

August 23, 2020 Exodus 1:8-2:10 An Invitation to be Bright and Splendid for God Caledon East United Church

Belarus' capital has seen hundreds of women take to the streets in the daytime this week, in a show of solidarity with the protest movement and the thousands detained amid the violent state crackdown. In several areas of Minsk, large groups of women -- often dressed in white -- have formed long human "chains of solidarity", holding hands, making victory signs and waving flowers, in a mass demonstration in support of opposition leader and properly elected candidate, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya and all the women who have led the Belarusian pro-democracy movement. It was the latest move by women who have taken a leading role in the protests -- and, they say, the country's path towards change. President Alexander Lukashenko's return to power after a corrupt election widely seen as rigged sparked an outcry, but the protests that resulted have been brutally repressed.

Since May, three women have led the people of Belarus, braving the threat of violent repression to rally people for their freedom and democratic rights. For 26 years Belarus' dictator, Lukashenko has ransacked that country and violently crushed dissent and freedom. In the past few days thousands of protestors have been arrested. Belarusians are currently facing mass human rights abuses from a state unwilling to recognize the true results of the election. All but one of those three women have been forced to flee the country for the safety of their families. During the election campaign, Lukashenko repeatedly said, "Belarus is not ready for a female president."

On Parliament Hill in Ottawa among all the statues of famous men there is a statue of five women. These Famous Five women fought relentlessly in the 1920's for the right of women to be considered persons, to have the right to vote and hold office in Canada. Their struggle also promoted the idea that our constitution is a living document that needs to be interpreted in different ways for different times. Their names were Emily Murphy, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney, and Irene Parlby. The **five** women had spent a number of years active in several women's suffragettes movements dating back to the 1880s and 1890s.

One who followed the famous five, in 1921, was activist Agnes Campbell Macphail (1890–1954), a farm girl from Grey county, who accomplished the unthinkable when she was elected to the House of Commons, becoming Canada's first female member of parliament. That Macphail even won the election was phenomenal, given that she lived in a time when women were basically expected to stay home. Macphail, however, believed women were equal to men and spent her lifetime trying to prove it. While in office, Macphail pursued a "politics of equality" for all people, regardless of their gender or socio-economic status. During her political career, Macphail's main legislative interests included farm issues, women's equality, prison reform, and peace activism.

Her political career held many challenges. Macphail, however, possessed one great weapon, which was her voice. It was startling, intelligent, and commanding, carrying to every corner of the legislative chamber when she spoke. In an article in the *Toronto Star*, historian Doris Pennington wrote that a *Toronto Telegram* columnist from Macphail's time once noted that the most beautiful thing about Macphail, besides her "shining honesty," was her voice. "Her voice had the quality of a viola, deep and compassionate and heart-catching ... Agnes Macphail, standing to denounce injustice or deride pettiness from her place in the Commons of Canada, spoke in tones that echo unforgotten across the years." She was quoted as saying that she could hear the echo of footsteps coming down the halls of Parliament of the women that would follow her in the future.

This past week, on Parliament Hill, we had a woman named as finance minister, Chrystia Freeland. She has taken on yet another challenging portfolio. Besides providing direction for the Canadian economy and directing our financial resources, Freeland takes leadership in a time spotlighting the glaring inequalities the pandemic has laid bare.

These women are all descendants of Puah and Shiphrah. It is amazing that we know the names of these two midwives. Women usually go unnamed in the Bible. But even though they are named, they are not often remembered. We know about Noah, about Abraham, about Joseph, about David and Goliath but this story of Puah and Shiphrah (in English, Bright and Splendid) may very well be new to you. The book of Exodus begins with the statement that there was a new pharaoh, and unnamed pharaoh, who did not remember Joseph. This ruler did not know his history, did not know that Joseph and the Hebrew people had ensured that the Egyptians had survived a famine that devastated the whole of the Near East. Many generations have passed and the Hebrews had become merely foreigners, not friends. They were numerous, they were different, they didn't worship like the Egyptians. They were a threat. They might join the enemy in the case of war. They might take over. They might, even though there was no indication that they had any such intention. Doesn't it all sound too familiar. During World War II both Canada and the United States decided that anyone of Japanese descent was a threat, even if they had been in Canada for three or four generations and showed no indication of treasonous behaviour. The manufactured threat became an excuse to confiscate land, possessions, businesses and freedom.

