

"Naming Our Foundation"
Rev. Ben Heimach-Snipes
Morgan Park Presbyterian Church

Good morning! Welcome again to Morgan Park Presbyterian Church. I am pastor Ben. Please join me in meditation on our scripture today.

Let us pray. God of love and justice, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Exodus 1:8-2:10
Matthew 16:13-20.

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

I learned during my sister's pregnancy that midwives, like doctors and chaplains, are often on-call - ready to respond to one of their new parents at a moment's notice to help them through the confusing, emotional, and painful process of giving birth. Some work in hospitals and others respond to their new parent's call - wherever it might take them. In the North American landscape, where community is often disconnected from geography - the modern midwife seems to greatly benefit from the invention of the cell phone. You can take patients all over the city and still quickly respond to each of them when that baby is ready to go.

I am grateful - on behalf of all men who were once babies - that Shiphrah and Puah did not have cell phones. These women were responsible for the epic task of accompanying, nurturing, and empowering each new life coming into the Hebrew community in Egypt. They were women's cheerleaders, coaches, doctors and caretakers as they went through the birthing process. I can only imagine that as a midwife, you would develop a special bond with each mother, each child, each family that you accompany.

It is in this context of naked vulnerable relationship that the all powerful pharaoh demands that Shiphrah and Puah murder each male baby that is born with them. After coaching a mother

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through countless hours of breathing and contractions, perhaps incorporating ancient medicinal plants into the mother's care plan, sitting face to face with her as she risks her life to give birth to her child, using every ounce of her soul to protect the life of this child, then she is commanded to kill about half of these new lives.

Having worked as a hospital chaplain with many different medical teams, I know that doing anything that might allow for the death of a patient goes against every fiber of their being. I can only imagine that Shiphrah and Puah, having a unique life-giving vocation among the Hebrew community, would have developed similar foundational intentions to preserve life in all its diverse identities. It is strange, then, that Pharaoh chooses to first enact an institution of murder and ethnic cleansing of the Hebrew people through the vocation of midwife.

Whether out of fear or jealousy or power or economic gain, the pharaoh institutes policies that aim at the complete destruction of the Hebrew family unit - exterminating Hebrew men, leaving only Hebrew women who would need to marry into Egyptian families, which in a patriarchal society would lead to a transfer of wealth from Hebrew families into Egyptian families. The pharaoh chose midwives, the first people to see those male Hebrew babies to end their lives.

"But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live."

This act of defiance, of resistance to Egyptian authority, is seen as the first recorded act of civil disobedience in the bible by author Laurel Dykstra in her book *Set Them Free: The Other Side of Exodus*. What if we assume Shiphrah and Puah, the "midwives to the Hebrews" are Egyptian characters? These two women saw the injustice in their new instructions from the Pharaoh, and instead of seeking to preserve their own lives by carrying out this injustice, they risked everything for the Hebrew families that they served.

It was easy for Pharaoh and those who served him to notice that the baby boys were still alive, so he asked the midwives, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?"

Shiphrah and Puah responded, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them."

I wonder how long it took for these midwives to find out that someone under their care had gone into labor. Perhaps a family member would come looking for them when the time came. I wonder how long it took them to respond. I wonder if midwives today respond any faster. I think with cell phones or without, Shiphrah and Puah would have provided an explanation for the survival of these baby boys. Fore, who would want to call a midwife who might kill their baby?

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This nonviolent direct action of preserving life was in direct resistance to the Pharaoh’s power. And their reasoning plays off of the Pharaoh’s fears of the Hebrew people growing too “numerous and powerful.” The Hebrew women were even powerful in childbirth! Their reasoning was hand picked to fit into the Pharaoh’s stereotype of the Hebrew people, and it worked!

These women lay a foundation for seeking justice in solidarity with the oppressed. Shiphrah and Puah lay a foundation of resistance. They also provide a way for the birth of Moses who is loved and nurtured by many women who also resisted the systems of violence set against the Hebrew people. Moses’ mother nursed him in secret for three months before interpreting Pharaoh’s command to “throw every male baby into the Nile” by crafting a reed basket to carry him in the river. Moses’ sister follows him along the river and negotiates with the Egyptian princess to reunite Moses with his mother to act as his wet nurse. And this Egyptian princess, daughter of the Pharaoh who commanded Moses’ death, adopted Moses as her son and raised him in the Pharaoh’s home.

These are powerful and inspiring women whose acts of love and justice stand on their own in scripture. They model the image of God for Moses and for us. We have people in our lives that have become part of our foundation, part of our identity, part of how we identify as people of God. A God who resists the power of oppression.

