

The water associated with Shiprah and Puah is the water of birthing. Water and birth are closely related. The author of Genesis in describing the birth of the world, says that "In the beginning, God's spirit brooded over the face of the water"...and as the creation unfolds, the world is born out of those waters. A very physical image – because each of us begins life nurtured in the water of our mother's womb...and we know that birth is about to happen when the water breaks and new life, as it were comes out of the water. I wonder if that image was in the mind of the author of Genesis as that was being written?

Many people believe that life on this planet evolved as sea creatures emerged from the waters and began to walk. Isn't it interesting how nearly all understanding of creation involve water? It is fascinating to me that we speak of God our deliverer. In Hebrew scriptures the classic delivery, or act of deliverance by God is – the Exodus. A passage from slavery to freedom, death to life. A passage that lead through – WATER. In Greek scriptures and in Christianity *the* act of deliverance is the death and Resurrection of Jesus, into which we enter through – WATER. We have traditionally prayed to God to "deliver us from evil". In addition to the liberation aspects of the word "deliver" the word also means to bring to death – again passing through water. Would the prayer be different to you if you prayed it with that added nuance to the expression – "deliver us from evil" (repeat). Hmmm.

Shiprah and Puah were midwives. Their careers were to assist in giving birth. When orders came to kill, they refused to do so...the killing was to be done by drowning – water as an instrument of death. They said no. They said so by their actions – they simply did not obey the law. They who dealt with birth waters would into be part of water of death. They put their reputations, their careers and their lives on the line. *And* invented an ingenious tale to explain to the Pharaoh why they had not done his bidding...using his own prejudice against him – his own desire to believe that the Hebrews were “different” that fueled his hatred and fear and resulted in his death command, they turned that belief on him and used it to save the lives of the very people he was trying to kill. The waters of creation brought to birth within them great courage, imagination, ingenuity and nerve. Who knows *how* many babies they saved that way? As we remember and celebrate the great contribution of Shiprah and Puah, let us think of the waters of birth. Be attentive to their washing over us, around us, inside us and through us. How is it that we can be midwives...help new birth and creativity in those around us and in the world? May the God who is Living water – Birth water – who is midwife to us, assist us to be midwives to each other.

Jochabed is the name of the mother of Moses (also of Miriam and Aaron). (***Pour water***). We learn her name not from this account but from Numbers 26:59. She was of the priestly tradition by birth.

Read Exodus 2:1-10

The water in Jochabed’s part of the story is her tears. She was pregnant a third time and gave birth to a beautiful son. At that time there should be great joy, but for Jochabed and Amram her husband, it was an overwhelming sorrow. If he had been a girl he would be allowed to live. Can you imagine carrying a child the full nine months, wondering as all parents do, whether it’s a boy or a girl...but knowing that it’s life depends on the answer? And then going through labour and at that final moment – when the baby emerges and you look in terror at the faces of the midwives who are helping you – what is it? And their faces fall and you know. It’s a boy and he will die. And for a moment you’re horrified, lying there helpless and fearing that the midwives might take him right now and...do it... Then imagine three months later, after hiding him and loving him – deciding to let him go to save his life – there would be many tears.

Jochabed’s water is the water of her tears – but tears that did not lead to helplessness or resignation or paralysis – these tears were very much waters of creation as well. Her tears motivated her to conceive a plan to save his life. As she placed him in that basket in the water – as she let him go so he could live flowed freely and they brought to birth a plan. She trusted the maternal instincts of another woman – and she saved her baby’s life.

I know there are tears in your life. Are they, or can they be, birth waters too – can you use them to bring life? A new birth – some creativity, some growing? And can we, through our tears, trust the maternal (paternal) instincts in each other with what is most precious to us? Jochabed’s water is the water of her tears.

Miriam’s story is intimately connected with water as well. (***Pour water***) Waters of freedom. We see her here as a little girl – remarkably brave and keenly intelligent.

Read Exodus 2:1-10

How long did she stand in the water waiting? She must have been tempted to run, or wade to him and take him out again, especially when he cried. Was she afraid? She must have been. Was she covered in leeches as she emerged from the water? Was she fly bitten or worse there in the water, waiting? And then the nerve of her, to speak to a princess! She’s a poor slave girl – foreign – and yet she’ll do anything for her baby brother, who is floating between life and death. She negotiates the terms of his survival. She thinks quickly – did she know that the princess came here to bathe – or were she and her mother just

hoping again hope that whoever found him would be a good and merciful person? I don't think so. In any case – she offers to find a wet nurse – all wide-eyed innocence – and the story carries on.

