

Child Care
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People have been talking a lot about monuments lately, and what they mean. Who gets commemorated and why? In general, it's fair to say that the people with power and money get the statues. That does not necessarily win them eternal fame and adoration, though. Earlier this year, segments of an enormous statue of a pharaoh, including the massive head, were pulled from the mud of a Cairo slum by archeologists. Originally, it stood about 30 feet high. Solid stone. At first the archeologists thought it depicted Ramses II (who was made famous by Yul Brynner in *The 10 Commandments*) but then they found an inscription that indicates another identity: Psamtik I. Both of these men were powerful rulers, monument builders, able to commission these extraordinary statues, so that no one would ever forget them. So what can you tell me about Psamtik I, aside from his name? Only that he had a colossal ego, and that his statue has been lying in the mud for centuries.

A different kind of story is told in our Scripture readings. No statues, no name for the pharaoh. He has a part to play, but the narrative is really carried by six women: two midwives, a mother, a sister, a princess and a maid. They passed through Egypt's history without a ripple, but they changed the course of our faith story. Behind the scenes, under the cover of "women's work," they challenged the power of an empire.

Shiphrah and Puah. At least we know two of the names - unusual for a literature that often names women only in relationship to male family members. Shiphrah and Puah were in the business of helping babies to be born. Some Jewish commentators say that they were Hebrews themselves, others say that they were Egyptians, assigned to work among the Hebrews as midwives. But in the book of Exodus: there is a question to be answered, more important than which ethnic identity you claim. It is: whom do you serve? Whom do you fear? Who claims your allegiance? This defines a person, and all their actions flow from this definition. These questions form the future.

We don't always like, these days, to hear words like so and so "feared God": it's language that feels politically incorrect. We'd rather say, they loved God, or they were devoted to God. But I think of fear in this sense of implying awe of the unknown coming very close to us: a healthy respect and honor for a power that makes demands on our lives. As I said, this experience of awe defines us and compels us.

We know that the Egyptians, personified by their pharaoh, feared the growing population of Hebrews. Joseph, a former Pharaoh's right hand man, had been forgotten over the 10 or so generations since the end of the Genesis story. From being honored visitors the Hebrews had descended to being a sub-class of forced laborers. Fear motivated this Egyptian policy. The trouble with this approach is that it doesn't lead to easy solutions: it just leads to more fear, harsher treatment, and in this case, genocide. Pharaoh orders that all Hebrew baby boys be killed before they can draw their first breath. Of course, midwives are the logical people to carry out this order. Or so Pharaoh thinks.

Pharaoh had not bothered to research the interior identity of these women. He had not asked the key question: whom do you serve? Whom do you fear? Maybe he assumed that he already knew the answer: they feared the almighty Pharaoh, the one who can commission enormous statues. “But,” we are told, “the midwives feared God; they did **not** do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.”

Of course they had to come up with an alibi, and this is a classic example of ancient humor: civil disobedience as humor. Contrasting Egyptian and Hebrew women, they tell Pharaoh that unlike his delicate wives, Hebrew women are as strong as animals, so strong that they push those babies out before the helpers can get there. Really? The blatant lie seems designed to cater to Pharaoh’s prejudices, to tell him the kind of thing he likes to hear, especially if you think delicacy is a sign of superiority. God rewards these uncooperative midwives. It says “And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.” In other words, God gave them a future.

Turns out that it is the girls, the worthless females, that Pharaoh **should** fear, because they are too clever for him. And the subterfuge continues. A woman, unnamed, gives birth to a boy. She sees that he is a fine baby – actually, the text uses the same word that is found in the creation story, when God sees each stage of creation as good. So she cheats Pharaoh and hides this good baby, this fine boy, first in her home and then in Pharaoh’s own river: the very place that Hebrew boys were supposed to be drowned. And another female, the baby’s older sister, goes to watch over the baby in the basket.

This feminine conspiracy of compassion even extends to Pharaoh’s own household. His daughter sees the basket; her maid fishes it out of the Nile. Right away the princess knows that this is a Hebrew child. She does not serve or fear Pharaoh; the baby’s tears lead her another way. She takes pity on him. Another bit of Old Testament humor here: the baby’s sister asks if she can help out with a referral for childcare. Pharaoh’s daughter arranges for the baby’s survival within his biological family, while adopting him as her own son. She is special, because she saves one who will be a savior himself. She gives him an Egyptian name: Moses, meaning “child.” All of these women care for this child. And God gives Moses and his people a future.

