

23rd August 2026 Sermon Exodus 1:8–2:10

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What can two ordinary people do when they are surrounded by chaos and injustice?

That question is at the heart of today's reading. Egypt is ruled by a powerful Pharaoh. He has an army, officials, taskmasters and the authority to issue laws. Against him stand two women: Shiphrah and Puah, midwives whose work is to help bring children safely into the world.

On the surface, there is no contest. Pharaoh has all the power. Yet Exodus remembers the names of these two women, while the king himself remains unnamed. He is simply "Pharaoh", a title only.

Scripture remembers Shiphrah and Puah because, in the middle of chaos, their choices made a difference.

The chaos begins with a new king who "did not know Joseph". He has forgotten—or chosen to ignore—the history of his own country. Joseph, a Hebrew immigrant, had once helped to save Egypt from famine. But this Pharaoh looks at Joseph's descendants and sees only a threat.

The Israelites have done nothing wrong. They are living, working, raising families and becoming numerous. Yet Pharaoh turns their existence into a political danger. He says, in effect, "There are too many of them. If we are not careful, they might turn against us."

His fear becomes policy, and his policy becomes oppression.

First, Pharaoh forces the Israelites into hard labour. But the more they are oppressed, the more they grow. Then Pharaoh develops an even more terrible plan. He summons Shiphrah and Puah and commands them to kill every Hebrew boy at birth.

Consider what he is asking them to do. These women have devoted themselves to protecting mothers and babies through the dangerous process of childbirth. Their vocation is to welcome life, but Pharaoh commands them to become agents of death.

The command is cruel, but it is also calculated. Pharaoh wants the deaths to look natural. He wants the midwives to kill the boys during birth so that no one will accuse him of murder. Like many unjust systems, he wants ordinary people to carry out the violence for him while he remains at a safe distance.

This is often how injustice works. A cruel system rarely depends upon one powerful person alone. It needs many ordinary people to say, "I am only doing my job. I am only following the rules. I did not make the decision."

But Shiphrah and Puah refuse.

We are told: "The midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live."

To fear God here does not mean being terrified of God. It means recognising that God, not Pharaoh, has the highest claim upon their lives. Pharaoh may be able to threaten them, but he cannot redefine good and evil. He may control the law, but he does not control their consciences.

Their faith and relationship with God shape what they do with their hands, their skills and their responsibility. Because they fear God, they preserve life.

When Pharaoh challenges them, they tell him that the Hebrew women are strong and give birth before the midwives arrive. Whether these women lied or whether such a lie was justified, the story clearly celebrates their resistance. When truth is already being corrupted by power—when an innocent child is called a threat and murder is called policy—Shiphrah and Puah refuse to allow Pharaoh to use them.

They do not have an army. They do not lead a public demonstration. They do not remove Pharaoh from power. They simply refuse to do the evil placed before them.

Yet their decision has consequences far beyond what they can see.

Moses is not the only child saved by this resistance. Other boys must also have survived because these women refused Pharaoh's command. Some of those children may later have walked out of Egypt. Some may have crossed the sea, travelled through the wilderness and entered the promised land. Generations of people may have owed their lives to the courage of these two midwives.

Shiphrah and Puah could not have known how far their actions would reach. They only knew what faithfulness required at that moment.

That is important for us because injustice can feel overwhelming. We look at violence, discrimination, poverty, war and political chaos, and we wonder what difference one person can make. We may not possess the power to change an entire system. But we still have choices about how we participate in it.

We can refuse to repeat language that dehumanises others. We can challenge an unfair decision. We can protect someone who is vulnerable. We can refuse to cooperate with prejudice. We can use our profession, influence, money or voice to preserve life rather than serve fear.

Sometimes courage is dramatic. But often it looks like two women quietly saying, "No. We will not do this."

Shiphrah and Puah remind us that resistance to injustice begins when ordinary people refuse to surrender their conscience. Their actions did not immediately end the chaos, but they interrupted its power. They created space for life to continue and for liberation to become possible.

We may never know how far one faithful action will reach. But when we fear God more than Pharaoh, refuse to cooperate with cruelty and choose to preserve life, our actions can make a difference.

Two women stood against an empire—and because they did, children lived.