

Memory Verse: Psalm 27.14 “Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage.”

Moreover, the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was called Shifrah and the other Pu‘ah. “When you attend the Hebrew women and see them giving birth,” he said, “if it’s a boy, kill him; but if it’s a girl, let her live.” However, the midwives were God-fearing women, so they didn’t do as the king of Egypt ordered but let the boys live. The king of Egypt summoned the midwives and demanded of them, “Why have you done this and let the boys live?” The midwives answered Pharaoh, “It’s because the Hebrew women aren’t like the Egyptian women - they go into labor and give birth before the midwife arrives.” Therefore God prospered the midwives, and the people continued to multiply and grow very powerful. Indeed, because the midwives feared God, he made them founders of families. Exodus 1:15-21

Four years ago this weekend the moving truck had left Etna and there was no furniture left in the parsonage; not even anyplace to sit down. We’d visited our favorite places in the valley and said our goodbyes, and there was just no way around it... it was time to go. We got in our cars and I drove as slowly as I could, as we came “south” (as the people in the uppermost part of northern California refer to the Bay Area.) It wasn’t just sadness over the goodbyes and concern for my little Scott Valley churches that made me want to use my feet as brakes to slow the car. It was fear. Fear of the unknown. Fear of a new thing. Fear of meeting new people and beginning ministry in a new place. Fear of beginning *life* in a new place. I don’t think I had this conversation in prayer with God, but I know what I’d been thinking: “I trust You, Lord; I have confidence in You... when I’m in my comfort zone, and I know what to expect. I have courage when there isn’t anything to be afraid of.” I’m pretty sure Jesus was rolling His eyes then... and perhaps many other times because of how I go into new situations... cautiously, reluctantly, and fearfully, instead of joyously jumping into the Living Water that is His love, and His presence, and... my experience with Him.

Yesterday I visited with Missy and Tookie and Margaret, and I told them that the image Jesus has given me is of a child standing on the edge of a pool, curling my toes around the edge, and Jesus is in the water, holding out His arms and He says to me, “Jump. I’ll catch you. I always catch you. Just jump.”

This is what I know four years later... I periodically know it and then forget it and need to be reminded again. That God lead me, and God catches me when I jump, and that God’s desire is for me to trust, and have courage. God’s desire is for me, and for all of us, to have courage so that we can experience the fullness and newness of life. God has shown me blessings of this new ministry and this new place too numerous to count. I have experienced what God said through the prophet Malachi, “See if I don’t open up heaven itself to you and pour out blessings beyond your wildest dreams.”

This month I’m preaching on courage, and we have a memory verse. Will you find it on page 4, and say it with me? **Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage. Psalm 27:14**

Tucked into the long and dramatic story of Moses there's a little-known story of two courageous women, Shifrah and Pu'ah. Courage, I think, is less about "growing a pair" or aggressively speaking your mind, or bluffing your way through a situation, and more about *listening* and *waiting* for God's guidance, and *then* acting boldly and with confidence.

In the 60's there was a TV show called "My Favorite Martian" with Bill Bixby and Ray Walston, who played Uncle Martin, the Martian. Periodically Uncle Martin would need to contact his mother-ship and so he'd go off alone, and two little antennas would rise up out of his head, and he'd be able to communicate with the mother-ship. There are two spiritual practices we can learn from Uncle Martin: First, we rarely communicate with or hear the voice of God (the mother-ship) in the midst of a crowd, whether the noise and the crowd are around us or within us. We need to go apart, and be quiet, and still, to hear God's voice. To hear God's voice leading us, and giving us courage, we have to wait on God. To seek God. To expect God. The second spiritual practice we can learn from Uncle Martin is that we have to raise our antennas. We have to practice sensitivity to God's Spirit, to God's still, small voice, so that we are like strings on a harp that make music when the Spirit touches us. We can learn... it's a practice: to be still, to wait on God, to recognize God's voice speaking to us, giving us strength and courage. There are a myriad of ways - silence, worship, walking, being in nature, journaling, singing, listening to the voice of a trusted friend, even in physical work if we are mindful and present to the moment - we can practice sensitivity to the Holy Spirit; we can learn to raise our antennas, and to communicate with the mother-ship (that is God.)

