

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, July 24, 2022
10am

Text: Exodus 1:8-22 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

Today's Scripture lesson is a tale of civil disobedience.

Civil disobedience is the choice to not obey a law, regulation, or authority that you consider unjust. It is a form of peaceful protest; if violence is involved, it stops being civil and becomes just plain disobedience.

Nonviolent protest of the government has existed as long as organized government has been around. But the term 'civil disobedience' was invented by the American writer Henry Thoreau. Thoreau lived in the 19th century and was a vocal abolitionist. He abhorred the federal government's tolerance of slavery in the American South. He was also troubled by the government's annexation of California and the Southwest from Mexico during the Mexican American War.

So, because he was a writer, Thoreau decided to write an essay: "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience."¹ In this essay he argued that the law is created by human beings, but our conscience – our inner sense of right and wrong – is created by God. And because our conscience comes from God, it is greater than the law. Sometimes the law will conflict with our inner sense of what is right and just. Thoreau believed that when that happens, we must protest the law by disobeying it, otherwise our silence makes us an accomplice to injustice.

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_Disobedience_\(Thoreau\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_Disobedience_(Thoreau))

I read Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience for a school assignment when I was a junior in high school. I remember only a little of the essay's contents, but I do remember how it made me feel. The only authorities I had ever willfully chosen to disobey were my parents. I grew up in a law-respecting household, and my dad had served in the military. So, the thought of disobeying the government was unfathomable. It made me deeply nervous.

I imagine our heroines in today's Scripture lesson also felt deeply nervous. Their names, Shiphrah and Puah, appear only once in the Bible, here in the first chapter of Exodus. But their decision to disobey Pharaoh has had a far-reaching legacy. The subtitle of our Faces of Our Faith worship series is "Bold and untold stories," and this story is one of the boldest and least told in the Bible.

Let's set the stage. Pharaoh has commanded that all newborn males born to the enslaved Hebrew race be smothered at birth. Egypt is the cultural and economic center of the Near East. Her famous granaries are not just a wise hedge against future famine; they are also a tool for controlling a growing and hungry population. Hunger is what brought Jacob and his sons to Egypt generations before, and though they were given land to build homes on and raise their families, the descendants of Jacob were always a lesser class of people in the eyes of the Egyptians. The memory of Jacob's son, Joseph, and what he did for Egypt in her time of need has faded. And so, when this Pharaoh looks upon the Hebrews, all he sees is a threat. The Hebrews outnumber the Egyptians. They are an exceptionally fertile people – the fulfillment of God's promise to their forefather Abraham in Genesis 15: "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them...So shall your descendants be" (v. 5). Pharaoh is concerned the Hebrews will rise up and overthrow the Egyptians. And so, he devises a plan to curb their fertility by enslaving them and working them so hard that they will be too tired to reproduce. But it doesn't work; the Hebrews keep having babies. So, Pharaoh resorts to a system of mass infanticide.

This story lies so deep in the past and is so removed from the reality of our modern American lives, that it can feel like just that – a story. But to Jews it is more than just a story. This story represents the very real peril their people have faced since time immemorial – the peril of extermination by the state. Pharaoh is not just a sadistic tyrant afraid of losing power. Pharaoh represents the power of the state to set up systems and policies that kill people. The order to murder the Hebrew baby boys was a government policy, no different than the Nazi's genocidal program less than a century ago, or the U.S. government's forced relocation of Native Americans the century before that.

Which is why Shiphrah and Puah's decision to disobey Pharaoh is more than an act of heroism. Their decision is an act of civil disobedience.

We know very little about these two women – how old they were, whether they had families of their own. Interpreters commonly assume they were Hebrews, too, but the Bible does not actually say. What we do know is why they chose to disobey Pharaoh. Our Scripture lesson says, "The midwives feared God" (v. 17).