Much later in the story we see her – a woman now – a prophet – on the banks of the Sea of Reeds, the water newly closed back over the place where they had crossed. She led them in a song and dance of freedom – with the wind in her hair and perspiration coating her skin, tears of joy flowing – streaming down her cheeks. She danced and sang for the freedom God gives. God's great deliverance and as she did she remembered the day that Moses was drawn out of the water and she sang louder and more sweetly as the truth washed over her that she had had a great part in what had happened to her people and what was still to come. When she died in the wilderness, the people refuse to go on until she is properly buried. When she is buried in Kadesh, the text notes that there was no water there for the people.

She saves Moses from the water

Leads the people through the water

And her absence parallels the absence of water,

Source of life in the desert and instrument of freedom.

Pharaoh's daughter had come to the river to bathe – an to swim. As she removed the restrictive clothes a princess had to wear – hot and cumbersome, she felt free. The water was refreshing – cleansing – her muscles relaxed and she began to swim – her motions strong yet fluid – graceful. Her body moved easily through the water and she thanked her God for all the joy that the water brought to her life. She absolutely loved it. Little did she know what the water was yet to bring.

Pharaoh's daughter surely had a name – but we don't know it. (***Pour water***) Neither do we know what she took that baby out of the water and raised him as her own. She must have had, as royalty – a princess – all the material possessions her heart desired. Why did she adopt this baby with all the risk such an act entailed? Or was she a mother and acted out of maternal compassion? Was she opposed in principle to her father's edict? Did she intervene to save other Hebrew babies? Did she lobby for a change in the law or try to influence her father's attitudes? How did she explain the baby to her friends? To her family? And do you think that she actually bought the story of the brave and frightened little girl who just happened to be in the water when the baby was drawn out and by coincidence knew of a Hebrew woman who could act as a wet nurse?

I can imagine the moment when they are all there together...Miriam has brought Jochabed to the princess saying "here's a woman who will nurse your baby for you" – picture them. Miriam. Jochabed. The princess. Doubtless her servant women. I believe at that moment every woman there knew the truth. It was never spoken aloud – but they exchanged glances – all of them – and the looks said, "we could all be killed for this and we are separated by language, culture, education and class but we are going to trust one another now for the sake of what we share in spite of what divides us and for the sake of this child. My sister – my life and the life of this child depend on your silence. I place our lives in your hand."

At that moment the princess was in her actions as fluid and graceful as was her body in the water when she swam. Yet this time the refreshing and cleansing and relaxing came *from* her to a frightened sister and mother and to her servant woman with whom she bonded that day in a way they never had before.

Could we do that? In this church – could we put aside the things that divide us, for the sake of a child's life? We can and we do. We do it when we stand together at baptism and say we will accept this child

and support her however we can. We do that when we work together to provide Sunday School and Christian Education programmes. We put aside the things that don't matter – because *children matter* more.

Five women. Shiprah, Puah, Jochabed, Miriam and a Princess.

Waters of birthing, of freedom.

Waters of courage and ethical action.

Waters of grace.

May you be filled with all of these and pour them out for others.

Addition for Baptismal Sunday:

There's a sixth container to be filled with water...and it's for a woman named **Alexandra** (Pour water) As I worked through the five women in the story of Moses, each in her own unique way, so Jesus' spirit does and will continue to work in and through the life of **Alexandra Mae Tesoro** Today she has been marked as Christ's forever by the waters of her baptism.

By these waters God claims her and names her and offers her gifts of freedom and growing and the certain knowledge that no matter what her life may bring, she will never be alone. This container is unlike the others – the water in it has taken a different form. Alexandra herself is a person unlike any another – and one of the delights of watching her grow, for you and for us, should we be so lucky, will be to watch the way Jesus' spirit in her takes its own very unique way in her life.

My prayer for you today **Alex**, is that you will grow into the fullness of your baptism – into the fullness of the beautiful and unique person God created you to be. May you know the birth waters of creativity, the liberating waters of freedom to be who you are and to serve God joyfully – when there are tears in your life may you receive from them a blessing and God's promise to be with you always and may you experience the fullness of the Spirit of God pouring into you and out from you so that you take your own awesome part in God's story of salvation.

Amen.