

**“Shiphrah, Puah, and the Next Right Thing” Rev. Michele Ward**  
**Exodus 1:8-2:10 (NRSVUE) August 27, 2023 RCL Year A**  
**Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD**

The reading continues in the book of Exodus. Listen now for a word from God.

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him.

"This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said.

Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?"

Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother.

Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it.

When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son.

She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

**All: Thanks be to God.**

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**PRAYER**

*Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.*

*Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.*

*Break me, melt me, mold me, fill me.*

*Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.*

Imagine it. Stone on stone on stone, Pharaoh’s house rises into the heavens before you. It is utterly overwhelming for visitors. It’s supposed to be. After all, Pharaoh is a god and a king, the supreme ruler in a dynasty that stretches longer than anyone can remember without pulling old tablets out of storage. His palace is enormous because it should be, and because it can be; he’s had a whole community of enslaved people building for him.

The big house and dynastic power aside, Pharaoh has a fear. The Hebrew people are enslaved but their number is growing... Too quickly, in his opinion. He’s noticed their size, and so have the other Egyptians. They have come to dread the Israelites. What if they turn against Pharaoh? What if another enslaved group takes up arms or someone else invades? The Israelites might turn the tide of an uprising or a war and this long dynasty would fall.

Better to head the problem off before it starts... He summons two women, Shiphrah and Puah. They’re just who he needs to ease his worry about the Hebrew people, because they are their midwives.

He commands them: “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.”

In the translation of this story that we have this morning, Shiphrah and Puah are called *Hebrew midwives*. But the language carries

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enough ambiguity that it could instead mean that they are *midwives for the Hebrews*.<sup>1</sup> It may be that the reason they are called before Pharaoh is that they too are Egyptian. It is unlikely, I think, that Pharaoh would have demanded women to kill newborns who were part of their own community. They were Egyptian midwives for the Hebrews. And so when he spoke, he saw no need to worry about resistance. They would do as he said.

“Problem solved,” thinks the god-king.

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A few years ago, a movie hit the screen just in time to stream it during quarantine. It was a beautiful story about family, reconciliation, the danger of revisionist history, and reparations. In it, an unlikely group of leaders and friends set out to save their community from an existential threat. And along the way, every assumption they had about their home, their people, even themselves, is challenged.

I am, of course, talking about *Frozen II*.

If you missed it because it was 2020... because you don't watch Disney princess movies... or because after “Let It Go” was blasted through your speakers for 2 years, you banned the sequel during lockdown, I'll fill you in on one of the more poignant scenes and songs.

Elsa, a queen with magical ice and snow-related powers, has chosen to forge ahead alone to find out the truth about her family and a mist-shrouded magical forest. In an enchanted glacier full of memories (stay with me), she uncovers a messy and hard truth:

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<sup>1</sup>Website “Womanists Wading in the Word.” Shabbat Shemoth post by Wil Gafney.  
<https://www.wilgafney.com/2013/01/05/shabbat-shemoth/>

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that a past king in her family found a way to control and subjugate an indigenous people across the river. Just before she freezes in the glacier, she magically sends this information to Anna. Anna, her younger sister, receives the message, knows something has gone wrong, and assumes that her sister has died on her journey to find the truth and set things right.

She is overwhelmed. She is alone. Her world is shattered. She is a Disney Princess. So she begins to sing.

*Can there be a day beyond this night?/I don't know anymore what is true/I can't find my direction, I'm all alone/The only star that guided me was you/How to rise from the floor/When it's not you I'm rising for?/Just do the next right thing/Take a step, step again/It is all that I came to do/The next right thing<sup>2</sup>*

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Shiphrah and Puah’s work is to care for the life of mothers during pregnancy, labor, and early parenthood, and to usher new little lives into the world safely. Their world is shattered by Pharaoh’s demands. The trust they’ve built with a whole community is compromised. Evil and fear swell from the palace and the work they do to bring and save life is suddenly a dangerous and illegal task.

The next right thing? The next right thing is to lie to save the newborn boys.

And so they do. Instead of taking advantage of the mothers’ trust in them to carry out Pharaoh’s command, the midwives take

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<sup>2</sup>“The Next Right Thing” *Frozen 2*, Lyrics by Kristen Anderson-Lopez and Robert Lopez, Sung by Kristen Bell (Anna), 2019.

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advantage of Pharaoh’s fear and prejudice. He believes the Hebrew people to be giving birth too often and quickly, believes them to be nothing more than brute workers he can command. So when he sees all these small Hebrew baby boys in the city, he recalls the midwives, and rages: “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” Playing on his prejudice, the midwives tell him, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.”

