

## Sermon: Life in the Midst of Death

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Aug. 27, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

J.R.R. Tolkien is one of the most creative and influential fantasy novel writers of the 20th century. In his monumental work “The Lord of the Rings”, Tolkien wrote, from the voice of Samwise Gamgee to Frodo Baggins, midway through the quest to destroy the One Ring: “It’s like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were. And sometimes you didn’t want to know the end....But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folks in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn’t. They kept going, because they were holding on to something. That there is some good in this world, and it’s worth fight for.”

Folks in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn’t. They kept going, because they were holding on to something. That’s how I understand heroes to be. They are ordinary individuals who find the strength to persevere, to endure, and to go on in spite of overwhelming challenges and impossible odds.

Brother and sister in Christ, for the next 10 weeks (including the present Sunday), I will be reflecting on the life of Moses, through a 10-parts sermon series on the book of Exodus. We will be looking closely at Moses, as a hero not born but made. A hero who delivered the people of Israel from the grasp of the Pharaoh, and led them through the wilderness to the Promised Land—a journey from being enslaved to be called the ‘people of God’.

Before we get to today’s Scripture story, focusing in on the birth of Moses, I would like to say a few words about the importance of a name. The Book of Exodus, is called in Hebrew Scripture the ‘shemoth’, literally means ‘names’. The Hebrew Scripture, or the Old Testament as we understand it, often uses the first significant word of a book as the name for the book.

For example, the Book of Genesis begins in Hebrew as *bə-rê-šît bā-rā ’ě-lō-hîm* or ‘in the beginning created God’ (the word order in Hebrew is slightly different than in English). The point is the Book of Genesis is thus

called *bə-rê-šît* in Hebrew, meaning ‘in the beginning’. We see the same convention in the Book of Exodus, which begins in Hebrew *wə-’êl-leh šə-mō-wt̄ bə-nê yîs-rā-’êl*, or ‘these are the names of the sons of Israel’. The word ‘*šə-mō-wt̄*’ or ‘names’ thus becoming the title of the book.

The point of this exercise is to highlight the importance of a name in the Old Testament. Names carry the continuing covenantal bond between God and Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob. Of Jacob’s household of 70, who entered into Egypt, 600 thousands strong exited the Kingdom. Some biblical scholar put this number much higher, at 2 million including women and children. However the number is calculated, names are important and vital part of the story.

So for today’s Scripture passage of Exodus 1:8 to 2:10, who were actually named? We know the most important name was *מֹשֶׁה* or Moses, which literally means ‘to be drawn out’, as the Pharaoh’s daughter explained in verse 10, with a climatic ending “*I drew him out of the water.*”

Interestingly, the infant’s mother and sister were not named here. We learn their names later as Jochebed and Miriam. Pharaoh’s daughter was not named either, neither was the Pharaoh. For all his cruelty and atrocity, his name did not matter to the author of Exodus, for he was destined to be forgotten in due time

The two midwives were named: they are Shiphrah and Puah. What we know of these two midwives are that they were not married and they were barren, thus having very little societal status. They worked to help other Hebrew women delivering their babies, where one imagine would be quite challenging given a high infant-mortality rate amongst an enslaved population.

Shiphrah and Puah were somewhat set apart from other Hebrew midwives, as they had direct access to the Pharaoh, and the Pharaoh seemed to have trusted them. But that access and that trust came at a steep price, because of a truly diabolical scheme hatched by the Pharaoh as he commanded in verse 16, “*When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live.*” How does one obey such an evil command? How does one even begin to process it?

Hannah Arendt, one of the most influential political philosophers of the twentieth century, who because of her Jewish background was forced to leave Germany in 1933. She coined the phrase ‘the banality of evil’

based upon her observation of the trial of Otto Adolf Eichmann, in Jerusalem after the war.

Eichmann was an officer in the Nazi SS, having obtained the rank of lieutenant colonel, who was put in charge of logistics. He participated and later organized the Final Solution to the Jewish Question—that is the deportation and subsequent extermination of the Jewish people at various concentration camps. During his trial, when shown a large volume of transport orders bearing his stamp of approval, Eichmann showing no emotion nor regret, simply quipped that he was simply following orders from the top, in fact he was following the law.

This is what Arendt had to say about Eichmann, “Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all... He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing...It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.”

The banality of evil, in such a case, is simply the thoughtlessness in obeying an order, with no regard to its consequence, or the potential loss of human lives. In the case of Eichmann, this is what evil looks like... [stamping on transport orders, page after page]

Coming back to the Scripture, the two midwives Shiphrah and Puah certainly would have none of that. Let’s be clear, they were in position to carry out Pharaoh’s order, without raising much suspicion. In fact, disobeying such an order might cause them great deal of harm in the hand of the Pharaoh. His words were, at that time, law.

But Shiphrah and Puah were following a higher moral law, God’s law. They knew killing was wrong, killing barely born infants boys in such a scale was just wrong, wrong, wrong. So they devised a clever scheme in their disobedience—just don’t do it.

When asked why they had not follow the Pharaoh’s order, the two midwives replied, in verse 19, “*Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.*” Pretty clever, isn’t it? They used the Egyptians’ own fear and narrow-minded prejudice of the Hebrew people, and threw it back at the Pharaoh.

Now, let’s be clear, their defiance did not stop the Pharaoh, for he later ordered that all Hebrew boys to be thrown into the Nile. Evil person having absolute power is not so easily stopped, just look at what Putin is

doing in Russia and Ukraine. Nevertheless, God dealt well with the two midwives, with Shiphrah and Puah. Because they fear God, and they were willing to do the right thing, to stand their ground in their own station of life, God rewarded them and gave them families.

They played but a minor part in the overall story of Moses. Other women in this story also played their parts—the sister and mother of Moses, the Pharaoh's daughter, they all played their parts. They all chose to protect life in the midst of death. They all chose hope in the midst of suffering. They all chose God in the midst of chaos. These women of Exodus may not have understood the end result of their actions, for they could not have seen that far down. For their efforts to protect and preserve the life of infant Moses, who would later become the deliverer of Israel, these five women were the first ordinary heroes, folks who became the instruments of God to accomplish the will of God.

The lesson for us today is simple—to know God, to fear God, and to obey the Lord God. Theologians talk about the concept of the 'original sin', where Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the fruit, not just a simple apple, but the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. Yes, we are all paying the price of that disobedience, for thus sin entered into humanity and immortality was taken from us.

But, this is a big but, the benefit of that disobedience often is overlooked—we are now in possession, that is all of us, the knowledge of good and evil. Call it conscience, morality, or inner voice, God has put in all of us the ability to discern right from wrong.

But it is not enough, for sin corrupts that inner voice. When left unchecked, that corruption will only lead us astray until our conscience becomes unrecognizable, bent all out of shape. This is where to know God becomes vital. The more we read the words of God in the Bible, the more we hear the words of God proclaimed through Scripture reading and sermon reflection, the sharper we become to be able to tell right from wrong. To know God is to fear God—not being afraid, but having a healthy respect and reverence to the Lord.

We may not have to face the same level of challenge like Shiphrah and Puah. But should we be put to the test in our own stations in life, knowing God and fearing the Lord will help us to make the right choice, big or small. May the Lord God guide us and strengthen us.

**In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**