In our Gospel reading today, Peter identifies his foundation, his inspiration, his teacher - Jesus - as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Peter believes that Jesus is the living image and voice of God. And for his faith - inspired by years of ministry and miracles with his Messiah - Jesus ordains Peter as the foundation of the church. Peter is the rock on which we stand. Peter becomes our connection to the kingdom of heaven in a dangerous and uncertain world.

By studying the scriptures, we can be inspired by and identify with our biblical foundations - with Peter, Shiphrah and Puah. It is important to understand these characters contextually - as people who responded to the needs and the oppression of their people with the love and justice of God.

We too are contextual characters, living out our calling as the church in response to our people. Studying our own context can be as important as understand scripture. We live and breathe our context, and it can be challenging to examine that context when it directly impacts our lives. It can become invisible to us as we live in it. Our context is based in geography, history and family. We are formed and informed by it.

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In the spirit of knowing our context, I spent this week studying our Morgan Park neighborhood through the lens of the Mapping Inequality Project. This “is an online data project that offers access to the national collection of "security maps" produced between 1935 and 1940 by one of the most important agencies created as part of Roosevelt's New Deal, the Home Owners' Loan Corporation or HOLC.”

“HOLC recruited mortgage lenders, developers, and real estate appraisers in nearly 250 cities to create maps that color-coded creditworthiness and risk on neighborhood and metropolitan levels. These maps and their accompanying documentation helped set the rules for nearly a century of real estate practice. More than a half-century of research has shown housing to be for the twentieth century what slavery was to the antebellum period, namely the broad foundation of both American prosperity and racial inequality.”

“Over the last thirty years especially, scholars have characterized HOLC's property assessment and risk management practices, as some of the most important factors in preserving racial segregation, intergenerational poverty, and the continued wealth gap between white Americans and most other racial groups in the U.S. Many of these agencies operated under the influence of powerful real estate lobbies or wrote their policies steeped in what were, at the time, widespread assumptions about the profitability of racial segregation and the residential incompatibility of certain racial and ethnic groups. Through HOLC, in particular, real estate appraisers used the apparent racial and cultural value of a community to determine its economic value.”

For many of us, the existence of these maps may come as no surprise. For many of us, our lives have been deeply impacted by the power of these maps and those who enforced their boundaries. All of us, though, exist in a world where the racist ideas of these maps - enforced with economic and political power - have shaped our institutions and our embodied assumptions about those around us and ourselves. These maps have become part of the foundation of our community - just like enslavement was a part of the foundation in which Shiphrah and Puah secretly preserved the lives of Hebrew babies as midwives in Egypt.

I will now read to you excerpts of the official HOLC security map descriptions produced by Murphy and Murphy Civil Engineers and Surveyors in the late 1930's. As I read, consider how this foundation has impacted your life. How does the story of our geography intersect with the story of our lives? What have you inherited? What have you resisted? Know that I have edited the content for antiquated racial slurs. The Morgan Park neighborhood was broken up into four sections. I will go through them from West to East - starting with the area on top of the hill behind me now.

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"This area, west of Longwood, is what is known as the Morgan Park area. In it reside many of the so-called "elite" of the Beverly Hills Morgan Park district. As in Beverly Hills, a high degree of ownership exists. This section has always been considered a high-grade one, but the development of Beverley Hills to the north has had the effect of classifying the area as somewhat inferior to Beverly Hills. Age and obsolescence here is showing its effect, but the area is still desirable. At present there is under way a movement to restrict the sale of property to [people of color] in the district between Rock Island Suburban west to Western Avenue, south of 107th. At present, there is a restriction as to sale to [people of color] west of Vincennes to the Rock Island Suburban, south of 107th. Although this area has attained its peak and property sales are in a buyer's market, the area will continue for some time to house a most desirable type of inhabitant. Security grade: Still desirable. Mortgage funds: Ample.

Next: this area, between Longwood and Vincennes, is what is known as part of the village of Morgan Park. Notwithstanding the fact that the territory west of Vincennes and south of 107th has recently been restricted against sales to [people of color], values will tend to depreciate here, due to the large [people of color] area east of Vincennes south of 107th. This is a well built up, old residential area with a high degree of home ownership, with very few, if any, homes for rent. While the area has seen its best days and is in a static state, due to its location, it is still a popular one in which to reside. Security grade: definitely declining. Mortgage funds: Ample.

