

Exodus 1

Five Strong Women - By Water and the Word

I have a pitcher of water here - and five containers.

As I pour the water into each of the five, it takes the shape of that particular container.

That's not very profound, but I want to explore that truth – splash around in it - this morning in five concrete ways.

Water - is a powerful symbol. It flows through the story of the exodus - sometimes a gentle stream and other times a torrential downpour. It is a river, to drown newborn baby boys, it is a sea, parting in a gift of freedom, it is a sea, closing over the heads of the Egyptians. There is terrible thirst in an arid wilderness, there is water from a rock....

and on it goes. Water trickles, gushes and flows through this whole narrative.

This morning I want to look at each of the five women who conspired to save a baby and ultimately, a nation.

Shiprah, Puah, Jochabed, Miriam, and the Pharaoh's daughter. The Bible doesn't tell us her name, but the old rabbis call her Bityah. At story time Friday night, Ashley who is 10 and lives in Grande Prairie and joins us every night – Ashley is the one who gives names to the Bible characters who are nameless. Ashley says that the princess is called Sylvia.

Five women by whose brave and brilliant acts, the life of a Hebrew baby was saved.

The river that was meant to drown him, in fact floated him to safety, buoyed him up and into 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 people from slavery.

When, as the prophet Amos says, "justice will pour down like a mighty river" it will surely begin flowing in ways like these.

The first two we'll talk about together, because they acted together and worked in team, risking their lives for a newborn Hebrew baby.

READ TEXT Ex 1: 15-22

The water associated with Shiprah and Puah is the water of birthing.

Water and birth are closely related, as you know. 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 waters" - and as creation unfolds, the world is born out of those waters.

It's a very physical image...we begin life in the water of our mothers' bodies, and we know that birth is immanent 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? And of course, many believe that life on this planet evolved as sea creatures emerged from the waters and began to walk.

Nearly all creation stories involve water. It's fascinating to me that we speak of God as deliverer. In Hebrew scriptures, the classic delivery, or act of deliverance, is - the exodus. A passage from slavery to freedom, death to life, that leads through...water. In the Greek scriptures and in Christianity, THE act of deliverance is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, into which we enter through - baptism. Water.

We have traditionally prayed "deliver us from evil" - the word deliver is not only to give freedom but to give birth. Would that prayer feel different to you if you prayed it with that added nuance? Deliver us from evil....

ANYWAY....Shiprah and Puah were midwives. There is some debate about whether they were Hebrew themselves or midwives TO the Hebrews.....

and I like that ambiguity because it blurs the lines between us and them. We can't locate them on one side or the other - maybe that's the point? Was the author deliberately asking us to stop thinking in terms of their race?

Some traditions say they were mother and daughter. 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 daily with birth waters, would not be part of the waters of death.

They put their reputations, their careers and their lives on the line. AND ...they 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".

One of the things that people do, when they are oppressing or annihilating another group of people is to convince themselves that those people are different. Don't have the same feelings, hopes, dreams that you do. It's easier that way. Pharaoh was more than ready to believe them when they said

"the Hebrew women aren't like our women...they give birth before we can get to them"- it's brilliant. Using his prejudice against him, to save 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?

Listen to the next part now: - EX 2: 1-10

The water in Jochabed's part of the story is her tears.

She was pregnant with her third child. She gave birth to a beautiful son. At a time like that, there should be great joy...but for Jochabed, and for Amram her husband, it was overwhelming sorrow. Had that baby been a girl, he would be allowed to live. Can you imagine carrying a child the full 9 months, wondering as all parents do, whether it's a boy or a girl, but knowing that its 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.

Ah but no he will not.

Did they shout for the benefit of those waiting outside the birthing room "It's a girl!!"

Had this been the plan all along? Had Shiprah and Puah delivered her first two? Had they conspired ahead of time? We don't know. But in any case, the midwives helped Jochabed hide him, make a plan...she kept him for 3 months...loving him, protecting him, feeding and caring for him....and then, imagine... having to decide to let him go, to save his life....

