

**“Where Would We Be Without Women?”**

**Exodus 1:8—2:10**

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As some of you know, I lived most of my first six years with my mother and/or my grandparents. My parents separated before I was born and divorced before I was one. So, my mother had a lot to do with my development, as did my grandparents, and an African-American woman named Sis who helped our family.

The latter reality, explored by the novel and film *The Help*, was part of American history that can be viewed in different ways. I have no desire to glorify it, but I was very close to Sis. I made the mistake of saying her slave was even better than my grandmothers', which was saying something, but saying something I should not have said.

I don't know what I would have done if it had not been for the women in my life. The men weren't all “no-count,” but the women did most of the things that mattered, beginning with getting me into this world. And it wasn't just that they were nurturing while the men worked to provide for the family. My grandmother owned a cosmetic store, and my mother was an English literature professor. Most of my teachers, beginning with Miss Mattie Lou in kindergarten in Lincoln, were women too. What would I have done without the women in my life?

The same question can be asked of Moses, and the answer is that, without the women, Moses would not have lived to see his first birthday. As we begin our reading from Exodus, it is noted that the Pharaoh who elevated Joseph to high status is no longer around. We don't know that the current Pharaoh is his successor. We only know he is a later Pharaoh, and one who does not share the previous Pharaoh's fondness for Joseph's people. “Look,” he says, “the Israelite people are more numerous and powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.”

He decides to impose forced labor on them, a kind of slavery, and has them do the hardest work, building supply cities, Pithom and Rameses. Like many tyrants, especially those who need to cover their weakness, he acts like a bully and tries to beat these people he fears into submission. It goes against all customs of this time.

The valid basis for slavery is working to pay off debt, which these people have done, or being born into slavery, which they have not been. But like many bullies, Pharaoh has no respect for the law or tradition. He is the king! But his strategy doesn't work. The Israelites continue to grow in numbers and strength, as does Pharaoh's fear and bluster.

So, he tries a different approach. He has the Hebrew midwives brought to him. Their names are Shiphrah, "the fair", and Puah, "the maiden", though a Ugaritic cognate of the latter refers to making a sound that pacifies a crying infant, an apt name for a midwife. He tells them to kill the Hebrew boys and let the girls live. It is a vicious plan, an escalation of hatred which evokes images of the Holocaust, but Pharaoh does not know who he is dealing with here.

He assumes he can tell these lowly Hebrew *women* what to do, but they are midwives, for goodness sakes! Anyone who has seen a single episode of "Call the Midwife" knows how sturdy a constitution midwives have to have, what chaos they navigate all the time! These women are courageous, they fight for life, and the text says they fear God. They will not kill any children.

To be clear, they are risking their lives by defying this tyrant. It's like crossing Vladimir Putin. But Shiphrah and Puah fear God more than they fear Pharaoh, and they have principles they will not compromise even to save their own skin.

When Pharaoh finds out that the Hebrew boys are still living, he calls the midwives in again and demands to know why they have not followed his orders. But they are as savvy as they are courageous. They say the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, they give birth quickly, before the midwives can get there. Apparently, Pharaoh believes them, and God rewards these faithful women with families. But Pharaoh simply ups his rage and demands from his people that they throw any Hebrew boys into the Nile.

At this point, the story fast forwards to the birth of a boy to two Levites. He is healthy. So, the mother hides him for three months and then puts in him a basket made of papyrus and plastered with bitumen and pitch, somewhat like the ark. As humankind is saved from the flood, this child will be saved from Pharaoh. The mother places the boy in his basket among the reeds at the bank of the river. Technically, we might say she obeys Pharaoh by throwing him into the Nile, or at least placing him near it. The boy's sister (presumably Miriam) is standing nearby, watching to see what happens.

By chance, Providence, or astute planning, Pharaoh's daughter comes down to bathe in the river and sees the baby. She has her maid bring him to her, he is crying, and she takes pity on him. She realizes he must be one of the Hebrew children her father has condemned to die, but she too will defy his wishes, just like the Hebrew midwives.

Miriam just happens to be standing there and offers to find a Hebrew woman to nurse the boy. Pharaoh's daughter agrees, Miriam returns with the boy's mother, and Pharaoh's daughter raises him as her own. She names him Moses, which in Hebrew means, "to draw out." She has drawn him out of the water. But the name is also related to an Egyptian word – *meses/mosis* - which means "is born of" and is part of some Pharaohs' names, like Ra-meses, Rameses. He doesn't become a Pharaoh, but he does confront one, and he leads his people to freedom.