We have historical evidence that there were in ancient Egypt 'habiru' slaves that built the ancient cities and we have indications that there were revolts but only the Bible remembers the midwives, Puah and Shiphrah. Forced labour

didn't seem to discourage the Hebrews so the pharaoh ordered the midwives of the Hebrews to murder all of the baby boys. He thought that the girls were harmless. But Puah and Shiphrah were not harmless; they knew the ways of nonviolent confrontation and civil disobedience. They knew that God's law trumped anything a pharaoh might devise. Called before the pharaoh to explain their failure to obey the law, they made up a ridiculous excuse about Hebrew women being different than Egyptian women. Any woman knows that the pain, the risk, the relief, the joy of childbirth are all the same no matter who you are or where you come from. The heartless pharaoh then ordered all the people to throw the Hebrew baby boys into the Nile. Which is just what Moses' mother did, except that she placed him in a 'tevah', a basket or an ark. The same word is used in Genesis for Noah's ark. This story teller knows how to use inference. The pharaoh's daughter had not inherited her father's heartlessness. Upon seeing the baby she felt compassion for it. She knew it was a Hebrew baby and she knew her father's edict, but nevertheless she agreed to have him nursed by his own mother, she even paid her to do it and when he was old enough she adopted him. Moses, saved by the women, Puah and Shiphrah, his mother and Miriam, his sister, the pharaoh's daughter and her slave woman, all willing to defy the evil of the pharaoh.

When the princess came to name the baby she said, "I drew him out of the water, and so I name him Moses." Perhaps, in preparation for raising her son, the princess had learned some Hebrew. The name "Moses" sounds like the Hebrew word meaning 'to draw out.' In Egyptian the name means 'son.' But, as I said, this storyteller knew what he or she was doing. Moses, the one who was drawn out of the water will become the one who draws the Hebrews through the waters and onto freedom.

We can look back in history and think that Puah and Shiphrah, Agnes Macphail or Nellie McClung were amazing women. Wonderful legends have been developed around St. Bridgid (Celtic Christian figure of the 1st century) and the miracles she performed, but at the time, they were just women, ordinary women who were willing to follow God's way even when or especially when the ways of the world pulled against God's way. We read in Exodus that Puah and Shiphrah 'feared God.' They had been taught in church that God loves everyone. They knew the story of the Exodus.

Nellie McClung and the other members of the famous five were all educated, all Christians, all supported by their churches and their families. Their significant leadership did not come out of a vacuum. Some would say that God was preparing them for greatness, but at the time they were just doing the right thing. Doing the right thing is easy when everyone else is doing it.

Our son taught in Sweden for a year after graduating from Teacher's College. Discouraged over the prospects of a job in Ontario he looked into the opportunities offered by the international recruiters that came to his university. He decided on Sweden partly because he had heard good things about its government, its lack of crime and poverty, its social programs, its government system that is sometimes described as social democracy. Doing some background reading, Sweden is now described as a very secular state, so people tend to draw the conclusion that social justice or social welfare is not related to religion or more specifically the Christian religion. People who think that don't know their history, like the pharaoh who didn't know Joseph. They don't realize that the foundation for their system of social and economic equality was developed by Christians and is rooted in Christian teaching. What happens when a generation or two are not taught the ways of Christ? Will the country be able to be as just and caring when the people are not taught the stories that show them what it means to love one another, to care for your neighbour, to give generously and to share willingly?

We can trace the same pattern in our own country. After two world wars with a depression in between, our parents and grandparents put some safeguards in place. They did not want to live in a country where old people starved or the poor were turned away from hospitals or the unemployed begged on the streets. J.S. Woodsworth was a Methodist minister and an ally of Agnes Macphail. Tommy Douglas was a Baptist minister, Lester B. Pearson was raised in a United Church manse. But now we have people who have forgotten their history, people who do not know the stories of the Bible, who tell us things like we can't afford universal health care, our government pension plan is going broke, unions are no longer useful. And we believe what we hear and we vote for the people who promise to make my life better, my taxes lower, without too much regard for anyone else. Or at least that is what most people do, but we who sit in church and listen to the stories of the Bible, we know that 'looking out for number 1' just doesn't work. We sit here on Sunday morning, and God draws out of us compassion and grace and justice and mercy and calls us to go and draw out others.

This story of Bright and Splendid people is an encouraging example of the Christian life and faith. We, at times, feel like we are living in Egypt. We live in times that can be hard and desperate for people. Yet our two churches are populated with bright and splendid people. We stand as a faithful oasis in the middle of this impersonal and desperate world. God is calling each one of us to be a midwife in the process of the rebirth of reshaping society and our churches after our pandemic experience.

One of the important dimensions is knowing our past. Knowing the patriarchs' stories, knowing the Christian story. In retirement I plan to dedicate some of my time to keeping the stories alive for my grandchildren-participating in Messy Church and Bible study with others

We are being shaped, whether we know it or not, into the next Puah or Shiphrah, the next Agnes, the next Nellie or Louise. The everyday decisions that we make could be life-changing or world-changing. When the princess saw the crying baby she had compassion and drew him out of the water. God is counting on us to live out our faith in the world, openly, visibly, so that people notice. Our culture needs to hear and to see in action the gospel of Jesus' love. Thanks be to God that we are here to share it. Amen.