Midrash is stories that are told to fill in information that is left out of sacred text. Midrash is like the butter and honey and nuts between layers of filo dough that make a delightful little bite of dessert called baklava. Midrash is used to help fill in the layers of a story, especially a brief story like the six sentences that make up the story of Shifrah and Pu'ah. The text doesn't tell us that Shifrah and Pu'ah had spiritual disciplines of being still and being sensitive to God's voice, but we assume, we understand, that they trusted God enough to risk their lives to save Israelite baby boys. That's Midrash... filling in the gaps in the story and making Shifrah and Pu'ah come off the pages of scripture and alive for us. These two women speak to us today of waiting and listening, and of strength and courage.

Shifrah and Pu'ah were two midwives who disobeyed the king's orders to kill all Hebrew baby boys at birth. If it was discovered that they'd disobeyed the king's command, it would certainly have meant death for them. But these two women listened to another voice, the voice of God, and let the babies live. The midwives disobeyed the king and lied to him. And God rewarded them. Not exactly what we expect from God... but it's said that God draws with crooked lines. All of us can relate to this. Our lives aren't straight lines or full of perfect behavior, and yet God uses us to fulfill God's plan. No matter who we are, or how good or bad we think we are, God can and does use us to fulfill God's plan. Like Shifrah and Pu'ah, God uses us, and our trust and courage, to help birth God's dreams for us. Shifrah and Pu'ah. Say their names with me. They are our spiritual ancestors and they have a lesson in courage for us.

Moses' story is long, and full of drama, and suspense, and murder, and fear, and wandering... it's a long story that starts with these two women, Shifrah and Pu'ah, who

refused to listen to a paranoid and evil king and instead listened to the voice of God. God used Shifrah and Pu'ah to give life to Moses, and to help birth God's dream of freedom and salvation for the Israelites, and through them, all of us. Many women's names in scripture have been forgotten, but we remember and celebrate these two courageous women whose trust in God helped deliver a people.

Why does this story of Shifrah and Pu'ah touch me so? It's because these two women knew the risk in what they were doing - and I'm sure they were afraid - but they waited on the Lord; they drew strength from God. And they were strong enough (because they waited, listened, and trusted God) to trust their own intuition. In a culture that gave women no freedom and no innate value apart from birthing children and tending a home, Shifrah and Pu'ah acted courageously on what they understood to be God's will, and through them, God birthed a nation and a people. Shifrah and Pu'ah must have acted together, and supported and encouraged each other, to be more than fearful servants of an evil king. Instead together they used the gifts they knew they had between them: love, trust, and courage. We see between the layers in Shifrah and Pu'ah's story their ability to listen to God, their friendship and support of each other, and their courage in defying evil.

My Favorite Martian also has something to teach us about courage as a spiritual practice. Like Uncle Martin, we first have to go away from crowds and noise (even the crowds and noise that are within us) and then we need to raise our antennas, to develop sensitive listening to the mother-ship (that is, God.)

It is God's sense of humor that the Holy Spirit has led me to preach on courage this month. God is teaching me courage, and I continue to learn that it is a practice. Courage wasn't something I was born with or that was encouraged in me. But it is God's will for me, and it is God's will for you... to wait, to be still and listen for God, and to trust that where God leads, us God will care for us. (God catches us when we jump!)

It is God's desire for us to have faith, and confidence, and courage, because God loves us. We are God's people. And God is using us, as God used Shifrah and Pu'ah, to birth God's dreams.

In this month of focusing on courage, I'd like us all to memorize this verse from the bible. Let's say it again together. **"Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage."** Psalm 27:14. Next week another story and more lessons from scripture about courage, but meanwhile, learn this verse. Take it to heart. Amen.