

“Do Not Be Conformed”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. These ominous words begin the epic tale of what would happen to the descendents of Joseph. Last week, we saw how Joseph became elevated in Pharaoh’s court due to his wise stewardship over food during a famine that gripped the region. But generations later, food was no longer the trading commodity that brought power to Egypt. Instead, bodies and labor became the tools to enrich the wealth and power of Pharaoh and his collaborators. The Hebrews, who had settled the land as peasant farmers, had grown substantially and Pharaoh became threatened by their potential for political power.

Pharaoh subdued the Egyptians with work; rationalizing, if they are forced to work, they will have no time to plan a revolution. And so, they were made to build supply cities for Pharaoh.

But as much as bodies became a tool for oppression, bodies also became a tool for liberation. Exodus reports that the more the Hebrews were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread. This filled Egypt with dread. So they became ruthless taskmasters, making the Hebrew lives bitter in hard work in mortar and brick and every kind of field labor.

Not only that; Pharaoh came up with a plan for genocide: the idea that he could wipe out any threat from the Jewish population. He ordered the midwives to kill any baby boy born to a Hebrew woman.

Pharaoh’s glaring mistake was that he thought that only the *males* could have the power to subvert his rule. He was very wrong.

A whole group of women and girls prove to be the perfect foils to Pharaoh’s program of oppression and genocide. First, the midwives, Shiprah and Puah, whom the bible goes out of its way to name when many characters, especially women, go unnamed in the bible— just go on performing their duty, to help usher life into the world. Pharaoh questioned them, and their response— “the Hebrew women are too vigorous; they give birth before the midwife can get to them” plays games with Pharaoh’s racist assumptions: that Hebrew bodies giving birth act and perform differently than Egyptian bodies giving birth would. “The Hebrew word *hayot* in this verse is softened too much when it’s translated as “vigorous,” “strong,” or “lively,” as it usually is. The literal translation is closer to “brutish, animalistic, unrefined.” They use Pharaoh’s very tools to dismantle oppression. ¹

¹ Kat Armas, “They Use Pharaoh’s Tools to Dismantle Oppression” in *The Christian Century*, June 30, 2021.

Because Shiprah and Puah refused to conform to Pharaoh's agenda, because instead of killing, they used their bodies for crouching and comforting, coaxing and catching, the Hebrew babies— all of them— survived. We focus on Moses' survival, which is indeed important. But without all those other Hebrew babies, there would have been a lost generation in the Exodus story.

60 years ago, Martin Luther King gave the 16th speech at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Just before King stepped up to speak, Mahalia Jackson had sung. Toward the end of King's speech, Jackson called out, "Tell them about the dream, Martin!" King went on to speak extemporaneously the words that are now embedded in our American story: "When we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: *Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!*"

King's speech is what was most remembered about that day. But just as Moses would not have existed without the courageous efforts of the midwives, who refused to conform to Pharaoh's demands, King's speech, and the March on Washington, would not have happened without its own group of midwives. In the summer of 1963, a group of people gathered for the whole summer in a townhouse on West 130th St. in Harlem. Bayard Rustin, a gay, black organizer who had influenced King on the teachings of nonviolent resistance, brought together 6 different groups: the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, N.A.A.C.P., National Urban League, Congress of Racial Equality and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, as well as labor leader A. Phillip Randolph— each sector working on liberation, but with different and sometimes competing philosophies on how it should happen. But that summer, their combined effort and ideas helped to bring forth the birth of a national conversation on racial justice as well as labor justice.²

Next Sunday we have our Blessing of the Backpacks, but it is also Labor Day Weekend. So I would like to take the opening these scriptures give us to speak about the importance of labor, and the distinguishment between labor that yields oppression, and the labor that yields life. Shiprah and Puah were able to use their labor as midwives to usher forth life, and it was a counter to Pharaoh's mandated labor, that yielded oppression and death. Thanks to the labor movement, we are able to advocate for life-giving labor for all. As we approach Labor Day weekend, let us consider what life-giving labor would mean for us.

Moses had a council of combined efforts as well, from the midwives, Shiprah and Puah, to Pharaoh's daughter. Knowing her father's rule, she could have tipped the basket to drown the baby in the Nile, but instead she defied her father and brought the child into the palace to live a privileged life— but not before he was weaned. Miriam, Moses's sister, hopped out of the reeds

² John Leland, "The 1963 March on Washington Changed America. Its Roots Were in Harlem" in *The New York Times*, August 26, 2023.

where she had been watching to offer her very own mother as a nursemaid. So, Moses grew up at his mother's knee, learning the stories of his people and the covenant with their God.

Each person in the story who countered Pharaoh put their skin on the line. Any one of them—maybe even Pharaoh's daughter— could have been killed for their defiance. Their actions? They weren't *attacking* Pharaoh or organizing an army. Their only weapons were catching a baby's head; drawing a child from a basket to a body; feeding a child with milk and the stories of his people. Paul wrote in Romans 12, "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable, to God, which is your spiritual worship." Luke Powery, a chaplain at Duke University, wrote that "to be human is to have a body, and a body is part of Christian spirituality. To be Christian, as Paul implies, is to have a body and to be a part of a body."³

Pharaoh was trying to sacrifice bodies through labor, exploitation, and death. But when we are called to be part of Christ's body, we have a different kind of sacrifice: one that brings forward *life*, rather than death. And our very bodies are tools for spiritual worship: our lips, our hands, our gathering arms, our sweat, our marching, our moving forward and sometimes—when we refuse to be conformed to this world— our walking away. These are all ways that we can worship God.

There is so much about our society that teaches us to see our bodies as the enemy. Watch any show with commercials, and you will see ads for pharmaceuticals that convince you you are probably sick just by hearing the unending list of side effects. The Ozempic era teaches us that we can be masters over our DNA. Messages of race become embedded into our bodies and damage our ability to love ourselves and one another, focusing on skin color, hair texture, or shape of eyes, nose, hips— rather than seeing our very bodies as reflections of the image of God.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds, Paul tells us. When we can free ourselves from the thinking that capitalizes off our notions of our bodily infirmities, and that puts us against one another, then we might have the kind of vision that seeks freedom in other ways too, and joins with others in working as one body to make that happen. When we do that, we come to see that the Body of Christ indeed lives and breathes and sighs and marches and weeps and feeds and heals and serves and **LIVES** among us.

³ Luke Powery, "In the Lectionary: Sunday, August 24, 2014: Romans 12:1-8" in *The Christian Century*, August 20, 2014.

