

The Little Ones: Protecting The Vulnerable

Rev. Kirby Lawrence Hill

Exodus 1:8-22
Matthew 2:1-12

Last week, I began a sermon series called The Little Ones, that began with a look at the special gifts that children offer us. Today, we begin a look at their special needs and what a faithful response to those needs entails. We do so through two similar stories: one of which is fairly unfamiliar, telling of two courageous women; the other being a very familiar story we generally hear at a different time of year that tells about three or more wise men. Both stories are prologues to mighty acts of God.

First, the story of Shiphrah and Puah. They are important enough to be named in scripture. Repeat their names after me so you'll remember them. Shiphrah; Puah. You may remember that at the end of the book of Genesis, Jacob and his family have gone to Egypt because of a famine in Canaan. Jacob's son, Joseph had reached a high government position overseeing the storage and distribution of food for Egypt. Jacob's descendants, called Hebrews or Israelites stayed in Egypt, growing in number, and after some generations had passed, the new Egyptian leadership did not know the history of their positive relationship. The king was worried at the growing number of Hebrew people in his midst, frightened that they might align with foreign rivals and become a challenge to his power. So he enslaved them and forced them to build cities for his kingdom and work in the fields. But even as they were oppressed, the Hebrew people continued to multiply, which resulted in Pharaoh's ongoing sense of feeling threatened.

So he came up with a plan that he must have thought was ingenious. He ordered Shiphrah and Puah, two lowly women who served as Hebrew midwives to come into his royal presence. When they arrived, he told them they were to alter their practice as midwives so that rather than being agents of joyous deliveries, they were commanded to become grim reapers. According to his plan, whenever a Hebrew boy was born, the midwives surreptitiously were to make sure the baby would not survive. For Pharaoh viewed the males as potential warriors and therefore, a greater threat to his throne than females. The plan was shrewd because it had the potential of turning the Hebrews against themselves through striking at them at a point where the life of individuals and the community were most vulnerable. Pharaoh may well have been the most powerful person on the planet at that time, so for things to happen, all he generally had to do was say the word.

Being in the presence of such a powerful person had to be intimidating, but Shiphrah and Puah were in greater awe of God than of Pharaoh. They knew that God loved and cared for each one of those infants they were delivering. They had dedicated themselves to bringing children into the world in full health. So, with courageous faith, they put their lives on the line by disobeying Pharaoh's orders. They continued to do everything in their power to deliver healthy Hebrew boys and girls.

Each successful delivery was a deliverance from Pharaoh's deadly plan. The Egyptian king eventually realized there was no increase in the prevalence of funerals for Hebrew babies, so he summoned Shiphrah and Puah, asking them why they were allowing the boys to live. Rather than

giving in to his pressure however, they replied with a brash humor which evidently defused the tense situation and allowed them to stand firm in denying to carry out his order. The most powerful person in the world saw faith in these two women that was more powerful still. Pharaoh must have had either an admiration for their spunk or for the strength of their convictions, for he did not repeat his command to them or have them put to death.

Now we turn to the somewhat similar story which comes to us from the Gospel of Matthew where we hear of people searching for a special child. Magi or wise men from the east had seen an unusual star which indicated to them the arrival of one who would become known as the King of the Jews. They brought three gifts to honor the royal birth, so it is frequently assumed there were three magi. Scripture does not give their names, but tradition has: Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. When King Herod heard of their search for the newborn King of the Jews, he was frightened and came up with a plan to kill the baby. He was ready to have his soldiers search for the child, but instead he brought the magi into his court and sent them to Bethlehem to find the child for him. Herod told them to come back and tell him where to find the child so that he too could pay homage to him. Herod, like Pharaoh before him, had a sole intent on securing his ongoing authority, no matter what means were necessary to do so. However, the Magi were warned in a dream not to return to Herod as he had commanded and they made their trip home by another route.

Two groups: women and men, disobeying kings in order to obey God, protecting the vulnerable. They took risks on behalf of the infants even though they were not parents or relatives of the children in peril. They were not even leaders in those particular communities. But God used their courage and wisdom to protect the children who were at great risk. In both cases, someone else was involved in finishing the job of deliverance. Shiphrah and Puah's story immediately precedes the narrative describing the birth of Moses and the actions of his mother and sister to save him. For Jesus to be safe, Joseph had to flee to Egypt with Mary and the child. But God used each group, whether from lowly stations or the educated elite to fulfill the divine purpose.

Through the courageous actions of the midwives, began the story of liberation of a people, where God would take on the role of midwife in the birth of the Jewish nation. Through the discerning actions of the magi, the possibility of God's saving work through Jesus Christ was preserved. The greatest stories of liberation and salvation ever told both begin with concrete and faithful actions to protect vulnerable children.

I am still trying to fathom the significance of the reality that God became human, not as an adult, but as a vulnerable infant. Some of the ancient birth narratives that tell of extraordinary people describe the newborns as miraculously being able to speak, but according to Matthew, the baby Jesus is not the one who warns the magi about Herod's intentions. There was a first century Jewish document (The Lives of the Prophets) which describes the infant Elijah as being able to eat flames of fire. But the infant Jesus in scripture is portrayed simply as an infant who couldn't care for or protect himself. God became that vulnerable in the incarnation.

You and I don't live under the authority of kings. Yet, those of us who are citizens of the United States have an ability to work to protect vulnerable children both in our country and around the world. There are policies of governments which are fashioned out of a desire to maintain power

and seek to deal with adult problems in ways which are destructive of children. Limits on access to prenatal care increases infant mortality rates well beyond what they should be with the medical technology available. Government embargoes of food and drugs in an effort to pressure certain countries to make political change have led to unnecessary deaths of vulnerable children. There is enough food in the world where malnourishment and starvation don't need to happen, but they do because of power structures that are more committed to themselves than to the well-being of children.

Consider for a moment Christ's Golden Rule: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." I am thankful that I was offered protection from danger when I was an infant. Jesus must have felt the same gratitude and his story reminds us to "do to others" in response. God can use whatever gifts we have to carry out that Godly priority. Can you and I live out our faith in courageous and wise ways following the examples of midwives and magi? In times past, when people of faith committed their gifts and efforts to protecting the vulnerable, it was the beginning of divine deliverance for many. When we commit our lives to protecting the vulnerable, who knows what will happen? The next great liberating, saving work of God just may be on its way. Thanks be unto God.

Amen.

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