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Forgotten Heroes | Exodus 1:8-21

I read one of those quotes that just stuck with me. Actually, I heard a speaker say, “When I open my Bible, God opens His mouth.” I love that. You want to hear God speak to you? Open your Bible. When I open my Bible, God opens His mouth. What a great thing. The Bible is God’s story. The Bible speaks *about* the book of life and the Bible *is* the book of life. The Bible is also filled with names, all kinds of names. A few of them we know well. They’re the heroes. You know, the wise Solomons, or King David, or Joseph, or Daniel, or Isaiah, or Paul, or Peter. The big names, the heroes. But hundreds of times more, there are names in the Bible that nobody ever hears of. Nobody ever remembers that Obed was the father of somebody, and somebody was the grandmother of what’s-her-face, and what’s-her-face . . . it’s all there. Generation after generation of names in the book of life, and what’s important is to know that your name, whatever your name is, from those babies we just baptized to each one of you, your name is already entered there. The key is, what will it say about you? What will the book of life say about you?

God knows every name. God knows the names that we never remember. Two of those names were new to me for a long, long time, and I have learned a little about their story, but I bet almost none of you know the names Shiphrah and Puah. Shiphrah and Puah. They aren’t in the top ten. They’re not even in the top 100, and yet God knows their story. They come at a crucial time in the story of God. God has raised up Joseph to be Pharaoh’s right hand man, saving Jacob and his children from a famine that came on the land, and for hundreds of years, Jacob’s descendants, the Israelites, are not only honored guests, they are key figures in the kingdom. But they never really become Egyptians. That’s when the story picks up.

⁶ Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, ⁷ but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them. ⁸ Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. ⁹ “Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. ¹⁰ Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.” ¹¹ So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. ¹² But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites ¹³ and worked them ruthlessly. ¹⁴ They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly. ¹⁵ The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, ¹⁶ “When you are

helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.”¹⁷ The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live.¹⁸ Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, “Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?”¹⁹ The midwives answered Pharaoh, “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.”²⁰ So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous.²¹ And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.
[Exodus 1:6-21]

Shiphrah and Puah. Who even knew their names? God. God knows every name. The prophet Micah wrote, “What does the Lord require of you? Has He not shown you? What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before your God?” Hundreds of years before the prophet Micah wrote that, Shiphrah and Puah were Micah people. They wanted to do justice. Like us, they lived in a broken world where little baby boys get shot on the north side by accident, where hundreds of thousands are killed in genocide, where millions flee for their lives, where race divides. A broken world; a war between good and evil. And, as Micah called them, the people of God will do justice. They are called to step in—given divine chances to show what justice looks like—whether that’s in Rwanda or whether that’s the boy across the street that you wonder, “Is that little boy being bullied?” You don’t know, but you just wonder. In its most direct Biblical formulation, justice is very simple. Justice can be described as setting things right. Things have gone wrong. Justice is not getting even. Things have been broken. Justice is not paving it over. It is setting things right. Cornell West was asked, “What is justice?” and West said, “Justice is what love looks like out in public.” I love that. Justice is what love looks like out in public. You could put that on a Hallmark card, couldn’t you? What you need is reality. Mother’s Day can be a Hallmark card moment, too, but what’s more natural on Mother’s Day than to talk about justice, because you’re talking about life?

Under the surface, the story of God in the Bible is loaded with women. The men get all the high lines—It was a patriarchal culture—but, right under the surface, there are women through and through doing justice. There’s Deborah, who becomes a female judge, inspiring cowardly male generals to get in the act. Rahab is not a prostitute with a golden heart, but she’s a woman who sees God’s judges coming into town and hides them from evil. Esther, Queen Esther, is too faithful to stop at being a runway model and saves her people. Jael sneaks into the tent to kill wicked Sisera, even as he sleeps. And then there’s Tamar and the slave girl with Amnon, and the Magnificat of Mary, and many, many, many other women in a man’s world, standing up for justice. And then there’s Shiphrah, and there’s Puah, and there’s you, and there’s me.

How does God bring justice to a broken planet? I believe that God’s justice can be brought in no particular order. I’m going to give you four things that happened. I don’t think they happened one, then two, then three, then four, but I think each of these four things happened. How is God’s justice brought? I think the first thing that happens

before justice can come is that somebody has to see it and say *that's wrong*. Somebody has to see it and say *that's wrong*.

