

CALLED TO COURAGE

Mother's Day/Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday
May 9, 2010

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Exodus 1:15 – 2:10

First Presbyterian Church
Uvalde, TX

This is a special day for many of us. Today—if you didn't realize—is Mother's Day. This is a day which I—the mother of three wonderful children—along with many other mother's celebrate the joys of being a mother.

This is also “Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday in the church—a Sunday to recognize ALL women—not just mothers. I want to share with you a story today of some courageous women from the Bible.

While not all the women here today are mothers, we are all daughters. The stories I want to tell you about are stories of some defiant daughters that had a lasting effect upon all of us here today—men and women.

There are five women, along with many other daughters, who were leaders of the faith—our faith, whose actions for life ensured the continuation of the 12 tribes of Israel and the continuation of our faith.

Do you remember this story about Moses as an infant floating down the river in a basket? His mother, a Levite woman made a basket, set Moses in it, and placed him in the river to save her baby boy from a wicked decree of the Pharaoh.

The story of Moses and the courageous women I want to talk about began back in Egypt when the Hebrew people were enslaved under the control of Pharaoh. The Hebrew women were very prolific and verse 12 tells us that the more the Hebrew people were oppressed, the more they multiplied!

Pharaoh was afraid the Hebrews would become too numerous and powerful and try to overtake Egypt. So—the Pharaoh sent for Shiphrah and Puah, two Egyptians who were midwives to the Hebrew women. He told them that when the Hebrew women came to them to birth their babies, if it is a girl—you may let her live—but if it is a boy, you must kill him.

Well—Shiphrah and Puah were strong women, and women of strong faith. They did not listen to their king. They listened to God and to their hearts, and did not kill Moses or the other baby boys being born.

This is where women's role in the liberation from Egyptian bondage begins. Shiphrah and Puah were not leaders in their country. They definitely were not influential in their society. Yet—God used these two women in a very important way. Shiphrah and Puah had the courage and the vision *not* to do as their king commanded them. This story is the first and the last time we ever hear these women's names mentioned in the Bible. However, without these women's vision, God would have to find another way for Moses to be born.

Well---we know Moses was born. Moses was born to the Levite woman named Jochebed. She was also a very courageous woman. After giving birth to Moses, *she* defied Pharaoh and hid him for three months, protecting him from the Pharaoh—nurturing and loving him. Then, when Moses grew too big to hide any more, she made a basket or an ark for her son. She placed him in the ark and set him among the reeds on the banks of the Nile.

The word used in this text for the basket is used only one other time in the whole of the Old Testament. The other place this particular word is used is to describe the ark that Noah built to survive the flood. This type of ark is a rudderless boat. Rudders are what give boats direction in the currents. Baby Moses' ark, just like Noah's would have no other guidance or direction tool other than God. Just as God brought Noah through the deathly waters of the great flood, God will bring Moses through the watery death of the Nile.

At this point in the story we are introduced to two more courageous women—Miriam and the Pharaoh's daughter. Miriam is the big sister of Moses. The text doesn't tell us her mother told her to keep an eye of her little brother and his basket, but that is exactly what Miriam does. She stands at a distance and keeps an eye on her baby brother afloat on the water.

As she is edging her way along the bank, trying not to be seen, I imagine the sun was warm on her face and shoulders. There was probably a gently breeze and bird flying over the trees. Most likely, there were insects crawling on the ground, maybe biting her sandaled or bare feet.

Suddenly, Miriam hears laughter and chatter. Then, she hears water splashing. She inches a little closer so she can see. Miriam recognizes the woman—it is the Pharaoh's daughter—and she has sent her handmaiden into the river to fetch the basket—the basket with her baby brother!

By this time, Miriam had inched her way down the river close enough that she was to the spot where the Pharaoh's daughter was bathing. What I imagine Miriam saw next—just before stepping out into plain view, was the compassion on the Pharaoh's daughter's face and the tenderness with which she is comforting Moses after her handmaiden had brought him to her.

Then—choosing just the right moment—courageous and clever Miriam steps out of the reeds and addresses the Pharaoh's daughter. "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" Miriam asks her. "What a wonderful idea!" exclaimed the Pharaoh's daughter. Can't you guess which Hebrew woman Miriam had in mind? And off runs Miriam to tell her mother the good news.

Miriam, the oft times forgotten prophet of the Old Testament was the courageous woman who established a temporary sisterhood between herself and the Pharaoh's daughter—between the world of the powerful Egyptians and the world of the oppressed Hebrew people. Miriam's act was the one that made all the connections between the two women that would make it possible for Moses to live. Moses needed both women—he need two mothers—his natural mother to nurse him, and his adopted mother, the Pharaoh's daughter to raise him in a manner that would make him into a great leader of a nation and of a people.

I believe it was no casual circumstance that God used Miriam in this special way, or the Pharaoh's daughter, or Shiphrah or Puah either. Just like Shiphrah and Puah, Miriam had no power or influence in life. In fact, she may have had *less* power than the two midwives. She was a Hebrew, to start out with, she was a child—in *our* current understanding of childhood, anyway, and she was a slave to the Egyptian people.

Female, Hebrew, a child, and a slave—Miriam didn't have much going for her in the power category, but she did have courage. She had the courage to step out of those reeds along the riverbed at just the right moment and set up a sisterhood that would be meaningful to all of human history.

I also don't believe it was just casual circumstance that I was called to First Presbyterian Church to serve as your pastor, or that you are sitting her today worshipping God. I believe that God has a plan for all of us, and we are led sometimes to do things and go places we never dreamed of before.

Shiphrah, Puah, Jochebed, the daughter of Pharaoh, and Miriam all took chances and risks. They defied oppression, affirmed life, and they acted wisely and resourcefully in dangerous situations and threatening circumstances.

For these women, and for us today as a church as a Christian congregation, it is many times about acting wisely and resourcefully. It is about taking risks. You all took a risk when you called me to be your pastor. A lady pastor, some of you must've said! Well, God has a funny way of doing things sometimes, doesn't he? I would just like to tell you that I think you are courageous.

I believe it is through that courage that each of us has deep within us that we are called to make important connections, as Miriam did, in our lives. Whom can you make a connection with that is maybe just waiting for you ask them to come to church?

I encourage you to keep on having courage. Be risk takers. Stand up to oppression, affirm life, and when you find yourselves in threatening or dangerous situations, be mothers to each other—nurturing each other, caring for each other, and feeding each other with the love of God, with the grace of Jesus Christ, and with the power of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.