

Serve Life

Exodus 1:8-20

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A few weeks ago I went to the home of the martyred young boy Mohammed Abu Khdeir with a group of women's organizations and children from all over Jerusalem. They came to pay their respect, to express their condolences. They came to the tent to shelter from the hate raging throughout the city. While standing there taking in the scene of children's drawings given as offerings to the murdered boy's mother I saw a family tree posted on the wall. It was the tree of one of the largest families murdered in Gaza. The children had made it and color coded it so you could see the interconnections between all 35 members. It was beautifully made and very sad.

Then I noticed that some of the children wore the names of children who had been killed in Gaza around their necks. Some of the children had died the day before. They, who are terrified to go out of their homes for fear of being kidnapped, were wearing the names of dead children around their necks. Not knowing quite what to do with myself in the crowded tent I asked if the boys near me spoke English. They said yes. I asked if I could interview them.

Then I realized I had no idea what to ask these children. I had no idea how to have a conversation about death and dying with an 11 year old so I simply asked, "Are you sleeping at night?" Mohammed answered right away, "No. And then he put his face in the pillow of his hands and said, "I always sleep with one eye open like this." Then he said, "In the street I walk with all my eyes open." Then looking at his sign he said, "It's so sad. He was only five." And I am thinking and you are only 11 and we shouldn't even be having this conversation.

Over 2,000 people have been killed in Gaza and 500 have been children. It is said that this averages to about 11 children per day. There were also nine unborn children who died in their mother's womb. There was one baby who was pulled out from her dead mother alive who lived for 5 days until her oxygen was cut off when they bombed the power plant. And there was another baby whose parents were killed found alive in a tree.

There are children here in Jerusalem who have just found out that their parents and siblings are all dead. And in Gaza there are kids walking around I am told with their names tattooed on their body parts in case they get blown up so their

families can find their arms and legs. There is a boy who draws the bombing of his home over and over but says he doesn't need colored markers because there are no colors in war. Over 4,500 children have been identified as needing psycho-social help.

This is what it is like to be a child growing up here at this time, living in the land we call holy, the land where Jesus himself had to flee with his parents to avoid being killed. It is a frightening time with no end in sight for a peaceful resolution. I imagine your emotions are like mine---- all over the map jumping from rage to sadness to grief to denial in endless spirals. No matter your political view of who started it the killing of children is particularly painful.

And so we turn to our sacred texts for comfort and guidance for how to cope, and lo and behold we have a story about another time and place when children's lives were under threat; this time in Egypt when the Hebrew people were enslaved. Pharaoh was worried that a young male child would be born to challenge his imperial authority so he ordered the killing of all male children. He enlisted two Hebrew midwives to assist him in this deadly task.

However, these women, Shiprah and Puah, women who brought babies into the world refused to kill the babies. They chose instead to honor their profession, the bringing forth of life. They were smart and cunning and exploited Pharaoh's fears that the Hebrews were breeding like animals and said they couldn't get to them in time to kill the babies. They capitalized on this derogatory stereotype and used it as part of their defense.

Shiprah and Puah stood in the royal chambers and defied their king; they let "Pharaoh go" in order to follow their own life giving ways, God's ways. They resisted the temptation to go against their own values. They refused to kill the children, to let them go. Their non-cooperation with authority paved the way for a mass resistance movement, an exodus toward freedom. Some say they are the first practitioners of non-violent resistance or civil disobedience.

Like the midwives before them, these women did not do as they were told. Like Miriam, Moses' sister, they used their knowledge of the system to out think the system. Like Pharaoh's daughter who rescued baby Moses from the Nile they chose to wade in the waters of life instead of death. All four women defied imperial authority and chose life.

God intervenes in history through the actions of us. He uses those in the court of power and those who are oppressed. He counts on us to step up to the plate and be human, to show compassion.

Our epistle reading from Paul's letter to the Romans asks us to be transformed by making our own bodies a living sacrifice. So the question dear ones this morning is how? How do we do this? What small or brave acts of defiance or resistance can we take to stop the slaughter of the innocent ones today? How do we stand on the side of life and not death?

The first thing we need to do is to acknowledge that children are being targeted right now not only in Gaza but in the streets of Jerusalem and all over the West Bank. They are targets not because they are security threats as is often cited but because they are the next generation. Pharaoh and his imperial court are still worried about a demographic threat. We must stand firmly against all the doublespeak that justifies or covers up these deaths as collateral damage or terrorist threats.

Like Shiprah and Puah and Pharaoh's daughter we are called to go up against imperial authorities and their systems of unjustness. There are many opportunities to do this right now but one of the ones that is most compelling is to use our economic influence. For example, throughout the world people are looking at what they are investing their money in and withdrawing support from those companies or industries that are supporting or profiting from the occupation. Some are taking to the streets or doing civil disobedience while others are changing their investments or pension funds. In addition, here in Palestine there is a strong movement to put economic pressure on Israel by trying to buy more Palestinian made products whenever possible.

We are indeed in dark times and once again our children are the ones suffering. However, we have our mandate not only to follow Jesus on the Via Dolorosa but to work with the God of life.

Over 5,500 babies were born in Gaza during these past seven weeks. Let us work together in whatever ways we can to make sure they not only live but have abundant life.

God of life, you labor with all creation
to bring forth the holy.
Be with us, breathe through us
as we seek to be your midwives
by our acts of nonconformity
by defying Pharaoh and empire
by fearing You and serving life.

Give us the courage to not obey
commands or unjust laws.
Like Puah, give us the words to utter charms

for deep remembering,
breaking silence, truth telling.

Help us to stand tall together
to denounce violence
on every street corner
where military occupation intersects
with excessive force
where war making knocks out peace.

God of life, you labor with all creation
to bring forth the holy.
Count us in.