

“Shiphrah and Puah: The mighty midwives”

Exodus 1:8-20

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I have something which means a great deal to me. It is a stole. A stole is a liturgical vestment. You can buy stoles and some people have fancy stoles made from the finest cloth. Thanks to some of you I have some beautiful stoles for which I am very grateful. This stole is not fancy, nor is it made from the finest cloth. Despite being neither fancy nor fine, this stole is a favorite of mine. When we left our church in Houston the kids of the church made me this stole. They made handprints, and each handprint has one of their names. This stole reminds me of people, of children, who in a real way left a handprint on my heart.

As I said, a stole is a liturgical vestment. The book of Exodus makes a big deal out of liturgical vestments. The liturgical vestments in Exodus are to be worn by the high priest. Moses was the prophet, the leader of the people. But Moses was not the high priest. The high priest was his brother Aaron. Aaron is the one who will wear all the liturgical vestments. If you want a detailed description about the liturgical vestments for the high priest, you can give a careful reading to Exodus chapter 28. There you will learn about the breastpiece, the ephod, the robe, the woven tunic, the sash, the turban, the onyx stones and the other precious stones that adorn the vestments, stones like carnelian, chrysolite, beryl, turquoise, lapis lazuli, emerald, and more. It seems like Aaron has all he needs and more in terms of vestments. But looking at this stole that means so much to me, I would like to offer to Aaron a stole to include with his many and varied liturgical vestments. I would like to offer to Aaron a stole very much like this one, a stole with handprints on it. And the handprints I am thinking of come right out the first chapter in Exodus. I am thinking of two very specific handprints with two very important names for the stole I would like to give Aaron.

To understand the two names on the two handprints, we need to explore the early chapters of the book of Exodus. The early chapters of Exodus tell of a time of great crisis for the Israelites. The Israelites arrived in Egypt as favored guests of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. God had sent

Joseph to Egypt to prepare the way, and sure enough that all worked out for the good of everyone. But after the Israelites experience a series of good years in Egypt, a new king rose to power who did not know Joseph. My translation says, “Joseph meant nothing” to the new king.” What follows is a harrowing tale of cruel and brutal oppression. Viewing the Israelites as a threat to his kingdom, this new Pharaoh dealt shrewdly with the Israelites, meaning...

- He put slave masters over them who oppressed them with forced labor
- He worked the Israelites ruthlessly
- He made their lives bitter...with harsh labor

And then...and then...he made the edict that when the midwives who were helping the Hebrew women with childbirth, if those midwives saw that it was a boy who was born, the boy child was to be put to death. And then...and then...when that failed...the Pharaoh made a similarly sick law. “Every Hebrew boy that is born must be thrown into the Nile...”

The part about throwing the Hebrew boys into the Nile, that part of the story might be familiar to you. Chapter 2 in Exodus begins with the birth of a Hebrew boy. We just said the boys were to be thrown into the Nile. A Hebrew boy was born, and he was thrown into the Nile, just like that cruel king commanded. But that cruel king’s command was countered by a crafty mother’s clever cunning. The mother of the baby boy obeyed the command to throw the baby in the Nile. But before she threw the baby in the Nile, she took a papyrus basket for the baby boy, and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the boy in the basket and set it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. And...she had the boy’s sister stand watch over the basket that held her baby brother. In a great and surprising twist to the story in Exodus chapter 2, a woman shows up who spots the baby boy in the basket. The woman is none other than the daughter of Pharaoh, the one who wants the baby boys to be put to death. Seeing the baby boy in the basket, Pharaoh’s daughter rescues him, the sister steps in and says, “I know someone who can feed him,” the mother of the baby boy in the basket becomes his wet nurse, and eventually the baby boy in the basket grows up in Pharaoh’s own house. The daughter of Pharaoh gives him a name that sounds an awful lot like, “Draw out”, as in he was drawn out of the water. What name might that be? Moses! Moses was the baby boy in the basket.

Moses was born when the second command to kill had been instituted. The second command to kill, the command to throw the baby boys in the water, was only given after the first command failed. That first command had been for the midwives to kill the baby boys. When Moses grows up, we learn Moses has an older brother. The older brother is named Aaron. Aaron is about three years older than Moses. Moses was born when the command was to throw the boys in the water. If Aaron was older, it seems a real possibility that Aaron was born when the command was for the midwives to kill the baby boys. If that is the case, then as Moses was rescued by Pharaoh's daughter, Aaron might well have been rescued by the midwives. Instead of obeying the cruel command of the king, the midwives feared God and obeyed God rather than Pharaoh. The midwives let the Hebrew boys live. The midwives might well have let Aaron live.

So what I would like to do is give Aaron a stole. On that stole I would like to put two handprints. On one of those handprints, I would like to put the name Shiphrah. On the other, I would like to put the name Puah. Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives who feared God more than they feared the powerful ruler named Pharaoh.

