

When Eggs Hatch
Exodus 1:8-22
Rev. Dan Schumacher

Here's a joke for you:

A pastor was reflecting on his years of ministry with his congregation: "My first baby dedication, the boy grew up and became an atheist. My first baptism, the girl backslid and left the faith. My first marriage ended up in divorce. But, good news, my first funeral, the man stayed right where I put him!"

Here's another:

A school was having a problem with bats — bats everywhere! The principal called up the local Lutheran pastor. He came out and confirmed the bats, and the bats were never seen again.

...Maybe you have to be Lutheran to get that one...

How about this one:

A pastor, upon retiring, was going through his closets, sorting out stuff. He was cleaning out his daughters closet when he came upon a shoebox with three eggs and one hundred one-dollar bills in it. He showed his wife and said, "Our daughter forgot to take this when she moved out."

His wife said, "Oh, that's not hers; that's mine."

He said, "What are the eggs for?"

"You don't want to know..."

He pressed her, saying, "After forty-five years of marriage are you really going to keep secrets from me?"

She relented. "When you became a pastor, I decided that every time your sermon bombed — when you *laid an egg* in the pulpit — I would put an egg in the shoebox."

He said, "Well that's not bad. Three eggs in forty-five years? What are the one hundred one-dollar bills for?"

She said, "You don't want to know..."

He pressed her. She relented. "Well, when I got a dozen eggs, I sold them to the neighbor for a dollar..."

I wonder how many one-dollar bills are tucked away in Christen's closet.

Have you ever felt like you laid an egg?

You set out to cook that complicated recipe and you end up ordering take-out instead. You started the coffee pot without the pot underneath it. You turned the wrong way down a one way street. You failed to record that check in your register and overdraft your account. You started a home project and had to hire a contractor to come fix what you started.

You worked hard on a presentation for work, a Sunday school lesson, a speech for class – and it just flopped. You totally choked on that first date and made it awkward even though you really liked him. You forgot your wedding anniversary. You forgot your kid's soccer game. You forgot to call your brother on the anniversary of his wife's death. You laid an egg.

Somedays it feels like we lay more eggs than actually do anything good. Life is moving at lightening speed for some of us – even and especially in quarantine. For example, consider those reporters who try to find a quiet place in their house to do the nationally televised interview by way of a video call, all the while their pre-teen son is doing a silly dance in the background.

Sometimes it is easy to feel like our efforts just aren't good enough, aren't bold enough, aren't effective enough. Sometimes we wonder if all our efforts are making any difference at all.

Do you ever wonder about that? Do you ever wonder if all that work you've done matters? Do you ever wonder if your efforts – to raise your kids, to do good work at your job, to be faithful to you community of faith, to serve God – even matter? Do you ever wonder if your life is making any difference at all?

I wonder if you've ever heard the names Shiprah and Puaah before? Their story is for people like us – people who sometimes wonder if our small bit really makes any difference at all.

It's an interesting story, full of suspense, full of humor, and full of challenge for us. It opens with a reminder that we're no longer talking about the time when Jews were held in high esteem in pharaoh's court. Joseph is long since dead, when a new king comes to power who does not know or remember Joseph.

It's fascinating, you know. We aren't told this pharaoh's name. We aren't told who he's related to or how. Is he tall or dark or handsome? We don't know. The only description we're given of this pharaoh is that he "did not know Joseph" (Exodus 1:8). What that really means is that he did not know Joseph's *God*, either.

The Hebrew people have remained in Egypt and, though they have not struck it rich, they are having lots of babies... lots and lots of babies.

The new pharaoh sees the Israelites multiplying, and it scares him. Those Hebrews may not be rich, but they are healthy and there are a lot of them! And so Pharaoh asked himself, "What if some other nation attacks and those Israelites rise up and side with our enemies?"

"Aha! I know what I'll do. I'll make them my slaves and I'll put slave-drivers over them. And I'll make them build my fortresses. The labor will be so hard on them that when they come home from work, they won't have the energy to make more babies."

But pharaoh's plan backfired. Not only did Israelites stay healthy, they also began having even more babies! In fact, the harder the Egyptians worked the Israelites, the more they seemed to multiply. So pharaoh tried to take his plan a step further.

He called in the two midwives, Shiprah and Puah (fascinating that we know their names, but not the name of the emperor of Egypt), and said to them, "Whenever you go to an Israelite woman to help her give birth, right when the child is born, check to see if it is a boy or a girl. If it is a boy, kill it on the spot."

Can you imagine that scenario? By profession, it was their job to ensure the healthy and safe delivery of children. They were trained professionals in bringing babies into the world safely. That was their job. It was their calling. It was their very vocation — to help bring *life* into this world safely. And here pharaoh was asking that they use their unique position at the moment of birth and betray their vocation to deal death, and not life.

And here is the pivot point — the fulcrum — on which the whole story turns. Exodus 1:17 says, "But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live."

John Lewis would have said what they were getting into was "good trouble."

Remember: this king of Egypt, this pharaoh enslaved an entire group of people in order to make sure he wouldn't lose his position of power. He set a system of abuse and oppression over an entire nation of people. He built his fortresses and his storehouses on their backs. He even ordered that midwives become executioners. We have no reason to doubt that pharaoh would not have killed Shiprah and Puah in an instant for their disobedience. He held all power over life and death.

So, why would Shiprah and Puah risk their lives by not obeying pharaoh's dictates?

