



Remembering Names

TEXT
Exodus 1:8–22

July 14, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Becky A. Chamberlain

Recently a friend asked me what I love most about being at Village. You might think that I answered Mission, or Music, or Members, or any number of things. I told him that what I love most about Village is nametags. Seriously!

You've heard of clergy who have instant recall of names? I am not one of them. There are so many of you, and even after more than a year, I struggle. Maybe you link my inability to remember your names to my advancing age, but truth be told, I had this problem 20 years ago.

Once, early in my tenure at my former church, I arrived at the hospital around 6 a.m. to pray with a couple before surgery. I said a lovely prayer: I prayed for Jim, for God to be present and calm his fears, for his wife as she waited, for Jim's surgeon and the medical team, etc., etc. After my "Amen," the man said, "I don't know who Jim is, but I'm Joel." It was not my best pastoral care moment.

Names are important! I will keep working to know your names. And any help you can give me will be welcome.

Our story in Exodus begins with a new king in Egypt who

does not remember the name of Joseph — and his amazing Technicolor dream coat. Four hundred years earlier, Joseph played a crucial role in saving Egypt from famine and mass starvation. During that time, Joseph's relatives immigrated to Egypt to escape famine in their own land. They were welcomed by the Pharaoh and the people of Egypt. The new king doesn't know his history.

Now, 400 years later, the Israelites have been fruitful and multiplied, and the new king is threatened by them. Wishing to solidify his political base, this Pharaoh revokes commitments previously made to the Israelites. He calls them by new names: not "neighbor," not "friend," but "illegal immigrant," "foreigner," "them." He imposes forced labor on them, and then even harsher, more brutal labor. Pharaoh no longer called them "Israelites," but "Hebrews," a pejorative name for enslaved people who disrupt ordered society. The Hebrews became his scapegoat for current problems in Egypt.

We've seen this movie before. We know this history. In the 1930s, especially in Germany but not only in Germany, it was the Jews. In our own country, in the 1940s, it was Japanese Americans who were put into in-

ternment camps. More recently, it's been illegal aliens, welfare moms, gays, the undeserving poor, Muslims. History is full of examples of our proclivity to define ourselves over and against others, and deny others their essential humanity. We forget their names as beloved children of God.

Pharaoh used his power to incite fear. He preached "them vs. us." His fearmongering was successful. Soon all the Egyptians were using Pharaoh's names for their former friends and neighbors. But according to our text, the more the Israelites were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread.

Pharaoh then intensified his plan to deal with the Hebrews. Genocide was his solution. He summoned two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, and commanded them to kill all the Hebrew male babies as they were being born.

The midwives, who assist women in bringing forth new life, are now commanded to deal in death. What must their conversation have been as they left Pharaoh's court? I'm guessing they were terrified and outraged at the same time. I'm so glad they had each other. Did they talk about their options? Consequences? Did they list the pros and cons

of obeying Pharaoh? Did they decide quickly or agonize over what to do?

They decided there was no way they could obey Pharaoh's order. Even though they knew Pharaoh could have them killed, they trusted in God and did what their moral consciences dictated. They let the boys live.

Pharaoh summoned them a second time when he realized they weren't following his orders. They lied and defended their action. They gave him some "fake news" and used his own racism against him: "The Hebrew women are so strong and give birth so easily, by the time we get there, they've already delivered their babies and returned to work!" Now that took chutzpah, to tell that lie with a straight face. Pharaoh failed to realize that not only was he being fed fake news, he was also being mocked.

Some scholars mark this as the first recorded instance of civil disobedience. The midwives' rejection of Pharaoh's decree was not just personal but political as well. Pharaoh isn't so much a person as a system that rears its ugly head time and time again.

Nowhere else are Shiphrah and Puah named or known or celebrated. Yet we have their names. At great risk to their own lives, they refused Pharaoh's order to kill. Instead, in the words of a favorite professor of mine, Terry Fretheim, "They are mothering agents bearing witness to the mothering power of God, whose will for life overrides the killing

and whose power for life is undeterred by the death dispensed by the powerful."¹

The Israelites could have come to an early end in Egypt if not for God's intervention through the kind of human bravery demonstrated by Shiphrah and Puah. Because the midwives revered the Mothering God of Life, God was ultimately able to deliver Israel from bondage. One of the boys spared will be named Moses, and he will lead the Israelites out of Egypt and into freedom. And it all started here, with Shiphrah and Puah. They are heroes, not because they single-handedly dismantled the powers of evil, but because they did "what they could where they were with what they had" (attributed to Theodore Roosevelt). They let the boys live. I doubt they thought they were changing the world, but they were, by following the dictates of their consciences with their hearts fixed on God.