It seems to me that by having a stole with two handprints with those two names of the two midwives, we are not taking anything away from the glory of God. God deserves every bit of honor and worship and admiration for all the signs and wonders he did as he set the Israelites free. The plagues and the parting of the Red Sea, the manna in the wilderness and the water that sprang from the rock, and those two tablets that were put in the hands of Moses holding the law of the covenant, God is the mighty one who set Israel free. To give Aaron a stole with two handprints with those two names of the two midwives does not take away from the glory of God.

For all the dramatic acts of divine intervention that take place in the book of Exodus, there is also this accompanying theme that humans have a role to play. When faced with the question of whether to obey Pharaoh or to fear God, the two midwives chose to fear God. In a similar way the mother of Moses and the sister of Moses and the daughter of Pharaoh all step up and play their very important part in the drama when they are called on to

do so. And, when Moses tries to shy away from doing his part, when Moses begs and pleads for God to send someone else, God does not take too kindly to that avoidance of responsibility. So no, I do not think it takes anything away from God to give Aaron a stole with two handprints bearing the two names of the two midwives who acted with great courage and boldness to obey God rather than Pharaoh.

And by giving Aaron a stole with two handprints with the two names of the two midwives we are reminding ourselves that in all likelihood Aaron would not have played the role he played, and Moses would not have played the role he played, without women like the mother of Moses, without women like the sister of Moses, without women like the daughter of Pharaoh, and without women like those two midwives, without women like Shiphrah and Puah.

We are in the middle of a series entitled “Partners in faith.” I think the bible makes a strong case for remembering unsung heroes who courageously chose obedience to God and faithfulness to God and trust in God, as these two midwives did, these two midwives named Shiphrah and Puah. I want to invite you to join with me in creating a stole. We cannot go back in time and give this stole to Aaron, but if we create a stole, with handprints bearing the name of ones who courageously chose obedience to God, we can wrap that stole around us, wrap that stole over our shoulders, and claim partnership with ones like Shiphrah and Puah. Remembering how they were faithful during their moments of opportunity, during their moments of testing, during those times when they were called upon to trust God, if we claim these women as our partners in faith, they might well inspire us to be faithful in our moments of opportunity, during our moments of testing, during those times when we are called upon to trust God.

In Exodus chapters one and two alone we have five women whose handprints are boldly displayed on the stole of faith. The Gospel of Matthew understood the importance of including handprints of those who played a role in carrying the torch of faith. Traditional genealogy is a long litany of this father begat this son who begat this son who begat this son. Matthew has its fair share of begetting and begetting. But in an intriguing and inviting way, Matthew also drops in some well-placed handprints. Jesus was

born to the tribe of Judah. When Matthew tells us about the two sons born to Judah, the genealogy is interrupted to let us know there was an important handprint concerning the offspring of Judah. “Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar.” When we come close to the birth of David, the one who would play such a prominent role in the life of Israel, we read, “Salmon was the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab.” For David’s grandfather we are told, “Boaz was the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth.” David became the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah’s wife, a reminder that David was not without fault, and yet somehow that handprint of Bathsheba is important, an item worth noting as we trace the heritage of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Oh, the stole we can make! Oh, the handprints we can insert! Oh, the names we can include! And oh, how those names inspire us to be faithful in our moments of opportunity, during our moments of testing, during those times when we are called upon to trust God. Please, join me in making a stole complete with handprints and attesting to the names of those who have been faithful, to those who are indeed our partners in faith. In Exodus chapters one and two we see five handprints. I have told you of those five, the two midwives and the three women who played a part in the rescue of Moses from the reeds. But when we go to put those handprints on our stole, we only know two of the names, the names of the midwives, the names of Shiphrah and Puah. Exodus two does not tell us the name of the mother or sister of Moses, and it does not tell us the name of Pharaoh’s daughter. So we have five handprints and three of them do not have names. My thought is to let these handprints that do not have a name encourage us to fill in the names. Later in Exodus we learn the name of the mother of Moses, that is Jochebed. The name of the sister of Moses is known by many, for his sister is Miriam. But instead of writing in those names, let our list expand. Whose name would you fill in if you had three handprints symbolizing faithful women who acted with courage, who trusted God, who obeyed God rather than the rulers and kings of this earth?

Here are my three. I tell you who my three are, not because they are your three. In fact, you can’t have them. They’re mine. But the real reason you can’t have them is I want you to think who your three are. As I tell you

of my three, think back on your life and see if you have three names you can fill in to the three empty handprints on our stole.

The first two names on my stole are going to sound very familiar, and you might say, “Not fair, you stole from the bible.” Stole...you knew I had to find a way to include that somewhere in this sermon. And it is true, the first two names will sound like I stole them from the bible. The first two names I want to put into the handprints on my stole are Ruth and Naomi. But not the Ruth and Naomi you might think I mean, although don’t those two women of the Old Testament deserve a handprint? Yes, they do. But my Ruth and Naomi are two women whose faith touched my life in a real way.

