

Bringing Life in a Culture of Death

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[0 : 00] So today I'm going to be continuing our series on the book of Exodus. And as Pastor Anthony mentioned, the story of the Exodus has really been a foundation for so many other stories of liberation.

For so many groups across time, it has been the origin of hope and possibility. But what we often skip over in this story is two women who are only mentioned very, very briefly. Their names are Shippurah and Pu'er. They were midwives and they were brave enough to stand up to the culture of death that held people in bondage. So I want us to remember their stories today. I want us to remember the names of the other women who were involved in this liberation, but their names have been lost to history. Across time and space, across all movements for liberation, the strength, perseverance, and sheer grit of women made true freedom possible. Shippurah and Pu'er gave birth to the fresh possibility for liberation in a culture of death. And my hope today is that we can find ourselves in the story of liberation and join them.

[1 : 10] So if you have a Bible, I want you to turn to Exodus chapter 1, verse 15. The words will also be on the screen. It reads, The king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, Why have you done this and allowed the boys to live?

The midwives said to Pharaoh, Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women. They are vigorous and they give birth before the midwife comes to them. So God dealt well with the midwives and the people multiplied and became very strong.

And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, Every boy that is born to the Hebrews, you shall throw into the Nile, where you shall let every girl live.

Now, this story of the midwives can often be seen as an interlude or prologue to the larger story of Moses. However, there is so much that is not being said in this story.

There are so many gaps that need to be filled. Underneath this passage, there is an entire story that is not being told. And one way to access that story is by practicing what scholar Wilda Gaffney calls womanist midrash.

[2 : 54] Now, womanist midrash is kind of a complicated term. But in essence, it is a way of reading scripture that pays attention to marginalized characters in the biblical text, specifically women and girls.

And this method of scripture emerged from the work of womanist scholars, specifically black women. And if you are not familiar with the concept of womanism, essentially, it is paying attention to the struggles of black women in particular.

It pays attention to our intersectional identities and focuses on the liberation of all people. This is in contrast to ideas of white feminism, which so often focuses on the struggles of white women to the exclusion of all other struggles for liberation.

So when we apply womanist midrash to this text, we are able to focus on these forgotten characters. We are able to get into the head of Shippurah and Puah to figure out how they did what they did, why they did what they did, and then from there be able to act in our lives in a different way.

So the story begins when the pharaoh has summoned Shippurah and Puah. And they don't know why they have been summoned. They're just doing their jobs. But anyone who has ever been summoned to their boss's office kind of knows a little bit about the fear and anxiety that they were feeling.

[4 : 22] I can definitely relate. They probably wondered what the pharaoh would possibly want with them. And when they arrive in front of the king, here's one command, kill all the boys, let the girls

live.

Now this command goes against everything that the midwives were supposed to be doing. They're supposed to bring forth life, and here they are being commanded to kill.

So in this passage, Shippurah and Puah come face to face with the end result of the culture of death that is all around them.

The pharaoh has traveled so far down this road of fear, dehumanization, and death that he is willing to commit the ultimate crime to say, you need to kill all the boys, which would lead to the genocide of an entire people group.

This is what happens when the culture of death runs unchecked in a society. There are two things that we can learn about the culture of death within this passage.

[5 : 27] First, the culture of death is rooted in fear. Last week, we talked about the beginning of the Exodus story, how the pharaoh did not know Joseph.

But what the pharaoh saw was all of these Hebrews multiplying, growing very strong, and his fear is that, oh, these people are going to one day outnumber me, and then they will rise up and tear off the shackles of their oppression.

And the pharaoh was so afraid of what would happen if they grew too strong that he used his power to first impose increasingly harsh sentences on the Hebrews, and then to say, if that doesn't work, if I can't oppress them with labor, I'm just going to kill them.

This leads me to my second point, which is that the culture of death denies our basic humanity. The pharaoh has lost sight of what it means to be human.

He's willing to murder innocent children who have done nothing wrong just so he can maintain his power. The people don't matter in the face of his endless ambition for power.

[6 : 41] And we can see the same story play out in the New Testament when Herod orders the murder of all the Hebrew boys, all because he's afraid of a child born in Bethlehem.

History repeats. Once someone lets fear sink in and they lose sight of their connection to all other life, then the road to unchecked violence and death is clear.