How many women have done the same thing – given up a baby so that that baby could have and life that you could not give? Hardest thing a woman has to do. Bless her heart. And bless yours, if this is you too.

Jochabed's water is the water of her tears.

Her tears, though, did not lead to helplessness, or resignation, or paralysis,

Her tears were very much the waters of creation as well. They motivated her to wrestle her fear to the ground, conceive a plan to save his life. And as she placed him in that basket in the water, as she let him go so that he could live -

as she did that, her water broke again, and the tears flowed freely, and they brought to birth a plan. She would trust the maternal instincts of another woman, and save her baby's life.

Miriam's story is intimately connected with water as well. Waters of freedom. We see her here as a little girl, remarkably brave, keenly intelligent.

Ex 2: 1-10

How long did she stand in that water, waiting? She must have been tempted to run, or to wade to him and take him out again, especially when he cried.

Was she afraid? Was she covered in leeches as she emerged from the water? Fly bitten, there in the reeds?

And 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 there between life and death. It is Miriam who negotiates the terms of his survival.

She thinks quickly.....did she know that the princess came here to bathe? Had they scouted out the place ahead of time, and timed it so that he wouldn't be in the water long?

In any case, she offers a wet nurse - all wide eyed innocence - "hey I just happen to know someone who could nurse him for you"

and the story carries on.

Much later in this 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 the freedom God gives.

God's great deliverance

and as she did, she remembered the day that Moses was drawn from the water

and she sang louder and more sweetly as the truth washed over her

that she had had a great part in what happened to her people and what was still to come.

When she died in the wilderness, the people refused to go on until she was 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, she leads her people through the water, and her absence parallels the absence of water, source of life in the desert.

Pharaoh's daughter – Sylvia – remember?? had come to the river to bathe. And to swim. As she removed the restrictive clothing a princess had to wear, hot and cumbersome, she felt free. The water was refreshing, cleansing, and her muscles relaxed and she began to swim. Her motions were strong, 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.

We don't know why she took that baby out of the water and raised him as her own. She must have had, as royalty, all the material possessions she would ever want or need.

Why adopt this baby with all the risk such an act entailed?

Did she have no children of her own and did she long for a child?

or - was she a mother herself, acting out of maternal compassion for a baby so like her own?

Was she opposed in principle to her father's edict? Did she intervene to save other 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? Her family?

And do you think 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 woman who could act as wet nurse?

I can imagine the moment when they're all there together.

Miriam has brought her mom to the princess saying "here's a woman who can nurse your baby for you"

Picture them. This scene gives me goosebumps. Picture them! Miriam. Jochabed, The princess. Doubtless her servant women. I'm going to say Shiphrah and Puah were there too, just because I hope they were....I hope they got to see what happened to the baby they risked their lives to save. So there they all are.....

I believe that 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, religion, ethnicity education, 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 sisters, my life and the life of this baby depend on your silence. I place our lives in your hands"

and at that moment

that princess was in her actions as fluid and graceful as was her body in the water when she swam

and yet this time, the refreshing and cleansing and relaxing came FROM her

to a frightened sister and mother

and to her servant women with whom she bonded that day in a way they never had before.

THIS IS A GLIMPSE OF THE WORLD THAT GOD WANTS.

This is a spine tingling peek into what's possible

when we open ourselves to one another and to the holy work of life. Open ourselves to allies in the service of life. To stand up and not stand FOR having something happen to other people's babies that we would not want to happen to our own.

Five women. Shiprah and Puah the midwives. Jochabed the mother. Miriam the sister. Sylvia , the Egyptian princess. Each of them acted in ways for which they were uniquely placed. Only midwives could do what they did. Only Miriam could have done what she did. Only Sylvia could do her part because of who she was.

May you find your calling - the ways YOU can save and honour life, be an agent of freedom from your unique position in this world.

and may the waters of creation, freedom, courage, ethical action and grace

fill you and pour out to fill the world. Amen