Because, as Exodus 1:17 tells us, as much as they might have feared pharaoh, *they feared God more.*

They feared God. It's a concept with which we modern, enlightened people struggle. I think we struggle with it, because it isn't very therapeutic.

We prefer thinking of God in positive, affirming terms. We like to think of God as "our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble" (Ps 46:1). We like to think of God as the mother hen who gathers us under her wing and protects us. We think of God as the one who loves us and guides us and comforts us. We think of God as our heavenly Father. And surely God is *all* of these things, but is God also someone to be feared?

You cannot avoid it if you read the Bible. "The fear of the Lord" is one of the most common themes in the Old Testament. In fact, both Psalms and Proverbs assert that "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of all wisdom" (Psalm 111:10; Prov. 9:10).

So what does it mean to fear the Lord?

Does it mean being "terrified" of the Lord? Does it mean holding a "healthy respect" for the Lord? Does it mean to be in awe of the Lord? Can it mean all of these things?

I think I experience something of what it means to "fear the Lord" every time I visit the ocean. The first view I catch of the ocean, each and every time I go, my heart seems to skip a beat, my breath catches in my chest, and I stand in absolute awe of its enormity and its beauty. And as I come closer and stand at waters edge, I also have the sneaking suspicion that the ocean's power could kill me in a second – especially if I were to choose to disregard its power. I am in awe of it, and I hold a healthy fear of it.

I suspect "the fear of the Lord" is sort of like that.

The ancient Christian mystics called it the *mysterium tremendum* – the overwhelming mystery of God that both repels and attracts.

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way: "When biblical writers speak of 'the fear of the Lord,' this is what they mean: fear of God's pure being, so far beyond human imagining that trying to look into it would be like trying to look into the sun" (*Walking in the Dark*).

Only the pure, unblemished mystery of God could so compel a couple of midwives to risk their own lives for the sake of others. And if you fear the Lord like they did, then the pharaohs of the world don't seem so scary.

Psalm 27:1 says it like this:

"The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"

When Rolf Jacobson was in high school, he had to have both legs amputated to save his life from cancer. Today, Rolf is an Old Testament professor at Luther Seminary, but back then he was just a *scared* high school kid.

He says he never feared dying. He did, however, fear what would become of his *living*.

- Would he be able to have meaningful work?
- Would he find someone to marry?
- Would he be able to have kids?

In the midst of this fear, he says, Psalm 27 became the center of his faith.

A few years ago, Rolf was at this favorite Mexican restaurant with his kids, when their waiter came to the table. This guy was *HUGE* – football player huge – and as he reached down to hand out menus, he had this prominent tattoo on his forearm that read “Psalm 27:1.” Just that: “Psalm 27:1”

Rolf asked him what that was about. All the he said was: “Really bad childhood.”

Rolf said, “Here was this healthy, strong guy – seemingly *nothing* to fear, and yet – just like me, he clung to: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”

Friends, I believe this one verse – Psalm 27:1 – is an essential foundation to answering *every* call of God in our life.

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”

In some ways, Shiprah and Puah didn’t *do* much. In fact, they are now recorded in the pages of sacred scripture for simply *NOT* doing the very thing they were commanded to do.

And because they chose to fear God above all else and to answer God’s call on their lives, Moses was given a chance at life. Because of Shiprah and Puah, Moses was born – and the rest is history.

Andy Andrews wrote a little book called *The Butterfly Effect* in which he catalogues the extraordinary impact of simple and courageous efforts. Except when you look back, you can never really tell which efforts made the biggest difference.

So, for instance, should Norman Borlaug, who developed high yield, disease resistant corn and wheat be credited with saving two billion lives from famine, or should Henry Wallace, the one-term U.S. Vice-President, who created an office in New Mexico to develop hybrid seed for arid climates and hired Borlaug to run it. Or should we credit George Washington Carver, who took a young Henry Wallace for long walks and instilled in him his love of plants. Or should it be Moses and Susan Carver, who adopted the orphaned George Washington Carver as their son. Or should it be... I think you get the point. Andrews points out how inter-connected our actions are, creating an unforeseen effect that can ripple across time and space to affect the lives of millions.

Who knows? Maybe one of you is a school teacher who will give encouragement to a student who will see something in herself that she hadn't before and, in turn befriend another student who was on the verge of giving up on life.

Or maybe one of you is trying out another complicated recipe that will probably end up in ordering take-out yet again, but what you didn't realize is that your child is watching you. And because you are so willing to try and to fail, to try and to fail – to get up time and again, to not give up, but to try, try again – unbeknownst to you, you were instilling a model of perseverance in your child, which served them their whole life long.

Or maybe one of you will go out on another disastrous first date, and what you think is painfully awkward and uncomfortable the whole night long, they will think is endearing. What you think is “over before it started,” they will think is “only the beginning.” And from that painful first date springs a 60 year marriage that stands as a testimony to the power of covenant between two people – encouraging and challenging untold hundreds of married couples along the way.

Or maybe one of you will teach a Sunday School lesson that you think is flop, but something you said stuck. Maybe it was a lesson on the Hebrew midwives, Shiprah and Puah, or maybe it was on Psalm 27:1 – and years later that child or teen, now an adult, answers the call to ministry and they point back to the day when you taught them that one unforgettable lesson about choosing the LORD over anything else.

You thought you laid an egg. But it just hatched, and God's hand was all over it from the very beginning.

Amen.