Shiprah, Puah, Moses’ mother, Moses’ sister, Pharaoh’s daughter and her maid: six women who engage in civil disobedience, driven by an ethical framework which is driven by allegiance to God. They stood up to oppression and allowed compassion to intervene. So, I wonder, whose child is Moses? Is he the child of those midwives who sparked a resistance movement? Is he the child of a woman who saw the goodness in a newborn’s face? Is he the child of a girl who watched by the banks of the murderous Nile? Is he the child of a privileged woman who stooped and recognized the baby as a slave and a foreigner? Is he the child of the maid who waded into waters of death and drew out life? I think the answer is “yes.” Moses belonged to all of them and so he belonged to God. He was born out of that feminine compassion and resistance, and he was a resister for the rest of his life. The Egyptian Pharaoh made statues and idols; the women made a future of freedom. The women made a future that we inherit, when we live as they did, listening to a compassionate God.

Speaking of children and child care, today we also heard an interesting New Testament dialogue: “Who do you say that the Son of Man is?” asks Jesus. Peter gives the correct answer: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Whose child is Jesus? He is the child of humanity and the child of heaven. Birthed by a woman of scandal, saved from a egomaniacal king, brought up amongst the poor and oppressed, baptized into self-giving ministry, he demonstrates the

way that the awe-inspiring God comes very close to us. He speaks of the kind of discipleship this inspires and demands. He inherits the compassion and resistance of those midwives, mothers, sisters, princesses and maids.

So here is a new definition of family and child care. Moses had many mothers. Those mothers had many children. And we are bound in cords of resistance and compassion to those ancient people and to all who hear the fearful, demanding, loving voice of God. These cords lead us to empathize with people from all times and places.

Today six million people are at risk of starvation in Somalia, and another fourteen million in South Sudan, Nigeria, and Yemen. It is the gravest emergency since the Second World War, according to the United Nations. Six years ago a terrible famine hit the southern area of Somalia; but the current drought has affected all the states in the Horn of Africa. The UN is begging for a major infusion of money, saying that children will be stunted by severe malnutrition and will not be able to go to school, gains in economic development will be reversed and "livelihoods, futures and hope will be lost".

Just to give you some sense of what famine means: UN and food organizations define famine as when more than 30 percent of children under age five suffer from acute malnutrition and mortality rates are two or more deaths per 10,000 people every day, among other criteria. Now, more than 20 million people across four countries face starvation and famine. More than one million children are estimated to be acutely malnourished across South Sudan, including 270,000 children who face the imminent risk of death should they not be reached in time with assistance. Meanwhile, the cholera outbreak that began in June 2016 has spread to more locations, notably Yemen, where military blockades prevent A UN humanitarian coordinator said last month that in northeast Nigeria, malnutrition in the northeast is so pronounced that some adults are too weak to walk and some communities have lost all their toddlers.

We often describe these places as "failed states," but famine is a symbol of failure in both a local and global community. So many governments, including ours, are focused on military intervention, while relief efforts go underfunded.

What would Shiphrah and Puah say about our child care priorities? How many future leaders have already been lost to what is effectively genocide, intentional or unintentional?

Of course famines are nothing new. Neither is oppression. Neither are wars in which children suffer most. Back in 1985, 37 musical artists came together to record "We Are the World." Harry Belafonte hoped to raise money to address the famine then raging in East Africa. Across the gulf of time, I can imagine our six women of Egypt singing the same words:

We can't go on pretending day by day
That someone somewhere will soon make a change
We're all a part of God's great big family
And the truth, you know,
Love is all we need

We are the world,
We are the children
We are the ones who make a brighter day

So, let's start giving
There's a choice we're making
We're saving our own lives
It's true we'll make a better day
Just you and me

Both the Quran and the Talmud express this sentiment, a monument to compassion: “Whoever saves one life, is considered to have saved the whole of humanity.” Our ancient stories are monuments to compassion, when six women conspire to save a life in a gesture of resistance, a life that transforms the future of the world. May we build our own monuments of compassion, in honor of the child of humanity and the child of heaven: Jesus, our Messiah and our hope.

Amen.