

**August 27, 2017**  
**12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year A**  
**Exodus 1:8-2:10**  
**The Rev. Carenda Baker**

What would you think if I were to say to you: ***“WHAT YOU DO THIS WEEK WILL CHANGE THE WORLD”***? Before you make a hasty judgment about this crazy notion, I invite you to just let that statement simmer on the back burner of your minds and hearts for the next few minutes: *What I do this week will change the world.*

Two women once made a decision, took a risk, and changed the world. It was simultaneously a small gesture and a heroic act. They disobeyed the law of the land. And through their act of disobedience God moved to rescue a people from oppression. Their names are Shiphrah and Puah, names that are not familiar to us, but names that belong among the most well known of our foremothers in the faith.

The book of Exodus opens on a chilling note. There is a new Pharaoh in town, who is concerned about the growing population of the Hebrew people, and their potential for gaining power and joining forces with Egypt’s enemies. Pharaoh seems unaware of his own country of Egypt’s history - that for generations the Hebrew people, whom he has pegged as a looming threat, had been considered allies and honored guests. He “did not know Joseph”, the Hebrew slave, who became a trusted leader, and helped save Egypt from famine. He did not know or did not care about his country’s history.

So this new Pharaoh, driven by his ignorance, insecurity, and fear first enslaves the Hebrews, and then turns to even more sinister means to stop the population increase of Hebrews. He orders these two Hebrew women Shiphrah and Puah, who are present at and help with the birth of babies, to kill all the Hebrew boys that are delivered. Ironically, it is the girls and women in this opening chapter of Exodus - apparently of no account to Pharaoh, of whom he should be afraid, because first these two Hebrew midwives, and then three others – Moses’ mother, his older sister Miriam, and Pharaoh’s own Egyptian daughter – prove to be his undoing. And please take note, that

Moses' sister and Pharaoh's daughter would likely have been young - probably teenagers.

Just think for a moment about those two midwives Shiphrah and Puah. Their daily work is to help deliver babies, to witness new life come into the world. Their daily work is to watch these tiny miracles arrive. They are the first to see and touch God's promise and possibility, cradled gently in their hands. And now? Now they are expected to become death dealers, to participate in state-sponsored killing, to spread Pharaoh's wave of control and terror? What are they to do? They have a decision to make. They are women of love and compassion. They deal in life and hope, in God's dreams for the future. They decide to actively exercise their God-given wisdom and courage. They become *creatively subversive*. They make up a story to tell Pharaoh about why his plan to reduce the Hebrew population is not working: "We're sorry your Majesty, but the Hebrew women are just not like Egyptian women. The Hebrew women are hardy and give birth too quickly, delivering the babies before we can get there. The Hebrew women are rough and ready, begging your pardon your Highness, so different from your genteel and delicate Egyptian women". Shiphrah and Puah take action to de-rail the killing of Hebrew baby boys using non-violent resistance.

It is a courageous act of civil disobedience that helps change the tide of history. They are the first two links in a chain of many people who will eventually be lead out of slavery and oppression in Egypt by Moses. Liberation starts here, with two women willing to say "no" to an act of cruelty and injustice.

These two women likely never considered that their actions would change the world, but they did - by remaining faithful and doing what was in their power to do. Of Shiphrah and Puah the text says they "feared God". They recognize the ultimate power of God over empire, and they show loyalty to God. They continue to do their life-giving work with integrity and help save a people by following the dictates of their hearts, and by heeding the call of conscience.

Maybe you've heard about another rescue story that happened earlier this summer on July 8<sup>th</sup> in Panama City, Florida. Roberta Ursrey, along with her two sons, 8-year old Stephen and 11-year old Noah, her mother, and other members of her family were enjoying a nice summer day at the beach. The two boys were in the water swimming when suddenly they found themselves swept away from shore by a strong rip tide. The boys were suddenly unable to swim back to shore and began yelling for help. There was no lifeguard on the beach. Their mother quickly swam out to try to help, but was soon overwhelmed by the current as well, and also found herself unable to get back to shore. Her mother, the boys' grandmother, followed them into the water in an attempt to reach them, along with other family members, and eventually others who wanted to help. Soon there were nine people unable to get back to shore, all in need of rescuing and in danger of drowning. As each minute passed, the situation became more frightening.

Someone dialed 911. Eventually a police officer arrived and called for a boat rescue, but there was grave concern that the boat would not arrive in time. It was at that moment that Jessica and Derek Simmons, both strong swimmers who had just arrived at the scene, came up with a rescue plan. They knew that even though they were strong swimmers, there was no way they could save nine people by themselves, and so they gathered the crowd on the beach into a rescue team. In a matter of minutes, first 12, then 25, then 50 and eventually 80 people worked together to form a human chain, one that reached out through the water far enough to reach the nine people at risk of drowning.

One by one the nine people were carefully passed along the human chain until all of them were brought safely to shore. The chain had been formed just in time. Roberta, the boys' mother, had just started to black out when she was reached. She later reported that she was sure she was about to die moments before help arrived. Roberta's sixty-seven year old mother experienced a heart attack as she was being brought to shore, and was rushed to the hospital. She is now recovering well. Surely

without the quick thinking and cooperative efforts of the people on shore, lives would have been lost.

After the rescue, Roberta Ursrey said: "I am so grateful. These people were God's angels that were in the right place at the right time. I owe my life and my family's lives to them. Without them, we wouldn't be here."

Jessica Simmons, one of the quick-thinking lead rescuers said: "I knew we had to do something. To see people of different races and genders come into action to help total strangers is absolutely amazing. People who didn't even know each other went HAND IN HAND IN A LINE, into the water to try and reach them. Pause and just IMAGINE that."

Strong riptides and dangerous currents come in many forms, and at any moment, any of us can find ourselves in need of a human chain of support, or can find ourselves with the opportunity to be a part of such a chain.

Might it be possible that we regularly underestimate the power of our actions, and the difference we can make in the world?

Friends, our job as people of faith is to listen closely for where God is calling us to act, individually and as part of a chain with others to help bring new life into our world.

Maybe it will be when we seek reconciliation in a relationship with a family member – a friend - or a co-worker.

Maybe it will be when we admit we are holding on to a stereotype of some person or group that is false, and we ask for God's forgiveness and help to change our thinking.

Maybe it will be the moment we find our voice to challenge another when some person or group is being mistreated. This could include a face to face encounter in person. Or maybe you will find your voice and take a stand to support the victim of cyber-bullying.

The diocesan youth and leaders serving here this weekend among the residents and staff of the Episcopal Home have worked enthusiastically to share God's light and love. So how will each of us join in spreading that wave of goodness, faithfulness, and joy in the coming week?

Dear people of God: we have been challenged here by God's living Word, and will receive nourishment and strength at God's table. Let us pray to be the vessels used by the Holy Spirit to breathe hope, healing, and reconciliation – to bring the good news of liberation - that will change us and this world – to the glory of the God of our salvation. Amen.