

I am convinced that stories are one of the most powerful ways we can nourish our souls. Stories carry great wisdom and power, they are part of us from even the absolute earliest stages of our lives. I think of parents reading books to their babies, even before they are born, as this great act of love and nurturing. We read bedtime stories to help our kids settle in for the evening, and even as adults, stories calm and center us. I recently saw on the meditation app I use that they have bedtime stories available for you to listen to to help you fall asleep. Powerful soul nourishment, even in the most anxious of time, even in the upper ages of our life.

And as we get older, stories are what continue to stay with us, that capture our hearts in powerful ways. Most often, we remember things and they stay with us so much more than just the spouting out of data or numbers. We remember the people, the characters, the odds they had to face, the humanness in a situation, rather than just the situation itself. Stories remind us of the core pieces of what it is to be human.

Scripture is no exception to this reality, that stories nourish our souls. There are moments when direct verses or quotes of Jesus or other biblical figures stick with us and offer the inspiration, comfort, empowerment, conviction, or prayer that we need most. But all of these verses, all of these words, are within the larger narrative of Bible stories. The stories of the Bible are how we teach our kids about the love and power of God and Christ Jesus, because stories speak to us on a human level deeply innate to who we are as created beings.

Today's scripture readings may have felt a little different than what we are often used to. I don't often read the long and Hebrew word-filled stories of the Old Testament as the primary text for a Sunday morning. But this story, for this Sunday, for today, is powerful and tangible in a way that speaks uniquely into our current situation. It also happens to be one of my favorite stories in the Bible.

This story of the Egyptian midwives and Hebrew babies is an incredible story of how exactly our brave foremothers lived out the enduring call to love God and love our neighbors. The midwives' brave actions in the midst of terror and persecution saved the lives of babies and mothers, and preserved an entire generation of Hebrew baby boys that would carry the family line forward. That family line was the chosen people of God, the baby boys of the house of Israel, our own forebears in spirit.

The women named here are Shiphrah and Puah, among many other midwives who aided in keeping the Hebrew babies alive. Shiphrah's name means "fairness" and Puah's name comes from a Hebrew root that means "to glitter, or brilliancy". These midwives were literally fair and brilliant.

The midwives knew exactly what was going on around them, they did not shy away from the incredibly harsh realities of their world. The Hebrew people, the people of Israel, were enslaved by the Egyptian government and forced to do hard labor and live in oppressive conditions. They did not ignore the cries and the pain and the systematic killing of their neighbors, they did exactly what they could to keep their neighbors alive. These midwives did so by claiming that the Hebrew women were so strong and vigorous that their babies were born even before they could get there - how could they possibly kill the babies of these incredibly vigorous women? By supporting and lifting up the strength of their fellow women, regardless of what background, nationality, belief system, or economic status they had, these midwives kept these mothers, babies, families, and nation, alive. While the men were off feeling so threatened by a group of people growing in numbers that they decided to enact a policy of killing babies, the women were saving lives and ensuring the next generation would make it. The bravery and faith of women has the power of life itself.

Midwifery requires a level of strength and patience and fervor and skill that is absolutely admirable. There are very few spaces, I have found, that are more vulnerable than the spaces of birthing and new life. Midwives are the

guides through this most vulnerable space, the space in which life itself is brought forth. And for these skills, to guide us into the beauty and vulnerability of new life, we give thanks. New life is where stories begin and come together.

How many of us, when we think of telling our own stories, begin with the people to whom we belong and love? We start with our families with whom we grew up, move into our partners, our spouses, dear friends, relatives, children of our own and perhaps even grandchildren. From there, we move into the other parts of our life that give it meaning - what our callings or jobs or roles are throughout our life. We are each called to live a life that is entirely our own, in our own time and space and context, with our own unique gifts given to us by the Holy Spirit - which are named by Paul in today's Romans reading. We are all a unique part of the body of Christ, a person belonging to one another. And we are all part of the great story of this world, of God's creation, deeply loved.

The reason why stories endure within us and tend our spirits, is because stories are lived out experiences in which we find ourselves, in which we can identify. Stories are embodied, enfleshed, humanized ways of knowing and learning. We may not always remember the exact details of what, where, when, why, how, but we will remember how we feel. We will remember the people who acted and touched our hearts. And we will remember the nourishment for our spirits.

When we think about our call, our commandment for how to live in the world, we often say and use the words of "love God and love our neighbors", which is a beautiful and important reminder. But what that actually means, what that actually looks like lived out in the world is a different and embodied experience. This is where we must learn from stories.

Shiphrah and Puah lived into their own unique calling as midwives, in their own context, to love and serve God as best as they could. And they, along

with all the heroic midwives, paint a picture of exactly what that loving God and loving neighbors looks like even in the midst of fear, uncertainty, and to the point of legitimately saving lives. Praise be to God for their ability to live into their calling.

So, dear friends, if you are struggling to know what to do to live out the call to love God and love your neighbors, start with stories. Actually listen to the lived experience of the people around you and know that there is humanness to connect you. What has living in their body been like? What are the callings and communities to which they belong? Where has God led and shown up in their lives?

We cannot rely solely on ideologies or tropes or statements to guide us in our lives. We have to rely on the stories of what it is to be human, and the stories of how God works and shows up in our world. One of the greatest gifts we gain in reading Scripture is the gift of our forebears' embodied knowing of God. We learn so much about God's favor and the many ways new life comes forth in relying on God. New life comes in the story of Jesus Christ, our risen Savior, and that story of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of so many others' stories leading up to it. So how will Christ be a player in your story? What new life will shape your story? How will you listen and respond to God's calling for us, to love God and love our neighbors?

Thanks be to our God of new life and love, the true author of all creation.
Amen.