

Sermon 21.01.24

Exodus Part 2 - Framing Stories - stories that shape, lead and inspire us.

SCRIPTURE-

Exodus 1: 15-22

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 'When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.' But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, 'Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?' The midwives said to Pharaoh, 'Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.' So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, 'Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.'

SERMON:

Gwen Robinson, now known as Zoharah Simmons, was born in 1944, in Memphis, Tennessee, great granddaughter of a slave, raised by her devoutly Baptist grandmother, Rhonda Bell Robinson. (The elder) Robinson schooled her granddaughter in their family's history of slavery, her own difficulties being a sharecropper, and how Mississippi was the worst possible place for Black people. As a girl, Gwen promised her grandmother she would never go to Mississippi, living out her grandmother's dream as the first person in her family to graduate from high school and go on to Spelman College. It was there that she heard Dr. King speak for the first time, and soon became involved with SNICK - Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), much to her family's dismay.

When plans for the 1964 Freedom Summer school project, organized by SNICK were finalized, Robinson was both excited and terrified about spending the summer in the one state her grandmother had warned her against. Gwen thought Freedom Summer would be a giant wake-up call for the

country, but when she heard she was being assigned to the town of Laurel because it was “too dangerous to send whites,” she didn’t know if she would make it out alive.<sup>1</sup>  
She recently reflected on a pivotal moment in the work back then ...

15:05-16:00 (see footnote 2 for link)

I’ve been waiting on you all my life. What a welcome into shared community.

That was the beginning of a long journey together - these 2 women and countless more, working for the freedom for their people. Ms. Spinks opened her home to Gwen and others, at great danger to herself, her husband and her teenage son. She often sat up nights with the lights out and a shotgun across her lap, telling Gwen “Now you all can sleep. I’m watching. And I’m not letting anybody bust up in here, not without a fight.”<sup>2</sup>

This was not work to be done alone. It required bravery, sacrifice and a deep commitment to the community and to one’s faith. Dr. Simmons continues...

11:04- 11: 33 On Being - footnote 2

12:49 - 13:53...

Loving our community is indispensable for change to come about.

I wonder what it was like for Shiprah and Puah, the midwives who chose to follow the Lord of Life, not the lord of fear and death. Did they know that loving God meant loving their community, at great cost?

These 2 women are the first two of 12 women who show up in the opening chapters here in the book of Exodus. 12 women, mostly unnamed, are the change agents of a God who promises life, not death. 12 women - a counterpoint to the 12 tribes of Israel named in last week's scripture. The freedom of these 12 tribes depends on these 12 women’s deeds as well as on the leadership of Moses. Yes, the contributions of these women are both collective and heroic, beginning here with the midwives, to whom divine authority seems more important than the word of the powerful pharaoh.

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<sup>1</sup> [Gwen Robinson \(Zoharah Simmons\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Living the Questions: A Civil Rights Elder on Exhaustion and Rest, Spiritual Practice, and the Necessity of Loving Community](#)

Some scholars suggest this is the oldest record in world literature of civil disobedience. These women are courageous, unlike the Egyptians who 'dread' the Israelites.<sup>3</sup>

These women, named and unnamed - 12 in all - that symbol of completeness - They are courageous, wily, giving their allegiance not to the lord in power, the lord of scarcity and fear, but to the Lord of life. They risk everything for their community. They know that to act as part of a whole, doing their small part, is what brings life.

Working together as a way of caring for one another. They don't do it alone. We don't have just one woman named here - in our story today we have 2 women, and later others, teaming up to support one another in the work of community building, ??? (how to describe and make the transition).  
(6 minutes to here...)

Another, very different story of how working as a community, a team, helps us not just survive, but thrive...

When Abby Wombach retired from soccer at age 35, she had scored more goals than any man or woman in the history of professional soccer. She was named U.S. Soccer's Female Athlete of the Year 5 times. She's an former Olympian, and now a writer, and activist. In her recent book, *Wolfpack*, she says "*The strength of the Pack is the Wolf, and the strength of the Wolf is the Pack.*" *she* talks about how she never scored a goal alone...She says - You can tell everything about a team by the way they celebrate together. After a score, you need to either point or run. Point or run - point toward the person who passed you the ball, or run towards your teammates to lift them up - acknowledge the work of the team.<sup>4,5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Meyers, Carol. 2005. *Exodus*. Cambridge University Press. P 37.

<sup>4</sup> Wombach, Abby. 2019 *WOLFPACK: How to Come Together, Unleash Our Power, and Change the Game*. Macmillan Press.

<sup>5</sup><http://www.15minutebusinessbooks.com/blog/2019/08/01/abby-wombach-wolfpack-how-to-come-together-unleash-our-power-and-change-the-game-here-are-her-eight-lessons-and-takeaways/>

In our biblical text today, the midwives are pointing a proverbial finger towards God and moving toward their community. These Hebrew women are strong... they recognize they need one another to not just survive, but to thrive. They work together to serve the God of freedom and Life, not the lord of division and death.

