



## Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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### “Collaboration”

Exodus 1:8-22

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The story found in the Book of Exodus is dominated by men – men like Moses and Pharaoh, Aaron and Joshua. But the story begins with women. Moses’ mother, his sister Miriam, and the Pharaoh’s daughter conspire to save and protect the life of Moses, the future liberator. But before these three, there are two extraordinary women by the name of Shiphrah and Puah, two midwives who play an important role in the deliverance of the people of Israel. Their names are known to us because of the actions of a certain Pharaoh of Egypt. It is a point of deep satisfaction to me that the Bible does not tell us the name of the Pharaoh but does provide the names of these two women, Shiphrah and Puah.

The Pharaoh in question is no friend to the Israelites. He fears them, for no other reason than that they have grown in population. He does what political leaders sometimes do. He creates an enemy where there is none. He stirs up his people to fear the Israelites. And he starts treating the Israelites differently. And they become slaves.

Even as life grows harder and harder for the Israelites, they still grow in population. This only increases Pharaoh’s paranoia and he decides to take action. He calls before him two midwives who serve the Israelite community – Shiphrah and Puah. He orders them to kill all male babies born to the Israelites. He orders them to collaborate.

When I hear that word collaboration I first think of World War II. Across Europe, in the countryside and city squares, in stores and schools, in homes and workplaces, the Nazis found countless willing helpers who collaborated or were complicit in their crimes. These collaborators were motivated by all sorts of things: anti-Semitism, nationalism, ethnic hatred, anti-communism, opportunism and fear.

On a recent visit to Israel, French President Emmanuel Macron acknowledged his country’s role in collaborating with the Nazis. This year is the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a mass roundup of Jews at the Vel d’Hiv cycling stadium in Paris. Over the course of two days in July of 1942, French police herded some 13,000 Jewish citizens into the stadium before they were deported to camps. More than 4,000 were children. Fewer than 100 survived. In his statement Macron insisted that “it was indeed France that organized this.” “Not a single German” was directly involved, he said.<sup>1</sup>

President Macron is helping France come to terms with its history of collaboration. Because collaboration is a bad thing, right? Sometime. But not always. Collaboration can be a good thing. In fact it’s quite a popular topic these days in the fields of education, business, and non-profit management. From group projects in elementary school to group projects in business school, learning has become more cooperative. Funders of non-profits are more likely to give money to support programs that involve collaboration among different organizations. A whole new industry has sprung up to create and support platforms for online collaboration with names like Slack, InVision, Trello, Yammer, Red Pen, Mural. These days, there is lots of collaboration that is

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/17/france-macron-denounces-state-role-holocaust-atrocity-paris-1942>

healthy and productive. So collaboration is not good or bad in and of itself. It all depends on whom you collaborate with.

In high school, I was heavily involved in student government. The principal at the time wasn't one of those cool principals that everyone liked. He was from the "let them eat cake school" of educational administration. I did my best to cultivate him as an ally in promoting my agenda for the students. I like to think that he listened to me. He certainly praised me. Once he did so publicly, at a school assembly. This – I learned – was not a good thing. Being identified as someone valued and respected by an authoritarian high school principal is not a good thing. I was identified – I believe incorrectly – as a collaborator with an unpopular regime.

In other words, choose your collaboration partners carefully.

The midwives face enormous pressure to collaborate with Pharaoh. But our text says, and here I am reading from *The Message* version of the Bible: "the midwives [have] far too much respect for God and [don't] do what the king of Egypt [orders]." In other words, the midwives work for God; not for Pharaoh. They take God more seriously than they take Pharaoh even though he has shown a willingness to kill those who get in his way. In perhaps history's first recorded act of civil disobedience, the two women disobey Pharaoh's direct orders.

The Pharaoh figures out that the baby boys are surviving and he calls the two women before him. When asked by Pharaoh what has happened, the women could admit their actions and receive their punishment. But they don't. Instead, they lie. They lie through their teeth. They lie to save their own lives. They lie to protect the Israelite families. Not only do they lie about their activities but they slip in a subtle insult against the Egyptians. They tell the Pharaoh that the strong Israelite women, in contrast to the weak Egyptian mothers, give birth before the midwives can get there!

Their actions put them at great risk. So, I'm betting that they don't improvise that lie on the spot. I imagine that the two women spend hours crafting their response.

It's a good thing they have each other. As they go about their work, they have a companion, a friend, a colleague who stands alongside them. So when the critical time comes, when their backs are against the wall, they can say, "Well, at least when we go before Pharaoh, we go together."