Next: this narrow area lies south of 107th to 115th, to the west of Vincennes. Vincennes is the dividing line between the [people of color] section to the east and the Morgan Park area. Property extending for one block and from Vincennes has depreciated and will continue to do so as a result of this [people of color] influence, and it is difficult to obtain mortgage funds. There are occasional stores on Vincennes. The major portion of the area from 107th to 115th is vacant and the area can be considered as a very poor one, with sales demand inactive. Security grade: hazardous. Mortgage funds: limited.

Next: this large area, between Vincennes and Morgan, is all [people of color], made up of labor, Pullman, and domestic employees. In an endeavor to keep the [people of color] within the confines of the area, a good recreation park which includes tennis courts, swimming pool, etc., has been built for [people of color]. They also have a good school. South of 115th is much vacant property extending southward to the West Pullman industrial district. Recently restrictions as to sale to [people of color] have been put into effect from Vincennes west to the Rock Island Suburban and north to 107th. The same restrictions are under way in reference to territory as far west as Western Avenue north to 107th. Transportation is fair. Security grade: hazardous. Mortgage funds: limited."

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Limited. Mortgage funds limited. What does this really mean? A federal agency labeled our neighborhood - at least the east side of our neighborhood - “hazardous” to resident’s “safety” and perhaps more criminally - hazardous to banks and mortgage lenders who could help families become homeowners. When these ‘redlining’ maps of Chicago were produced - as part of FDR’s New Deal to help U.S. citizens recover from the shock of the depression - they were producing maps that documented and reinforced existing racist practices of lending institutions. The great transfer of wealth that resulted from the New Deal - leading to the creation of the modern middle class - was limited. This transfer of wealth was limited to people who could exist in desirable neighborhoods which were desirable because they were white. This federally implemented system made whiteness equivalent to goodness and profited off of the racial division inherent in our society. The program returned \$14 million to the U.S. treasury by its closing in 1951.

“Mortgage funds limited” meant that people of color - specifically African Americans in Morgan Park who were already limited to the geography granted to them in “hazardous” neighborhoods - were limited in the ways they could finance their home. While white families could provide a small down payment and receive a federally backed loan, Black families were limited in who could provide a loan to them at all. Many Black families were only able to buy homes on “contract” from predatory lenders who required higher interest payments, sold homes above their value and could quickly evict a homeowner if a payment was late - no matter how much had already been paid. Our federally mandated mortgage lending practices literally extracted wealth from the African American community while creating a new foundation for wealth creation for white people.

This is the foundation on which we have been living as a society for the last century, and this foundation of inequality has been resisted in every generation. During the period of the New Deal, foundational resistance came in many forms. “African American newspapers, such as the Chicago Defender, openly criticized HOLC staffing decisions and infrastructure that favored white homeowners and businesses at the expense of blacks. Black housing officials often worked incrementally on a host of issues, including ending white terrorism and getting new black housing built, even if that meant operating within the segregationist strictures of federal policy.”

These are our foundations - how do we stand on them today?

This church started in 1891 in a neighborhood marked by segregation and white privilege, and in that first year of existence, the congregation - calling themselves yoke-fellows in a common work - pledged enough funds to both build their church building and to provide gifts to the assistance of freed slaves. A foundation of resistance to the injustice in our midst.

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What do we do with our foundation of resistance today? Today - when African Americans are still four times more likely to be denied a home mortgage than their white neighbors; Today - when white supremacy is openly touted by a violent and noisy minority as a legitimate power and viewpoint; Today - when our institutions still function on policies informed by our history of white supremacy; Today - when Morgan Park Presbyterian Church is known as a racially integrated church in a denomination that is 94% white.

The foundations of racism in the United States are important for our congregation as we continue to seek to understand each other and support our diverse community. We are a church built on the foundation of Shiphrah and Puah who rebelliously nurtured the life of Moses - unaware of his future role as liberator of the Hebrew people. Moses was nourished by and inspired by these powerful women who risked their lives to provide abundant life.

As Peter’s church, we are called to continue the work of resistance that began with Shiphrah and Puah. We are called to resist the powers of oppression that are enforced on our community. We are called to uncover the foundations of oppression and uproot them from our context. We are called to nurture life in those who have been proclaimed unfit to live. We are called to risk our lives out of love for the most vulnerable. We are called to live in community - seeking God in the faces of those we love.

This is not an easy calling. This is not a practice you can maintain on your own. The divine resistance work of Shiphrah and Puah requires relationship. This divine resistance work requires spiritual strength developed in partnership with God in community. This work requires hands to hold, shoulders to cry on, voices to be inspired by, and hearts to be loved by. This divine resistance work is not just for pastors and social justice warriors. As part of this congregation, as part of the body of Christ, this is your work as well.

Let us set a firm foundation for our divine resistance work as the people of God.
Amen