The babies live. The mothers live. And somehow, the midwives live too.

But Pharaoh won’t be stopped because his first, more subtle stab at genocide failed. He decides that all baby boys will be thrown into the Nile. This heartbeat of Egypt, a place of life, will be a grave.

Around this time, a woman named Jochebed marries a man and has two children. Her name isn’t recorded in this story, but another story in Exodus and one in Numbers give it to us later on. Miriam is born first. Aaron is second – both before the new edict comes. But then she becomes pregnant a third time.

She is horrified. The midwives protect her life and her son’s life too. But she cannot bring him to the water. She hides him instead – I cannot imagine how. Keeping a newborn baby secret from neighbors who might talk, from Egyptian authorities who would take him without a second thought? Can you imagine the fear? The stress? Of keeping a newborn quiet in a crowded neighborhood?

But she looks at this child and in the face of that overwhelming task, chooses the next right thing: to save the child. She chooses to save him by hiding him. And when his tiny limbs sort out how to

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crawl and she can no longer hide him, she chooses to save him by following the letter of Pharaoh’s command but subverting its spirit. She makes a basket and lines it, and throws her son into the Nile. It is terrible. It is the next right thing.

Caught in currents, he drifts away down the river under the watchful eye of his older sister. The basket slows and Miriam hides in the reeds with it. His tiny basket floats into Pharaoh’s daughter’s bath.

She sees it and sends someone to bring it to her. She finds the child inside crying, and she takes pity on him, “This must be one of the Hebrews’ children,” she tells her attendants.

She knows. She knows full well why this baby is in the river. She knows who called for babies to be thrown there. She understands that a mother is trying to save her son by sending him down the river in a basket. And she chooses the next right thing. She defies her father, the god and king of her world. She draws Moses out of the water.

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This practice of doing the next right thing predates Frozen II. And Anna the non-magical princess is not alone in practicing it in this century. Emily P. Freeman, author and host of the book and podcast *The Next Right Thing*, says of making tough decisions: “I can’t allow any part of me to be passive when it comes to making decisions especially ones that may potentially involve confronting the way things have always been done and tearing down systems that run counter to the kingdom of God. I want to show up fully awake to my heartbreak and fully aware of the facts.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>“What Do We Need to Tear Down?” blogpost, Emily P. Freeman, <https://emilypfreeman.com/all-things-new/>

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Shiphrah, Puah, Jochebed, and Pharaoh’s daughter are all fully awake to the nightmare Pharaoh has concocted. All of these women face down death, face down Pharaoh. With each birth, each lullaby to calm Moses, each stitch in the basket, with each next right thing, they forge ahead and grasp onto life a little longer in the face of death and chaos. They cannot know it then, but with each next right thing, they set the stage for an uprising, for the liberation of Moses and all of his people.

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I have been called to my next right thing. I am excited, and I am tangled in the bittersweetness of transition and goodbyes. The next right thing involves a lot of office packing and farewell hugs. It carries with it changes to our relationship as we count down to my last day, and start the year-long period that the presbytery asks pastors not to keep in touch with members at their last church so that you can begin a new pastoral relationship with someone, and I can do the same with a new church.

You, beloved Brown Memorial, are being called to your next right thing too. Maybe even a number of next right things. Because this place is a church, and in 2023, change is coming to all churches that will live to see the next century.

It is easier, sitting in the soft light of stained glass, to tell ourselves that a church like this is not facing the same identity crisis other churches are facing. It is easier, at the corner of Park and Lafayette, deep in the city, to believe that a church like ours is ahead of our siblings when it comes to seeking economic and racial justice. It is easier to choose to not do a “next thing,” and assume the same

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things we’ve always done will sustain us into the future. It is easier not to show up fully awake and aware of the world’s grief, our own grief, our own shortcomings and challenges.

We may be afraid. We may be anxious. We may be uncertain how to act. We can be brave and afraid. We can be compassionate and anxious. We can be aware of our own prejudices and choose to subvert them. When we do show up fully awake, God meets us there. God gives us the conviction in our minds to steer us. God gives us the courage in our chests to fuel us. God gives us the compassion in our hearts to know when something needs to change.

As you work, may you have the conviction of Shiphrah and Puah.  
May you have the courage of Jochebed.  
May you have the compassion of Pharaoh’s daughter.  
May you do the next right thing. Amen.