

*Seizing the
Nonviolent Moments*

Reflections on the Spirituality of Nonviolence
Through the Lens of Scripture

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Midwives of Life and Liberation

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live . . . (DEUTERONOMY 30:19, NRSV)

THIS TIMELESS COMMAND SPOKEN by Moses is a clarion call to every generation faced with choices between life and death, and that includes all of us hearing these words today. Some of these choices arise in our individual lives as we grapple with decisions about things that are life-giving and those that are deadening or drain life out of us. Others are much more stark in the life-or-death consequences that come with them, especially choices that impact others. Each of them, whether great or small, bears witness to the awesome responsibility God entrusts to us. We are called to be a people who choose life again and again, even when that choice is difficult to make.

The book of Exodus contains a humble story of five faithful women who choose life in a powerful way amidst a climate of death. These women are mentioned only briefly in the book of Exodus. Yet without them Moses may not have become the great liberator he was. Each of them faces a non-violent moment, and they seize these moments in ways that reveal essential aspects of the spirituality of nonviolence. Their actions together remind us that a choice for life made by any one of us today can be a catalyst for others to choose life tomorrow. And sometimes the momentum built through these choices can be enough to change the course of history.

Shortly after the book of Exodus begins, a new king comes to power in Egypt. The Israelites had been living peaceably there up until that time. But with the arrival of this new leader, things suddenly change. “The Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we,” says Pharaoh (Exod 1:9, NRSV). Fearing their growing numbers and power, Pharaoh subjects the Israelites to lives of servitude by forcing them to labor long and hard. Despite Pharaoh’s oppression of the Hebrew people, their numbers continue to grow. Fear of the Israelites spreads throughout the land “so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites” (Exod 1:12, NRSV).

Pharaoh decides he must do something decisive to stop the Israelites from increasing in number, so he devises a sinister plan. He calls before him two Hebrew midwives named Shiprah and Puah and orders them to kill in his name. “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool,” commands Pharaoh, “if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live” (Exod 1:16, NRSV).

Imagine being faced with such an agonizing dilemma. Pharaoh has ordered these midwives accustomed to cradling newborns to kill them instead. If this isn’t bad enough, they are ordered to kill *Hebrew* children, their own flesh and blood. How can these givers of life suddenly become takers of life? They are faced with a profound choice between life and death. To obey Pharaoh would be to go against the very essence of who they are. Yet to defy Pharaoh could lead to severe personal consequences from a king cruel enough to order the killing of infants.

Scripture tells us that the midwives “feared God,” biblical language for acting in faithfulness to the God of their knowing. The women know they must act according to what they believe deep within their being, so they seize the nonviolent moment. In what Scripture scholar Walter Wink calls the first recorded act of civil disobedience, Shiprah and Puah “did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live” (Exod 1:17, NRSV).¹

What courage these women display in taking this action! As Hebrews, they are well acquainted with the oppression being inflicted upon their people. Yet they find within themselves the amazing audacity to stand up to Pharaoh, their oppressor. By standing up to him they stand up to the empire that he leads. And through their actions they create a defining moment. These deliverers of life now deliver nonviolent resistance into the pages of Scripture for the first time.

1. Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 244.

Pharaoh learns of the defiance of these women and summons them to account for their actions. "Why have you done this," he demands to know, "and allowed the boys to live?" (Exod 1:18, NRSV). These wily women come up with an explanation that will be difficult for Pharaoh to refute. "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women," they cunningly reply, "for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them" (Exod 1:19, NRSV). Their answer is brilliant. Pharaoh knows nothing of how Hebrew women give birth. So how can he possibly know if the women's answer is fact or fiction?

Shiprah and Puah have outsmarted Pharaoh and he realizes that he cannot accomplish his death wish through these two faith-filled women. God recognizes Shiprah and Puah for choosing life and sets them among God's chosen. "God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong" (Exod 1:20, NRSV).

