



“Honest to God”
Exodus 1:8-22
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We all do it.

Some of us did it earlier this week, when we were asked by someone close to us: Does this outfit look good on me? And we said yes, absolutely.

Some of us will do it after church today. How are you doing? Someone will ask us. We will answer good, fine when we are not good, not fine.

I’m talking about telling lies. In a recent study, 75 % of respondents self-reported that they tell zero to two lies per day. And most lies are small, inconsequential, what some people call little white lies.

According to this study, lies are told for a variety of reasons. Only 16% of lies are told to protect or benefit another person. Most lies we tell we do in service to ourselves, to protect ourselves, to relieve our own discomfort. We just don’t have the energy to listen to a long summary of a movie, so we pretend we’ve seen it already. We claim we are busy when we are not.

I once told my daughter that McDonalds was only open Memorial Day weekend. Clearly, I told that lie to benefit myself.

Who do people lie to? Mostly friends and family. You could say that human relationships can only survive in the long term if white lies are a part of the communication repertoire.

Think of that expression – honest to a fault. The person who is honest to a fault may find themselves without many friends.

- Yes, that dress does make you look fat.
- I find your voice grating.
- The fact is that I don’t have something else to do that night. I just don’t like you very much.

That doesn’t work very well. There is a time and place for being honest to a fault. I count on my financial advisor to be honest to a fault both in terms of how she presents information and what she advises me to do.

Then there is something called the therapeutic lie. I am familiar with it in the context of caring for people with dementia.

Therapeutic lying in dementia care means intentionally telling a person with dementia something untrue, or withholding facts, to spare them distress that serves no purpose. Telling a woman with advanced dementia that her deceased husband is “at work” instead of repeatedly informing her he died is the classic example. It’s controversial precisely because it works, and because it forces caregivers to weigh honesty against mercy in real time.

I engaged in a therapeutic lie in order to move my mom into memory care. The staff, my daughter and I all told her that her assisted living apartment had a water leak, and she had to move temporarily to a new room. None of that was true. Lying in that way did not feel good. Does not feel good. I believe it was the right thing to do, and I would do it again. At the same time, I know how tricky this is – deciding for others that the lie serves a greater good.

How do we know when it’s the good and faithful thing to stick to the facts and when it’s the faithful thing to withhold some of the truth, to shade the truth, to downright lie? Just saying that aloud – I know this is a slippery slope.

It’s time to dive into this morning’s Bible passage. It focuses on two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. 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.

The Pharaoh in question is no friend to the Hebrews. He stirs up his people to fear them and the Egyptians enslave them. Even as life grows harder and harder for the Hebrews, they grow in population. This only increases Pharaoh’s paranoia, and he decides to act. He calls before him two midwives who serve this community - Shiphrah and Puah. He orders them to kill all male babies born to the Hebrews.

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. In perhaps history’s first recorded act of civil disobedience, the two women defy 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 children of their community.

It’s not a little white lie. It’s what researchers call a big lie. Not only do they tell a big lie they slip in a subtle insult against the Egyptians. They tell the Pharaoh that the strong Hebrew women, in contrast to the weak Egyptian mothers, give birth before the midwives can get there!

So, how do the women decide that it is OK to lie? The text doesn’t tell us. We can use our imagination. I am betting that they gave this quite a bit of thought. Perhaps they consult with others in their community. They ask themselves: what does God want us to do?

And they come to the conclusion, that in this case, the lie is justified. The lie is faithful. The lie is in service to God.

The lie is consistent with who they are. They are midwives. Their daily work, their defining purpose, their core identity is to help bring new life into the world. That's what midwives do. It is impossible for them to extinguish life. They know who they are.

And they know who they are accountable to. And it isn't Pharaoh. They are accountable to God for their actions. And they are OK with God.

What is the moral of today's story? What's the takeaway?

It's OK to tell a big lie? No, that's not it. That's not what this story is saying. Maybe it's telling us that one-line rules like "never tell a lie" only get you so far when you are navigating the complexities of a world that contains people like Pharaoh.

And when discerning the faithful path forward, it helps to

- Remember who we are.
- Read stories like this one.
- Talk to other people.
- Pray mightily.
- Remember to whom we are accountable.

I want us to go back to Shiphrah and Puah one last time. It's important for us to remember that they do not defeat Pharaoh. They barely slow him down. Frustrated by the failure of his midwife plan, the Pharaoh orders every boy born to the Hebrews thrown into the Nile. For the Hebrews, things get worse – much worse – before they get better.

But I like to think that Shiphrah and Puah play an important role in what followed. I like to think that word gets around the slave camps about what they have done.

Did you hear about Shiphrah and Puah? Can you believe it? They defied the Pharaoh. And they got away with it! They saved the lives of our children.

I like to think that as the Hebrews reflect on the women's actions, new possibilities begin to emerge. Slaves begin to imagine a different reality. This is the beginning of a story of hope and life, a story of liberation, a story of a people who grow 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.