

Sermon Text for October 10, 2021

Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Romans 13:1, Exodus 1:15-22 **The story of Shiprah and Puah**

Back when things were normal, don't you love starting your sermon that way, but back when things were normal I used to preach on stewardship once a year, and I also used to preach on one topic of the day that was considered political and address it from a Scriptural and reformed perspective. Honestly, I haven't done that all too consistently here at this church. I think we addressed the death penalty one Sunday and then homosexuality another Sunday, but over the course of this pandemic I've tried to steer clear of anything too controversial since I felt like there were enough things swirling around us that could divide us, why add one more?

A few years back in our Young Adult Sunday School class we addressed all of the controversial topics. We had about 20 people in class with ages from their 20's into, well me and Stacy were the oldest, and we looked from a Scriptural perspective the topics of parenting, social media, immigration, identity, Homosexuality, abortion, gun violence, finances, death penalty. We covered all of them and we were well represented with people on every issue all over the map from the far left to the far right. You know what happened after that series was concluded. We felt even closer to each other, and more bonded together as a group than we ever had.

As we laid out where we stood and tried to understand where the other person was coming from, it created within us a sense of we are all in this together trying to figure things out through the direction and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It never became us and them, it was always us working together to try to understand Scripture and while at the same time recognizing that Scripture may say one thing to me, which is right, and something else to you, which is normally wrong. No, we never came at it from right or wrong or from the point of view that if you believe differently then you are not a Christian or you are not loved by God. We have to set those ground rules today if we are going to address a controversial, political topic.

The story of Shiprah and Puah lends itself easily to a discussion on civil disobedience because we find ourselves required to look at moments when we are told by the law of the land one thing and by God another. How do we act, do we obey the law and disobey God? Or do we obey God and disobey the law? That was the choice that we see before Shiprah and Puah, well, you can imagine what they did, and I would argue that is what we are called to do as well. It

comes down to God understanding that human life is sacred. That always has to be our perspective in whatever decision and whatever topic that we address as disciples of Jesus Christ. Let's read.

READ

Let's go back to our first Scripture which is Romans 13:1 and which has been used throughout history to support corrupt and ruthless governments. This Scripture was used here in the United States to support slavery, and to support a loyalty to Great Britain against the revolutionary war. It was used to support Nazism and other forms of totalitarian government that wanted to enslave people in a variety of ways. So, while it is the Word of God, we have seen over history that it has been used traditionally in ways that are not of God, so when we read it, we have to be careful not to spew it too glibly because it carries with it the weight of history which is a heavy and tragic weight.

The reason why it is misused is because people don't tend to go all the way to the end of Paul's statement in this chapter, if you go to vs.9b-10 you will see what the end result of obeying the government ought to be. Can someone read that for us: Love your neighbor as yourself, Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. Obeying the government is not the fulfilment of the law, loving your neighbor is the fulfilment of the law.

But what if loving your neighbor requires you to disobey the law, which do you do? Do you obey the law, or do you love your neighbor? You know the answer to that, but that was the ethical question that was posed to our protagonists in our story today, Shiprah and Puah. Let's go to Exodus.

We pick up the story at the beginning of Exodus, even before God is mentioned. Remember the story of Exodus, Moses leads the people of Exodus out of Egypt and away from slavery. Well, this is before all of that and the people are still slaves. Pharaoh is worried about God's people because they are multiplying and he doesn't want them to become too powerful, so he increases their hours and decreases the quality of their material so they will have to work even harder to get things done. He hopes to break their will. It doesn't work. So he was still not satisfied so he comes up with another plan, and this plan involves Shiprah and Puah.

They are describes as the Hebrew midwives, so they were responsible for the births of all the children of Egypt. He commands them to kill each male child as the woman is in labor. He moves from plan A, forced labor to break their will, to infanticide as a plan B, similar to Herod. But let me ask you a question, if you were going to be involved in genocide, why wouldn't you

kill the female children? If you kill all the females it is going to be very hard to have children around. Pharaoh doesn't seem to be the smartest bulb in the box, and that plays out later on as well.

They are commanded to carry out this order, and they disobey, and then they make up a story. Pharaoh notices that boys are still being born and he calls them into his office, what is going on? Pharaoh, it is not our fault, you know the Egyptian women, well, they moan and they wince and the slightest pang they hit the couch, but these Hebrew women, they are prolific and robust and they give birth to their babies without hesitation and then carry on with their work and by the time we get there, they are back in the field with their babies on their backs.

Remember Rahab, where did the spies go? They went that way, and they were hiding in her house. The midwives loved God above all things. They loved God so much that they were willing to put their lives at risk in order to obey God and not the king. That sounds like Rahab, Stacy and I went to see Queen Esther at Sight and Sound, there is a story of a woman of God who was willing to risk her life and disobey the law for the sake of life.

We are placed in front of the question if there is anything that we would be willing to risk our life. There have been moments in history where people were willing to risk their lives for the sake of the lives of others. Our country has a history of oppression, but it also has a history of people willing to stand up to those who would not hesitate to take life. Shiprah and Puah's operating ethic was obeying God at all costs, even if those costs demanded their lives. The key to their actions was the belief of these midwives in God. God's will for them was more important than any order Pharaoh could give them and was also more important than their lives or what they considered their rights.

Throughout this story we see obedience reflects the underlying truth that God provides us which is that human life is sacred. That is never compromised in Scripture. In so many ways, our nation historically and even today, has been one with a national policy of murder, just like what we saw in Egypt today in our Scripture. There is a topic which has increased its visibility lately and your pastor has never addressed it in his ten years here. I addressed it once at all the other churches where I served.

Again, part of the reason is because I love you and I respect you and I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings or have people feel like their view isn't respected by this bully pulpit. But the topic of abortion has become more and more a topic of the day and your church, or at least your pastor, has not ever addressed it from Scripture. When I was in college I formed a group called

consistent life ethic and we argued that if you are opposed to abortion then you need to be opposed to the death penalty, and vice versa. If you are opposed to the death penalty then how can you be consistent and not oppose abortion. It was based upon the premise that God considers life sacred.

Let me be clear, neither side on this issue is for death, neither side celebrates or wants death. But I simply cannot support infanticide with all the various places in Scripture where we find rulers and kings demanding the death of those who are the people of God through infanticide from Pharaoh to Herod in Jesus' day.

My opposition to the legalization of abortion is based upon my desire to see all life as sacred and not subject to the choices that we make as women or as men. No one has the right, not Pharaoh, not us, to decide if a life is worth living or not. This is true for abortion, but this is also true for the death penalty. So before you cheer what I just said, check yourself, and ask yourself what do you believe about the death penalty. If you are cheering that I have spoken out against abortion but think the death penalty is justified, you are making a choice that is not consistent with Scripture. I would say the same as those who are grieved in their heart right now because of the stance that I have taken on this topic, but I would challenge you to examine why you would not follow a consistent life ethic which applies to your stance on the death penalty as well as your stance on abortion.

I do have a tendency to make everyone uncomfortable and unhappy with me when I address these issues that are so important. The key to being an advocate for a consistent life ethic is knowing that you actually can make a difference. Like Shiprah and Puah, God is consistently able to use people of faith from every lowly station in life to carry out the divine purpose. We saw that last week as well.

This week, I want to challenge you to obey the authorities in ways that provide life and in ways that, as Paul says in Romans, produces a love for neighbor that is required of us by God. That will then guide your steps for you in the days to come. Amen.