Together, they are clever and creative and cunning. Now, lying and trickery are not usually thought of as behaviors rewarded by God. But sometimes context is everything.

I almost feel sorry for Pharaoh. Here he is believing that he is the one with all the power. He thinks that he can do anything to the Israelite people and get away with it. He believes that the only threat to his power would come from men and here two slave women get the best of him.

Because they refuse to collaborate with him. They choose to collaborate with God. They are midwives. Their daily work, their daily routine, what they got up in the morning to do, is to help to bring new life into the world. That's what midwives do. That's what collaborating with God is all about. It's built into the word itself. Co-labor – co-labor-ate...

Are you a midwife? You don't have to work in the delivery room to qualify as one. We act as a midwife whenever we roll up our sleeves and get involved in bringing new life into the world. We act as a midwife whenever we step off the sidelines and enter into the thick of the pain and joy of the world.

When we see something happening that is unjust and we speak up – we are being a midwife. When we tutor a child, when we volunteer at the food pantry, that's being a midwife. We are being a midwife when we invite

another person to church – when we take the brave step of saying – being a part of the church has been a source of life and hope for me, would you like to come and see if that may be true for you as well? We act as a midwife whenever we listen deeply to another person, when we take the time to hear and receive the yearnings of another human being. Refusing to participate in something that we know to be wrong – that we know goes against God’s intentions for the world – that is being a midwife.

Vernon Jordan is a successful lawyer, business executive, and political operative. In 2015 he was asked to speak at Stanford University’s graduation. He told this story.

It was 1960, and I had just graduated from the Howard University Law School. I was home in Atlanta working as a law clerk for a prominent civil rights attorney. I had a wife and child and was making the princely sum of \$35 a week. In my first month on the job, we traveled to a small, rural Georgia town – Reidsville – to represent an 18-year-old black man who had been arrested, arraigned, indicted, tried, convicted and sentenced to die in the electric chair all within 48 hours.

The proceedings were held in the segregated courthouse of Tattnall County. We three NAACP lawyers slept in the nearest colored motel 30 miles away. Each day, we appeared in court to plead our client’s case. Each day at lunch, the white lawyers and court officials would go across the town square to the white-only café. And we black lawyers would go to the local grocery store, order sliced baloney, a loaf of bread, a jar of mustard, a Coca-Cola, and a Baby Ruth, which we would eat in our car parked on the courthouse square.

On the third day of the trial, a black woman beckoned me to the vestibule of the courthouse. She whispered, “We’ve been watching you lawyers eat bologna sandwiches for two days now. Don’t eat today, please. Come to my home for lunch.”

When we arrived at her home, we saw a beautiful sight. A table set for royalty. Her best silver, china and crystal, a lace tablecloth, beautifully folded white cloth napkins, and the most exquisite Southern cuisine I’ve ever eaten. Some ten black women and their husbands joined hands with us as our hostess’s husband said grace.

I shall never forget one sentence in that prayer: “Lord, way down here in Tattnall County we can’t join the NAACP, but thanks to your bountiful blessings, we can feed the NAACP.”<sup>2</sup>

During that time and place, it was too dangerous for them to join the NAACP. Not all of us can directly defy Pharaoh. But, we can support those who do. We can play our part. We can collaborate with those who fight for justice.

I ask the question again: Are you a midwife? Are you willing to be in the thick of it? In the pain and joy of it? Are you eager to bring God into a barren world?

I want us to go back to Shiphrah and Puah one last time. It’s important for us to remember that they did not defeat Pharaoh. They barely slowed him down. Frustrated by the failure of his midwife plan, the Pharaoh ordered every boy born to the Israelite thrown into the Nile. For the Israelites, things got worse – much worse – before they got better.

But I like to think that Shiphrah and Puah played an important role in what followed. I like to think that word got around the slave camps about what they had done. “Did you hear about Shiphrah and Puah? Can you

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<sup>2</sup> <http://news.stanford.edu/2015/06/13/jordan-baccalaureate-address-061315/>

believe it? They defied the Pharaoh. And they got away with it! They saved the lives of our babies.” I like to think that as the Israelites reflected on the women’s actions, new possibilities began to emerge. Slaves began to imagine a different reality. This was the beginning of a story of hope and life, a story of liberation, a story of a people who grew to know and love and serve God.

This morning, I invite you to celebrate with me the life and witness of Shiphrah and Puah and the way in which they used all of their creativity and energy and imagination and experience and courage to bring new life into the world.

May we be like them.

May we be like them.