The women in this part of the story are just as courageous, savvy, and faithful as the women in the first part. Moses's mother and sister take many risks. Pharaoh's daughter demonstrates compassion, nobility, and a willingness to think for herself. In this story, as in other parts of the Bible, it's all about the women.

It's not that the men are all horrible, though they don't look very good. Pharaoh is cruel and cowardly. He acts out of fear and with no moral character. Moses will kill a man in anger before fulfilling his calling. By contrast, the women shine, and Moses would not live to accomplish anything without them.

Like me, and like Moses, most of you can wonder, "Where would we be without women?" It's not that all women are perfect. Even

mothers can have faults. Nor is it that men contribute nothing. There was a wonderful story in the news this week about a cook named Kevin Ford at a Burger King at the Las Vegas Airport who has worked twenty straight years without taking a sick day. He is devoted to his work and to his daughters whom he raised after he and his wife divorced.

For twenty years of faithful work, Ford received a goody bag. He posted this on TikTok, but the response was one of outrage at how inadequate the recognition was. One of his daughters started a GoFundMe campaign, hoping to raise \$100 to help him get a plane ticket to visit his grandchildren. So far, over \$400,000 has come in from people saying Kevin reminds them of a father, brother, or friend.

There are good men in the world, and we need all men and women, all people, to make for a better world. But women are often at the top of the list of influences for most of us. Who do most athletes, entertainers, and leaders of various kinds usually thank after a great accomplishment? Sometimes it is dad, but most of the time it is . . . “my mother.”

Women are also central to the life of the church. As women play a key role in enabling Moses to live to adulthood, women are central to Jesus’ life and ministry. Mary brings him into the world and raises him with Joseph. Women are among his followers, women listen to his teachings, women remain at the cross, women are the first to find the empty tomb. And women play key roles in the early church as teachers, deacons, church planters, preachers.

This is the case in the biblical period. So, how is it that the church of the twenty-first century doesn’t seem to know this? We may celebrate the brilliance of post-modernity with our ability to fly to the moon and beyond, not to mention having indoor plumbing, but when it comes to our view of women, we’re still catching up with the first century!

Baptists like to point to the Catholic church because women still cannot serve as priests. There was a joke going around among the more progressive priests who taught at Notre Dame University in the early 1990s. Pope John Paul II, who was Polish, had an encounter with God. As they were walking, the Pope wondered if he might ask God some questions. God said, “Sure.” So, the Pope asked, “Will there ever be married priests?” God replied, “Not as long as you are Pope.” The Pope

then asked, “Will there ever be female priests?” God replied, “Not as long as you are Pope.” Finally, the Pope asked, “Will there ever be another Polish Pope?” to which God replied, “Not as long as I am God!” It was not an ethnic slur. It was an indictment of backward thinking.

Yet not only Catholics are guilty of it. The Southern Baptist Convention has been kicking out churches with female pastors. Thank God we left that structure long ago! Yet even among CBF churches, how many female pastors are there? And how do churches treat female ministers? We have studies that document the unpleasant answer.

During the takeover of the SBC, pastors of churches leading the way and closing the door to women in leadership acknowledged that women did most of the work in their churches. Visit the sick, teach the children, help the poor, model the way of Jesus, but don’t preach? Stay in your place? The Shiphrahs and Puahs of our time deserve better!

We might note a similar tension in our culture. We look down on other nations for not being as open as us. Muslim nations especially are ridiculed for their view of women. But how many of these nations have had female heads-of-state (Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain, Golda Meir in Israel, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Angela Merkel in Germany) while we have not? Women do so much to make every aspect of our society work, from industry to government, from academia to the non-profit sector, but how many of them rise to key leadership roles, and how many of those who do are recognized appropriately?

Some men feel slighted when women are lifted up, but losing privileged status is not oppression. There are many wonderful men in this world who are needed as much as women. But when it comes to recognition, it’s a bit like the Black Lives Matter dilemma. Some kind people insist we should say, “All lives matter.” And they do. But, as my friend and church historian, Andrew Manis, has noted, the value of white lives has not been in question. There is no need for a museum to honor the white people who have been lynched because they were white. In like manner, all people are of infinite value. But the value of men has not been questioned like the value of women. We question their value, but where would we be without them? Moses could tell us.