I don't have to spell out how this connects to our lives today. All we have to do is turn on our phones after the service and look at our push notifications from our news outlet of choice, and we see it all around us.

But when we return to the story, Shipper and Pua find the courage to say no. They look the culture of death in the face and they refuse to comply.

They know that their purpose is to bring life into the world and they refuse to allow even the darkest examples of humanity to tarnish that purpose. We too are also called to bring forth life in a culture of death.

[7 : 52] Now, I have learned that this looks different for each of us. Not all of us are midwives. Not all of us will be present in that actual birthing process.

I also have an interesting vantage point when I consider my work in light of Shipper and Pua's story. I've mentioned this in the past. Many of you are probably familiar with my job.

I talk about it a lot because for the past three years, this job has really made me who I am. It's an integral part of my identity. For those of you who are not familiar, I have spent the past three and a half years working at a medical respite and hospice facility for unhoused individuals with HIV AIDS. I began in August 2018 as a volunteer when we were primarily serving end-of-life patients. And when I started, we were trained to see our role as a kind of midwife to death.

Just as a midwife is meant to be there during the act of birth, we were called to be there during the act of death. And this was terrifying for me at first because it required me to look the reality of death in the face without flinching.

[9 : 05] And our society so often trains us to not do that. We're trained to avoid death, to not look at it, to pretend it's not there, to do all we can to avoid the fact that our lives are mortal.

So much of our lives are rooted in this fear of death. And so I think that it is incredibly human, this fear. I myself struggled with this fear before I took the job.

A couple months prior, in April, my grandmother passed away at the age of 100. She was in hospice care for the last few days of her life.

And I was so scared to be there in that moment of death that I did not go to see her in our final days. I could not bring myself to sit bedside with her.

And it was a moment that I ultimately came to regret, but also to understand that it was an all-too-human reaction. We would do anything to avoid being confronted with death.

[10 : 13] It's human. But God led me to a place where I would confront that fear, where I would learn to sit in the presence of death.

It requires this ability to settle yourself, to sit with someone at the bedside in that moment of vulnerability and fragility and hold them in that moment.

It requires a humility to know that we may not be able to restore someone's physical life, but we can give them some level of spiritual and emotional life.

In the last moments of someone's life, there is a beauty in showing someone that they are unconditionally accepted and loved. At work, we have this saying, healing into life, or healing into death.

And that is something that I have tried to embody. But it's not easy. And finding those moments of life can be difficult when you are confronted with death.

[11 : 20] At the same time, now, most of the clients at my work are living. But they are living in the reality of systemic oppression, poverty, racism, substance abuse, lack of access to health care, mental health challenges, they are confronted all the time with the realities of death around them.

And finding those moments where we can bring some level of life is an essential work, whether that is making someone a sandwich or making sure that they are taking their meds on time.

Those things are what abundant life looks like in the moments of death all around us. However, the culture of death distracts ourselves from that mission.

Especially in the non-profit field, there is so much that gets in the way of the good that we seek. The hierarchy of our institutions often does not allow ourselves to view ourselves as equals and work together for our clients.

A lack of resources can cut us off at the knees and there never seems to be enough money, enough resources, enough talent to do what we are called to do. And then there is the pervasive reality of compassion fatigue.

[12 : 37] I confess that for the past few months it has taken all the energy I have to show up. Many of us who have served in direct support roles during this pandemic know exactly what I'm talking about.

Caring for others becomes almost impossible when we are not caring for ourselves. And sacrificing our health for the health of others is always a lose-lose scenario as much as we might try to convince ourselves otherwise.

It is exhausting to be life-giving people in a culture of death. To return to the story, Shippur and Puer probably felt the same way. But they recognized one truth.

We need each other to bring forth life. And this is where I return to this concept of womanist midrash. Pastor Anthony mentioned last week that the numbers in the Old Testament are kind of squishy.

They don't, they're not literal. So if we look at this passage, it is highly unlikely that Shippur and Puer were acting on their own. Instead, they are standing a representation for the entire community of midwives who were working with the Hebrews to give birth.