How about us? What does this say to us today?

I must admit, I have been puzzling over this for years. I long for simple, easy answers - to what it means to truly work together, to even really know what this work is, to which I and we are called.

Right now I still have lots of questions -

What, what I said, not who, what are the pharaohs, the lords of scarcity, fear and death in our world today?

How are we called to show up, as ones who work together to usher in new life?

How do we do this? I'm not sure...

In his inaugural address this week, President Biden recalled the Civil War, the Great Depression, the World Wars, and the attacks of 9/11, noting that "[i]n each of these moments, enough of us came together to carry all of us forward."<sup>6</sup>

Enough of us came together to carry all of us forward.

Hmmm...

Makes me think of Shiphrah and Puah, those midwives who protected the new life of their community.

Makes me think of Ms. Eberta Spinks saying - I've been waiting for you all my life... opening her home to support the work of freedom.

Makes me think of those who choose to point at and run towards - pointing at those who work with us to bring the kingdom of God here on earth... running towards those who are already doing this work, offering our support and encouragement.

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<sup>6</sup> from Heather Cox Richardson, *Letters from an American*, 1/21/21

I have lots of questions, but maybe, just maybe, if enough of us come together, we can carry on this work, carrying all of us forward.

So how do we work together, like Abby and her team, like Eberta Spinks and Zoharah Simmons, like Shiphrah and Puah? How do we work together to serve the God of freedom and life, sometimes at great personal danger?

In his inaugural address, Biden recalled the Civil War, the Great Depression, the World Wars, and the attacks of 9/11, noting that “[i]n each of these moments, enough of us came together to carry all of us forward.” from Heather Cox Richardson, *Letters from an American*, 1/21/21

How do you celebrate some of the goals of your life? Are you pointing to the person who passed you the ball?

34:30 - when she wants to punish her children, she makes them sit down and watch her old goals. After one of the watching sessions, her daughter said - ‘you’re always pointing at people, what are you pointing at?’ Abby responded, I’ve never scored a single goal in my life without the help of a teammate....

There’s a big difference between competing against one another and competing with each other. The only way we can win is if we fought together, not against each other. AW writes about “Point or run” - when the spotlight is on me, I point at the others who made it possible, when the spot light is on someone else, I run towards her and cheer her on. We are stronger together.

**That** so often we’re told we need to work against each other, not with and for one another.

32:00 (not to play)

Showing up for one another, how can I use failure and turn it into fuel, so that we get closer, as family, as people on a team...

33:30 -

11:04- 11: 33 On Being - unloving harms our ability to be successful...

Transcript On Being with

GRSimmons:<https://onbeing.org/programs/living-the-questions-a-civil-rights-elder-on-exhaustion-and-rest-spiritual-practice-and-the-necessity-of-loving-community/>

I know that the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) organizers would sometimes stay in communities, but SNCC was really known for moving in and becoming a part of the communities they were organizing.

**Dr. Simmons:**

Absolutely. I was recently talking about my time in Laurel, Mississippi. There were just three of us, two guys and myself, and we split the list up. If they lived on the same street, maybe one would stay in the car, and one would go to one door and one the other.

And it was my great fortune that the door that I knocked on was a Mrs. Eberta Spinks. I was like, “I’m wondering if I could speak to you for a few minutes?” She was looking me up and down. I had on my blue jeans and my blue-jean jacket, which had become a uniform for SNCC organizers. And she said, “Are you one of those Freedom Riders?” I was like, “Uh, yes, ma’am.” She said, “Come in. I’ve been waiting on you all my life.”

That was literally the beginning of the Laurel project. I lived with that woman for two years in her home. I went to church with her almost every Sunday — I didn’t have a choice. We had to go to church, we had to live by their standards — no smoking, no drinking, that kind of thing — in their homes. But they were willing to follow us to jail, to beatings. It was really incredible. The love that I developed for Mrs. Spinks, I don’t know how you explain it – and for all the other people that I met and who became a part of the Laurel project.

13:07 - we must love our communities that we are organizing for change.

15:07 - 16:02: - Laurel MS - met Eberta Spinks. “Come in, I’ve been waiting on you all my life...”

From AMC conversation:

Cindy Lapp spoke of lawyer in her congregation who said January 5 and 6 most hopeful days of last 4 years. Jan 5 for election results in GA and Jan 6 for bringing the poison to the surface, so now we can really work with it.

Those of us who are white are on the white supremacy spectrum/path. Multi-faceted whiteness. It’s about hierarchy/patriarchy/power.

How do we be an authentic witness in this time? Not creating bright lines and also not becoming the white moderate that MLK spoke against.



Naming that our God is a God who takes sides - the side of the poor, the oppressed, a God who leans toward justice. But we, imperfect, are not that god. We need to be careful how we draw lines, we are complex - what we want, or say we want, and what we do are two different things. Need to be confessional.