Naomi was a woman in my home church, the First Presbyterian Church of Hanford, California, the church I grew up in. Naomi sang in the choir. I’m sure she did a hundred other things, but along with singing in the choir, what I remember most is that she had a sweet and serene smile, and she would stop me each Sunday and ask how I was doing. She cared about me. Then I moved to Sacramento. It was the first time I had ever lived away from home. I was nineteen years old. And I was one lonely puppy. One day the friend I was living with said, “Wayne, you got a package in the mail.” I opened the package. It was a bag of pistachios. The part of California where I grew up is a fertile valley blessed with an abundance of fruit and nuts, and seeing those pistachios was like a little taste of home. It was just what I needed. But it was not all I needed. Along with the bag of nuts was a note from the woman who sent me the bag of nuts. The note said something along the lines of, “Wayne, I know you have moved far away from your home. I just wanted you to know we think of you and are praying for you. Love, Naomi.” If I thought I needed a bag of nuts, well, you can imagine how much I needed that kind of a note from that kind of a friend. Naomi was Japanese American. She lived to be 100 years old. I think she was born sometime around 1919 or 1920. Either way she would have been in her early 20’s when something terrible happened to the Japanese Americans who lived in the area where I grew up. Internment camps. It pains me to think of a woman like Naomi rounded up and locked away in a camp. And yet as much as it pains me, it makes me even more appreciative of the faith

she had. Naomi gets a handprint on my stole. And that handprint has her name in it.

Ruth was an elder in our church in Houston. One of the responsibilities that the elders had in that church was to take turns opening and closing the church on Sunday mornings. The elder who was in charge of a particular Sunday morning was called the Duty Elder. One Sunday I arrived at church and Ruth was the Duty Elder. But Ruth had brought her husband Ku along. There was a lot for the duty elder to do, from opening doors and making coffee to turning on the heat or the air, and yet Ruth didn't seem fazed by all the work she had to do. When she greeted me, I realized why she wasn't stressed out. She said, "Hello Wayne. Ku is helping me today. He is Duty. I am Elder." Nice one, Ruth. Ku was doing all the work. As they walked on by, she pointed to the next item on the list for Duty to do.

Unfortunately, not long after that funny day when he was duty and she was elder, we were shocked and saddened to hear Ku had died suddenly. I will never forget the powerful testimonies and tributes that were shared at the memorial service for Ku. Ruth and Ku were part of a significant number of people who left their homeland of Formosa, now known as Taiwan, to make a home in the United States. Ruth and Ku were some of early ones to make that move, and they settled initially on the east coast. The home of Ruth and Ku became the first stop in this new country for numerous friends and family following from Taiwan. The new country, the new culture, the new customs, which were all strange and unfamiliar to newcomers, made having a place of entry, a place of welcome, even a place of refuge vitally important. Ruth and Ku provided that for others. They opened their home, and they opened their hearts. Apparently one of the ways the Formosan culture displays respect, admiration, and affection is by sending flowers at a time of loss. The day we gathered for Ku's memorial service the church was filled to overflowing with bouquets and sprays of the most beautiful flowers. Ruth gets a handprint on my stole. The handprint has her name in it...and of course, a spot for Ku as well.

I don't feel bad for fudging with the rules and adding two names on my second handprint. When I tell you about the third handprint, you will realize it doesn't really fit with the others. The third handprint was an actual

literal handprint someone left on my life. My third handprint goes to a woman whose name, unlike Ruth and Naomi, is not to be found in the bible. But it is a great name. Her name is Polly. And if that isn't good enough, you will never believe her last name. It's just perfect. Polly Colle. Stick that on a handprint. What a memorable name...for a memorable woman. Polly was our neighbor. She was also a member of church. Polly loved to work in her yard, and she loved getting her hands dirty as she tended her many flowers and plants. She also put her hands right into this messy world we call life, a world where people suffer and go through great sadness. Polly volunteered countless hours at a local hospital She did this in the 1980's. Polly did this when a new disease came out that terrified people. She did this when a new disease came out that isolated people. That disease was called AIDS. When Polly heard how people with AIDS were being marginalized and isolated and even rejected, she literally demanded that she be allowed to use her volunteer hours at the hospital helping those suffering from AIDS.

One day I needed a neighbor like Polly. One sad day I desperately needed a neighbor like Polly Colle. My mom died on Saturday, May 5th, of 2012. That day Julie had boarded a plane bound for New York City. My two daughters were living out of town. My older son was off to Galveston and the younger was away on a project. My mom died in California and I was all alone in Texas. Late that evening I went out for a walk. I was walking with a heavy heart. From the trail near our house, I looked down Polly's street and there she was in her front yard, working in her flowerbed. I walked toward her and said hi. She stood up and her hands were covered in dirt. I said, "Polly, my mom died today. I could really use a hug." Sure enough I had come to the right place. This sweet woman named Polly Colle felt my sadness, felt my pain, felt my loss, and so she reached out and hugged me. But her hands were dirty. After she hugged me, I looked and the back of my shirt had these two handprints left from the muddy dirt she had been working in. After we cried, we laughed. I left her house comforted. I left her house covered with her dirty handprints. I wish I had saved that shirt with Polly's handprints. Today I have the opportunity to save that handprint. And so do you. Make a stole. Put some handprints on it. And then fill in the names. Shiphrah, Puah, Ruth, Naomi, and Polly Colle...and don't stop there. With each handprint, give thanks to God, for we are not alone. We have partners in faith.