[13 : 52] They can't be in multiple places at once. There's no way that they were acting alone. So they had help. They reached out to their community. When we practice womanist midrash, when we place ourselves in the role of these midwives, we can think that their hearts were heavy with what they had been commanded to do.

But they did not let the culture of death win. They did not fear the Pharaoh and they did not sacrifice their humanity. Instead, they feared God. they came up with a plan.

And their resistance to the Pharaoh's commands probably started as this whisper on a wind. They told another midwife. They gathered all the midwives together and said, hey, this is what the Pharaoh has commanded us to do.

But we are not going to do that. And said, this is what we are going to do. We are going to hide your children. This is how you do it. And we are going to come up with a story. We arrived too late to prevent the birth.

This is what we're going to say. Chippah and Puerh could not have acted alone. They needed the coordination of midwives and mothers, fathers and brothers, the entire community to come together and save their children.

[15 : 07] So if we look at it this way, this passage represents the first example of community organizing in the Bible. people. They were able to work together to bring life out of death because they recognized they needed each other.

And we also need each other. There is a reason why so many of my sermons come back to this idea of connection. Because I believe that it is the single most important element in creating the change that we seek.

The culture of death thrives on isolation and disconnection. It feeds on it. If the world is divided into us versus them, we spend so much of our time trying to protect what's ours and we neglect to consider our common humanity.

If we remain locked in our own little world, it's easy for us to conclude that there is no way to fix the collective issues we face. The fear paralyzes people into inaction.

After all, what can one person do to solve the environmental crisis or systemic racism or unchecked capitalism? How can one person possibly stop the war in Ukraine or protect trans lives in Texas?

[16 : 23] How can one person stand up and protest against the forces that seek to divide us? The answer to that question is that we can't. We can't do it alone. No one person can systematically demolish the culture of death around us.

And the good news for us today is that we don't have to. We don't have to do it on our own. As Christians, we are resurrection people.

That means that we believe that Jesus Christ has already defeated the realities of sin and death even though everything around us will try to convince ourselves otherwise.

Yeah. that means that Jesus was able to inhabit our struggles. Jesus submitted himself to death on a cross so that we could receive new life.

Jesus did not leave us in our despair over the death in the world. Instead, Jesus reached down to us, Jesus inhabited the darkness, and Jesus defeated it. The culture of death will ultimately fall at the feet of Jesus on the cross.

[17 : 33] Even when that seems like the most impossible thing in the world to believe. Especially then. Being resurrection people means that we know that death does not have the final word.

We are free from the powers of death. And our freedom from the powers of sin and death means that we can look those powers in the face and say no. Just like Shippah and Pua did, we can learn to work together to bring forth life from the culture of death.

Now this does not come easy. Childbirth is messy and it's painful. It's heartbreaking. It lasts for hours, maybe even days.

And sometimes it seems as if there is no end to the birthing process. But I'm sure we've all had mothers tell us that nothing compares to that moment of holding their beloved child in their arms. All the labor, all the pain is worth it if at the end of it there is new life. So friends, I do not want to sugarcoat the fact that we are living in a dark and messy world.

[18 : 43] I struggled with this sermon because I did not want to leave us in our despair but I also did not want to leave with empty platitudes or this kind of triumphalism that kind of glosses over everything that is broken.

I wanted to recognize that it's hard to remember the power of life is always stronger than the power of death and it's hard to live into that reality to act as if it has already come to pass.

You may not feel that right now in this moment and that's okay it's human but that does not change the ultimate truth that life is springing forth from death.

so as you leave here today there is an invitation find one small way to bring life out of death this week or if you're like me and you're burned out and the idea of adding one more thing to your to-do list is just exhausting then just look for those small moments of life being born from death all around you because I promise you that they are there.

Small actions done with great love can make all the difference. Sometimes I'm convinced that those small actions taken faithfully day after day by each and every one of us is the only thing that has ever managed to change the world to bend the universe toward justice and righteousness.

[20 : 14] Any action that says you are not alone is new life springing forth from old ground. Any time we care for ourselves or we care for others we are breathing new life into old bones.

Any time we stand up to a person of authority and say enough is enough to the culture of death that is new life and when we work together to protect the least of these the marginalized the oppressed the outsiders the persecuted that is a form of rebirth.

It is life springing forth from death. So let us together become people who bring forth light. Thank you.