You've no doubt heard of the Butterfly Effect, where a small change in a complex system can have large effects elsewhere. Unless you trace things back, you can never really tell which efforts made the biggest difference. The Butterfly Effect points out how interconnected our actions are, and how simple and courageous efforts can ripple across time and space and affect the lives of millions.

We do well to remember the names of Moses ... and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa ... and how their actions have rippled

out and affected the lives of millions.

But let us also remember other names: Cornelia Arnolda Johanna ten Boom, a Dutch watchmaker, who, with her father and sister, helped many Jews escape the Nazi Holocaust by hiding them in her home. Corrie was caught and sent to Ravensbrück concentration camp.

And let us also remember thousands of unnamed Liberian women — ordinary mothers, grandmothers, aunts and daughters, Christian and Muslim, who came together in 2003 to pray for peace. Armed with only white t-shirts and the courage of their convictions, they demanded that the killing of their sons in a brutal 14-year civil war STOP. Their actions were critical in bringing about an agreement during the stalled peace talks. Their remarkable story is chronicled in the documentary *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*.

And in our own nation, let us remember men and women who marched last year into Lafayette Square opposite the White House to protest President Trump's separation of parents and children at our border. While Trump was away for the weekend at his Bedminster Golf Club, protests and marches swelled from New York to California. Former Attorney General Jeff Sessions quoted Romans 13 to justify the government's actions. Perhaps Sessions had forgotten the names of Shiphrah and Puah in Exodus 1, who pleased God by their civil disobedience and were rewarded with children of their own. (And let us remember the names of

those protesting the latest government plan for deportation.)

And let us remember the parents of Octavio and Omar Viramontes, who I read about in this week's *Christian Century*. They moved with their 10-year-old twins from Mexico to California. Life was tough for them in the beginning. They had to pick grapes and peddle them door-to-door. This spring, Octavio and Omar graduated from Harvard and UCLA's medical schools, respectively, one day apart. Remembering their parents' sacrifices, Omar said, "Every day I wake up and I think, 'What can I do today to make myself better, my family better, and my community?'"²

Closer to home, let us remember the names of Sisters Berta Sailer and Corita Busanmas, who started Operation Breakthrough in 1971 as a response to parents asking for quality childcare for their children. Today, Operation Breakthrough has a budget of \$8 million to help impoverished kids and their families in a wide variety of ways. Just recently, they built a bridge over Troost Avenue, literally bridging a racial and economic divide that has persisted for decades.

And, let us remember Mary Molle, sister of Village Church member Sharolyn. Mary died this June 9 after a diagnosis of cancer that she never allowed to define her. In her 35-year career of teaching second and third grade children, she gave witness to the mothering power of God. Her unconditional love and support for each child, her con-

tagious laughter and smiles, her hugs, as well as Hershey's chocolate kisses — Mary's actions will ripple out with consequences for the health of the world for years to come.

The things you and I do this week — our actions, our decisions, our choices — will ripple out with consequences foreseen and unforeseen, for good or for ill, for the health or damage of the world. Some of these actions may be bold and courageous. Others may be hardly noticeable. They all have the potential to ripple out, affecting countless lives.

We too, men and women alike, are midwives, mothering agents of our Mothering God. We know our own names: beloved children of God. Called by name, we act against Pharaohs of racism, sexism, ageism, and any other "isms" of evil. We act against violence and poverty, and injustice. We are beloved midwives helping to birth forth new life on behalf of our Mothering God, showing love, bringing change.

The Exodus story affirms that it's the small things, the insignificant people who bear God's salvation into the world one small, courageous action at a time: the cleverness of midwives; the birth of a little baby. Thousands of years later, let us remember Shiphrah and Puah, their names preserved for all of history as monuments to heroic acts that save an oppressed people — while this Pharaoh is just a Pharaoh, because if you've seen one Pharaoh, you have seen them all.

Our names may be remembered — or not — in history. But, as we work together to birth God's promised new day, we can be confident that our names will never be forgotten in the heart of God.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

¹Terrance Fretheim, *Interpretation Commentary: Exodus*, John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1991

²*Christian Century*, July 17, 2019 issue

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.