

8 Now a new king came to power in Egypt who didn't know Joseph. 9 He said to his people, "The Israelite people are now larger in number and stronger than we are. 10 Come on, let's be smart and deal with them. Otherwise, they will only grow in number. And if war breaks out, they will join our enemies, fight against us, and then escape from the land." 11 As a result, the Egyptians put foremen of forced work gangs over the Israelites to harass them with hard work. They had to build storage cities named Pithom and Rameses for Pharaoh. 12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they grew and spread, so much so that the Egyptians started to look at the Israelites with disgust and dread. 13 So the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites. 14 They made their lives miserable with hard labor, making mortar and bricks, doing field work, and by forcing them to do all kinds of other cruel work.

15 The king of Egypt spoke to two Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah: 16 "When you are helping the Hebrew women give birth and you see the baby being born, if it's a boy, kill him. But if it's a girl, you can let her live." 17 Now the two midwives respected God so they didn't obey the Egyptian king's order. Instead, they let the baby boys live.

18 So the king of Egypt called the two midwives and said to them, "Why are you doing this? Why are you letting the baby boys live?"

19 The two midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because Hebrew women aren't like Egyptian women. They're much stronger and give birth before any midwives can get to them." 20 So God treated the midwives well, and the people kept on multiplying and became very strong. 21 And because the midwives respected God, God gave them households of their own.

22 Then Pharaoh gave an order to all his people: "Throw every baby boy born to the Hebrews into the Nile River, but you can let all the girls live."

- Common English Bible

Kevin and I were blessed to join a table of Presbytery representatives at the EMO gala this past Tuesday. EMO stands for Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon; it is the largest ecumenical organization in the nation and is preparing to celebrate its 50th anniversary. The adjective "Ecumenical" means representing a number of different Christian churches, and often points to efforts to promote the unity of the Christian church across our deep diversity. Perhaps when EMO started it was focused on Christian unity, but it is truly an interfaith organization now, promoting human unity and well being for all people. As a spokesperson said on Tuesday night, for 50 years EMO has been showing up, fixing problems, meeting needs, and spreading love. St. Andrew's is delighted to extend our reach to and service of neighbors through membership in EMO. EMO helps meet the needs of refugees and unhoused youth and

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hungry folks and advocates in Salem for more just public policy and gathers faith leaders from across diverse communities to strengthen relationships... and more... EMO also gives awards every year to emerging leaders and ecumenists. This year the awards were given to Taylor Stewart, the founder of the Oregon Remembrance Project, and Lift Every Voice Oregon, the grassroots, interfaith, broad coalition campaign that has produced the only ballot initiative in the country aimed at reducing gun violence.

Let me tell you a bit about Taylor Stewart. Taylor is a young, African American man who grew up in Oregon. Near the end of his college studies he took a trip to the American south and visited a number of civil rights memorials. While there he realized how much he did not know about his own state's racial history when he learned that a lynching took place in Coos Bay in 1902. He was initially hesitant to sign up to assist with raising awareness, but then was convicted by the words of John Lewis, "If not you, then who? If not now, then when?" He has since built a movement in Oregon that both memorializes tragic incidents in our local history and undertakes parallel contemporary efforts to create current justice. For example, consider current work in Oregon City, where a black businessman Jacob Vanderpool was driven out of the state in the mid 19th century, the only known person to have been removed on the basis of the racial exclusionary laws on the books in the state. The project is working to put up a plaque at the site of Vanderpool's business and to work with Oregon City Council to adopt a commitment to targeted recruitment of minority owned businesses in the community. The Oregon Remembrance project has had success in Coos Bay, and has exciting projects underway not only in Oregon City, but also in Grants Pass. Taylor's word to us on Tuesday was "Ordinary people have the opportunity to do extraordinary things by asking the question, 'Why not me?'"

It seems that two midwives in ancient Israel are a good example of the truth of this statement. That the names of two women from ancient Israel are remembered is truly a remarkable thing— they were ordinary people, and women at that— in a patriarchal world. But we know their names! I invite you to write them on your hearts— Shiprah and Puah. We know their names because they were confronted by unjust power and given an unjust command and they accessed their own power to resist. I know something about midwives— I birthed at home with the help of midwives; my sister is a

midwife. I know they are brave and tough souls. I know they are primarily in the business of catching new life, helping women to safely bring babies into this world, preserving the lives of women and babies at this tender transitional time. They are no strangers to death— sometimes death visits the liminal birthing space. But midwives bear scars on their hearts from such encounters. They are in the life business. I don't think, for one moment, that Shiphrah and Puah, are willing to catch a boy baby and kill him. But the king has ordered them to do so. Who are they to disobey the king? As Exodus records it, they choose to obey God, the giver of life, by disobeying the king. They are ordinary people put in a position to do an extraordinary thing, break the law to save babies, lots of babies. And when they are called before the king to account for the survival of all the little boys, they lie... they suggest they have no opportunity to carry it out because the Hebrew women are just too strong and they birth before they get there. They risk their own lives to save others.

I've jumped to the end of our story for today, though. Let me go back a bit. The scripture begins "Now a new king came to power in Egypt who didn't know Joseph." We jumped all the way from the call of Abraham, the very beginning of history of the family of God to the enslavement of that family in Egypt. As I reminded you before reading, the 12 tribes of Israel are directly descended from Abraham and they ended up in Egypt in a situation of famine, where one of Jacob's sons, Joseph, had risen to a position of power after his own brothers sold him into slavery. When his family came for help, he forgave them and helped them to settle in Egypt and for many decades his family was well cared for in Egypt because the King there loved and respected Joseph. But eventually memory fades and a king who does not know Joseph sees a growing foreign population and feels threatened by it. There is no indication that the Israelites in Egypt were causing any trouble. This is a tale as old as time, and as fresh as our current newsfeeds, the presence of a growing foreign population leads to fear and often oppression. According to Exodus that's what happened in Egypt. The Pharaoh tried to weaken the Israelites by subjecting them to brutal labor, enslaving them and forcing them to do much cruel work, and then tried to reduce the population by ordering the murder of baby boys. This was the backdrop to the extraordinary work undertaken by ordinary midwives, such that we remember their names today.

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There's an old hymn that I know some of you love that includes the line "Though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet." I think that in the world where the wrong is oft so strong— such that innocent lives are slaughtered, mass destruction threatened, power abused left and right- God's rule on behalf of life and love and justice is manifest in the acts of ordinary people taking up the work that is theirs to do— noticing what is wrong in their sphere and doing their part to right it. This is what Taylor Stewart and his partners in the Oregon Remembrance project are doing, it is what the hundreds of volunteers, some of you among them, of Lift Every Voice Oregon, are doing. It is what those of you working with Afghan refugees are doing. It is what those of you helping to clean up graffiti are doing. It is what the youth of St. Luke's Lutheran church are doing as they build a dog park for the residents of the Multnomah Safe Rest Village. It is what people all over our city, state, country, and world are doing. Admittedly, a LOT of bad can be done by just one or a few whose hearts are so wounded or minds are so twisted that they visit pain upon others. But almost as assuredly, a LOT of good can come when individuals and small groups of concerned citizens set out to love no matter what. We have been seeing this so clearly in our congregational life this past month. Take heart friends, if Shiphrah and Puah could resist the Pharaoh, we can resist evil power in our day too, and with God's help we will change the world for the better.

To learn more about EMO, visit <https://emoregon.org/>
To learn more about the Oregon Remembrance Project, visit <https://www.oregonremembrance.org/>
To learn more about LEVO (Lift Every Voice Oregon) visit <https://www.lifteveryvoiceoregon.com/>