This fear is not terror of the divine, although God's power can terrify us. In the Bible fear is another word for reverence – respect for the Creator, the Author of life. The midwives know that it is God, not Pharaoh, who holds ultimate power in the universe. It is God, not Pharaoh, that is the benchmark for authority and justice. And it is God, not Pharaoh, who grants the breath of life and decides when to take it away.

It is this fear of God that gives an otherwise powerless pair of women the power to resist Pharaoh. The midwives' fear of God makes them unafraid of Pharaoh. Quietly, but with great determination, they risk their own bodies to undermine Pharaoh's state-sanctioned murder. The power of life is surging through the Hebrew people, and Shiphrah and Puah use their bare hands to deliver that life into the world. What more defiant answer to death exists than brand new, stubborn, squalling life?

Our artist for this series, the Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity, chose to paint a picture of Shiphrah and Puah's hands, rather than imagine their faces. In her artist statement she wrote, "These hands represent the women's resistance...The impact of their actions, like the waters of the Nile, ripples out far beyond them."²

When Pharaoh asks the midwives why the Hebrew women continue to deliver baby boys, they just shrug and lie. *The women are too vigorous; they labor too fast.* Pharaoh decides to take his genocidal program to the next level. He enlists everyday Egyptians to spy on their Hebrew neighbors, and when they see a Hebrew baby boy, they are to take that baby and drown him in the Nile.

The fact that Pharaoh finds a way around Shiphrah and Puah's defiance does not mean that their resistance was in vain. They were midwives of hope to an otherwise hopeless people. And it is that same tenacious hope, that same spirit of defiance, that not long after inspires the mother of Moses to hide him from the authorities and set him adrift in a basket of reeds on the Nile. Hope preserved his life so that he could one day grow up and liberate his people from Pharaoh's whip.

I have not been called upon to risk my life and limb for justice the way Shiphrah and Puah risked theirs. But as I have grown in my understanding of the Gospel and what it means to follow Jesus Christ, I have been challenged by the witness of colleagues and laypeople who have used their bodies to protest unjust systems of power that hurt people. One colleague traveled to the U.S.-Mexico border and served communion to migrants through the border fence. Another laid down on an airport tarmac to protest exploitative labor laws. Many have stood in our churches and blessed the marriages of same-sex couples, knowing that they risked defrocking by a church court. They feared God more than they feared the government or even the Church (with a capital 'c'). And they loved their neighbor more than they loved their own security and comfort.

² Artist statement for "They Said No" by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity. A Sanctified Art, LLC. sanctifiedart.org.

Almost a decade after I read Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience, I found myself at an annual conference session where we were invited to spend an afternoon participating in an act of service. There were a few options, one of which was to take part in a public protest. Several weeks before, a Hispanic man had been killed by the police in the city where our conference was meeting. The community was upset and angry, and they were demanding an investigation into the killing. We were invited to join the local Spanish-speaking United Methodist congregation in marching to the street corner where the man was killed and silently blocking a lane of traffic in protest of the killing.

Thoreau's essay made me nervous. This protest made me even more nervous, though, I will add, it was legally registered with the local police department. Even so, I had never taken part in a protest before. But I felt the Spirit nudging me to participate. Which did I fear more: God's command to stand on the side of justice? Or my personal discomfort at protesting the government?

I chose to honor my fear of God that day. I stood on a street corner in one-hundred-thirteen-degree heat and silently prayed as the people around me held signs and cars drove by honking their horns. It was uncomfortable. But it was also incredibly holy.

I do not know what kind of impact that small act of protest made. But I do know that when we choose to follow Jesus, we will find ourselves at odds with the powers of this world, whether corporations or the government or even our own beloved Church. It is a matter of personal discernment, between the God we fear and the individual conscience He has given each one of us, when and how we choose to protest those powers. We might discern that we are called to make a bold action of civil disobedience like Shiphrah and Puah. Or we might discern that we are called to take a first step out of our comfort zone to stand as an ally alongside people who are suffering at the hands of unjust power. However we are called, may our actions as individuals and as a faith community sow seeds of hope in the world, and may those seeds bear full and abundant life for all people.

Amen.