In the film *Amazing Grace*, Wilberforce, who is trying to end slavery in Egypt, brings his distinguished friends to a party on a ship, sails them down the Thames, and anchors right next to a slave ship. His friends see it and smell it and feel it, and they want to get away. Wilberforce says, "You may not do anything, but you can never say now that you did not know." Somebody has to see it and say, "This is wrong." After they see it, like Shiphrah and Puah—when the Pharaoh says, "Kill all the babies"—they know it's wrong.

Then, I believe that justice comes when somebody prays. Exodus 1:17 says Shiphrah and Puah "feared God." They were in contact. They were in contact with the God of the universe, and the God of the universe was telling them *this is wrong*. In a book I'm going to talk about a little later, the author says, "If I'm interested in justice, what can I do besides pray?" The answer is always: There is quite a lot that you can do, but there is absolutely nothing that you can do without prayer that will last. It's important to remember that God can do God's work, whether we join God or not. God hears the cries of everyone suffering, whether we talk to God about it or not. God is with us and with them, whether we ask Him or not, but when we pray, we are choosing sides. You've seen it. When you pray, you're choosing sides. Justice can't come unless someone stands on God's side.

The third thing may sound self-evident: Justice comes when someone sees and prays and starts. When they do something small, like walking across the street and taking a look at that little boy, watching him throw the ball and wondering, *Are those bruises suspicious or are they about right?* When somebody sees what's happening and starts. Shiphrah and Puah take their lives into their hands and disobey the king by not killing the baby boys. They let the boys live. And when we start, we start small. Martin Luther King did not start out working for justice in a Birmingham jail. He started out small and ended up in a jail, because when you do justice, one thing will lead to another. You don't know where you'll end up. You just know the first step that you ought to take.

The fourth thing that I wrote down about God's justice being brought is that sooner or later, after you see it, pray about it, and start it, sooner or later you have to trust that God will do what you cannot. You have to trust that God will do what you cannot. Shiphrah and Puah's story is great, but that's because it's in the far past, and we know how that story ended. It says because they feared God, God blessed them and gave them children of their own. But then, the story will go on and get much darker. Things get far worse for Shiphrah and Puah and the other Israelites. They get far worse before justice comes. They get far, far worse before something miraculous happens. We see, we pray, we trust, and we start. Where are the Shiphrah and Puahs of 2016 on Mother's Day? I think they're sitting right here. I think the church is filled with people who are passionate about justice, with women who don't want to leave it alone.

Gary Haugen, the founder of International Justice Mission, is going to be here next

week. He's going to speak at Grace Church. The president of International Justice Mission, Sean Litton, is going to speak here and at six different churches in the Twin Cities. We're going to have a justice Sunday. It's going to be a powerful thing to hear how 35 million children in the world today are enslaved, what you can do about that, what God is already doing. We will together celebrate justice Sunday, and then next Sunday evening at Grace, we're going to have a concert that will talk about what God might want to do next. I say that all because Gary Haugen once said to a group of us, "What do you think God's plan is to rescue his broken creation? It's the church. The church is God's plan A, and God does not seem to have a plan B! It's the church."

Shiphrah and Puah are sitting right here. Today, Shiphrah's name sounds like Becky. It sounds like Becky Walker. Becky was a successful banker and in the course of her philanthropic work—you know, the thing that rich people do when they want to not feel guilty—in the course of that, she was exposed to children, suburban children, who are hidden in what looks like a wonderful place in the Twin Cities, and their lives were being wrecked because their families were disaster areas. She saw the plate of broken lives, so she left the banking industry and has spent the last ten years of her life leading TreeHouse, an organization that draws kids into safe environments. At TreeHouse, kids get unconditional love, an opportunity to learn from and support one another, and a fresh future. We saw the fruits of that labor this last Thursday night, listening to stories from Becky's team. What struck me most was that this last year, TreeHouse in the Twin Cities has touched 1,804 kids. Don't you love it that they know exactly how many kids there are? These kids are not a number to them; they are a name. And, just as God knows their name, when somebody else knows their name, justice can come. I love that they know how many have come through the door. Becky is moving from being the CEO of Treehouse to being the Chief Executive Grandma. Maybe a more important role. But thousands of children in the courts of heaven will praise God that she is Shiphrah.

