

Today, the Diocese of Southern Ohio begins its “Big Read” project, inviting everyone to read, study, and reflect on the book of Exodus and its significance for our life as a church and for our lives as individuals. The reason that we are starting today is that today we began a series of readings from the book of Exodus in our Sunday liturgy; that series will continue for a total of nine Sundays.

Bishop Tom Breidenthal’s call to us to participate in this initiative was published in many different places, including in the summer issue of our quarterly parish newsletter, *The Lion’s Tale*. Our fall issue, which is available today, includes my opening reflections on why Exodus is central to our lives as Christians. As a supplement, a special insert in today’s service bulletin offers some suggestions for your reading.

In keeping with ancient Semitic practice, the book that we call “Exodus” is known in Hebrew from one of its opening words, “Shmot” or “Names”: “These are the names of the sons of Israel who came into Egypt with Jacob, each with his household.”

Names are important; they are a key part of our identity. People throughout history have tried to find ways to ensure that their names would be remembered, long after they themselves had died.

Since the Exodus project includes *study* as well as *reflection*, let me ask you a couple of questions about names as they pertain to today’s first reading. Don’t worry; this can be an “open-book” or “open-service-bulletin” test. In the passage from Exodus that we heard this morning, what are the names of the two midwives? “Shiphrah” and “Puah” -- OK, good. Now, historians have tried to identify the Pharaoh of the exodus; but, *looking only at today’s reading*, what was his name? It’s never mentioned, is it?

*Isn’t that ironic?* The name of the great and powerful king of Egypt, who insisted that his name be remembered by all generations to come, has been forgotten. Yet, after more than 3000 years, the names of two, ordinary, midwives are still remembered. In fact, they are still being spoken this morning as part of the Exodus reading in countless churches throughout the world.

So, who were ultimately the most important people in Egypt at that time? Whose actions set in motion the events that continue to be remembered and celebrated by countless millions of people today? It is not the supposedly all-powerful ruler, with his pride and self-centered arrogance, but two seemingly ordinary women who courageously refused to follow his order and who instead did their work without fanfare but remained true to their conscience. They turned out to be the ones who had the greatest effect on the events of history that were to unfold. In a sense, it is with the two of them that the timeless story of the exodus begins.

Sometimes, we look at all the needs in the world around us and feel overwhelmed and frustrated. We feel so small, like there is nothing we can do, like there is no way that we

can make a real difference. But the example given to us by Shiphrah and Puah contradicts that sense of helplessness. It reminds us of how critically important our seemingly small contributions can be. It reminds us of the vital role that we can play in the lives of those around us by using whatever abilities God has given us, no matter what they are. It reminds us that God has called us by name in order to defy the forces of death and suffering in people's lives and to reaffirm and work for God's gift of the fullness of life for all people.

But one key to our success in contributing to this great work is realizing that we are never in it alone. But then, neither were Shiphrah and Puah. They were part of a group of five brave women who rejected the edict of Pharaoh What's-His-Name. It was the determination of these two midwives along with Moses' mother, Jochebed, his sister, Miriam, and the unnamed daughter of Pharaoh, all of whom dared to defy the ruler's edict of death and who instead gave life to one child: a child through whom God would one day set the people free.

We are never in this work alone either. As St. Paul reminds us in our second reading (Rm 12:5): "We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another." Each of us has, not only a single gift, but a unique combination of gifts. And if we are willing to use them to do the work that God has given us to do and to make a positive difference in people's lives, we allow God to accomplish great things through that one body: things that we could not possibly have accomplished on our own.

Doing that, taking our part in the one body, requires us to accept and be who we are, coming to appreciate the value of whatever gifts God has given us, and finding ways to use them to make a positive difference in people's lives. Shiphrah and Puah would probably have failed miserably if they had tried to lead the Hebrew slaves out Egypt. That was not who they were. Instead, they used the knowledge and the skills that they had in order to make what turned out to be a vital contribution to the people's deliverance.

In the same way, it does no good for us to try to be people who we are not. Instead, we need to recognize the unique gift that each and every one of us is, in and for the world. As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks has put it (*Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*, page 139), "Peace comes when we see our reflection in the face of God and let go of the desire to be someone else."

Shiphrah and Puah were not Moses. The recipients of the Letter to the Romans were not Paul. The disciples, who appear in our gospel reading, were not Jesus. But then, God didn't need them to be. God already had one of each.

What God *did* need them to be were people who used whatever seemingly small talents that they had in order to touch people's lives in a positive way and to make the world a better place for everyone to live. That is exactly what God needs us to do as well.