I thought of another one. She's not a mom, but that's okay. You know, one of the things we have to watch out for on Mother's Day is that at least a third of us are single. Many are here and they wish they could be moms but they're not, or grandmas, or their kids have run away. But anyway, the other person I thought of, Puah, was named Dorothy Titt. Dorothy, a single woman, was in our congregation for decades. Now, if you ever call the church, a volunteer receptionist answers our phone between 9:00AM and 5:00PM. Friday afternoon was Dorothy's slot. Friday is my day off, but I would frequently call on Friday just to hear Dorothy answer the phone. She'd say, "Christ Presbyterian Church. Dorothy Titt speaking!" She'd say it that way, and since I have the maturity of a seventh-grader, I'd say, "Oh, say it again, Dorothy!" And then I talked to Jody (Phenow) about Dorothy and I found out that in her late eighties, in her late eighties, Dorothy Titt, the Spanish teacher, had begun teaching English as a second language to undocumented immigrants. In her late eighties, she started to give Spanish lessons—just enough—so that our group, who was going down to a border town in Mexico, could survive in those days. And the way that I got to know Dorothy the best was that she was one of the first volunteers for what we call Families Moving Forward. She said, "I'll take the part of the job that nobody else . . . I don't have a family. I can do this." And so she

would, every Thursday night, sleep overnight here. That was her service to these kids and their moms, who just desperately needed a good night's sleep. And one morning, about 6:15AM on a Friday, I walked into my office and I looked over, and there is 89-year-old Dorothy Titt asleep on my couch. It reminded me of Psalm 92. You know Psalm 92? It says this:

¹² The righteous will flourish like a palm tree,
they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon;
¹³ planted in the house of the LORD,
they will flourish in the courts of our God.
¹⁴ They will still bear fruit in old age,
they will stay fresh and green,
¹⁵ proclaiming, "The LORD is upright;
he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him."
[Psalm 92:12-15]

Dorothy "Puah" Titt worked for justice. You know, much of this sermon's theological content comes out of a book that I'd recommend to you. It's called *The Justice Calling*. *The Justice Calling*. Bethany Hoang is a member of the International Justice Mission that I talked about—one of Gary Haugen's protégées—but, for the last year, she has also been a member here at Christ Presbyterian Church. We gave her a place, an office, to write this book, which is a powerful idea of how you can learn about justice if you believe in God. She's going to be outside with that book. I would encourage you not to add it to your library—that means you buy it to say okay—but to read at least the first chapter, because then you will read the second. *The Justice Calling*. Gary started out by saying, "The church is God's plan A; God doesn't have a plan B." And Bethany picks that up and she says, "There are no God-forsaken places. There are only church-forsaken places, places where the children of God have yet to bring justice."

Let me give you, just in the last five minutes, something that I learned from this book. Because when I hear sermons like this, I tend to get inspired. I want to get in the game. I want to say, *There's got to be something a little more I can do. I want to be like Dorothy! I want to be like Becky! I want to be a hero for God.* And Bethany wrote about that. She says, "Don't we need heroes that can rush to the rescue? The hero provides the action that changes everything for the good. The hero is at the center of the story, and some combination of timing and strength and courage and wisdom changes everything for the good. Heroes are modest, but they often get credit for the rescue, because without the heroes' decisive action, this story does not end well." And then, what Bethany reminded me was our response to God's calling in Jesus Christ—His calling to justice, and truth, and power—will not ultimately make us heroes. No heroes here. Our calling is even better. We're not called to be heroes. We are called to be saints. That's a terrible word in our society, "Saints." It sounds holier-than-thou. Now, on the other hand, it's Mother's Day, right? How many of you have ever said, "My mom's a saint"? I am the eldest boy of four Irish Roman Catholic kids born in four-and-a-half years. My mother is a saint. Trust me. The scholar Samuel Wells notes that the word "hero" does not appear even one time in the New Testament, but the word "saint" is

there sixty-four times. Saints do not save the day. They don't provide the decisive action that changes everything for the good, because saints know that Jesus Christ has already gotten there first. The hero assumes that everything is left up to us and that it depends on us. Jesus came so that we wouldn't have to be the hero.

Saints are not the center of the justice story because God is the center of the justice story. God is ultimately responsible for the way that this story is going to end. So, as saints, whether we are Shiphrah, or Becky, or Puah, or Dorothy, or you, as saints, we don't just fight occasionally for truth and justice. By the grace of God, we *live* the way of truth, and justice, and righteousness. As saints, we don't need to rely on our own power, our own cleverness, our own strength, our own timing to save the day. We don't need to feel the weight of saving the world, because we already know the One who does save the world. We're not the ones who ultimately set things right. Thanks be to God. Jesus Christ is the one who has set, and is setting, and will set all things right, and saints, on Mother' Day, get to join Him. That happens through something special, something that we should do first, instead of just at the end.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.