Shiprah and Puah reveal a face of nonviolence that resists cooperating with evil and refuses to be co-opted by it. Two women, small in number yet majestic in spirit, show us that the way of nonviolence is firm in its resolve to withstand the advances of evil. They were less concerned about the cost to themselves if they resisted and more concerned about the cost to others if they didn't. By their bravery, Shiprah and Puah become catalysts who create an opening for life where there was none. Their actions open the door for others to follow their example, and not a moment too soon. For Pharaoh was hardly finished.

Intent upon his death mission, Pharaoh issues a new order, saying, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live" (Exod 1:22, NRSV). Sometime after this Moses is born, a Hebrew boy who by decree should be tossed into the river Nile. Yet his mother, Jochebed, desperately wants to spare the life of her child. Surely she's heard about the nonviolent resistance of the Hebrew midwives. It's possible they were present at the birth of Moses.² So Jochebed decides to seize the nonviolent moment by bravely resisting Pharaoh's order. She refuses to toss Moses into the river and quietly hides him instead.

Jochebed reveals a face of nonviolence that shows great care and even caution. There are times when nonviolence must do its work quietly. Time spent in a secluded place creates room to breathe, shore up resources, or ponder a next step. Sometimes the way of nonviolence seeks a secluded place like a fertile egg seeks a womb, in need of a space to grow an idea, give

2. Winter, *Woman Witness*, 16.

shape to a design, wait for the stirrings of wisdom, or ready itself for the time when it will emerge once again into the fray.

Jochebed conceals her son for three months, until “she could hide him no longer” (Exod 2:3, NRSV). Perhaps it was getting too hard to keep his birth a secret. Perhaps he had been discovered and she knew it was only a matter of time before Pharaoh sent someone to dispose of her son. Or perhaps she could hide Moses no longer because she was ready to take another step in the way of nonviolence. The time had come to move her nonviolent resistance out of the shadows and into the light.

When I think of Jochebed during the months she spent hiding Moses, I imagine her creating a plan for the day when she would no longer be able to keep him hidden. We know nothing from Scripture as to what went on within her mind and heart. But she, like every Hebrew mother at that time, must have longed wholeheartedly for her son to live. She had time enough to think about what she might do. I imagine her coming up with the details of a plan as she quietly considered how it would proceed and when to set the plan in motion.

When the time seems right, Jochebed fashions a sturdy basket, puts Moses into it, and places the basket in the reeds along the bank of the river to protect him from the current. She who spent three months hoping her son would not be discovered now hopes with every ounce of her being that he will be.

Jochebed seizes her second nonviolent moment in a way that teaches us pragmatic lessons about the spirituality of nonviolence. When we have a particular goal in mind, the way of nonviolence calls us to ponder our steps carefully. We know that good planning has a much better chance of success than good intentions do. So we seriously consider the who, what, when, where, why, and how of our actions, planning with care and deliberation to intensify the impact of our work.

As Jochebed places Moses in the river, the sister of Moses (known to be Miriam) stands “at a distance, to see what would happen to him” (Exod 2:4, NRSV). But Miriam will not remain at a distance for long. The time has come for her to emerge from the shadows into the light as well.

Sometime thereafter, Pharaoh’s daughter comes to the river, notices the basket and finds the infant boy within. “This must be one of the Hebrews’ children,” she says as she takes in what she has discovered (Exod 2:6c, NRSV). Imagine what goes through her mind and heart at this moment. She must realize that the child lying before her is not a newborn.

And when she does she realizes a whole lot more. This means that someone refused to throw this baby boy into the Nile when he was born. Someone has hidden the child ever since. And that means someone had the courage to resist her father's orders.

As Pharaoh's daughter ponders all of this, Miriam enters into the story. She brings to this nonviolent moment her raw desire that her brother might live and every drop of courage that courses through her veins. With the full-fledged freedom of a child, Miriam throws caution to the wind as she asks, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" (Exod 2:7, NRSV).

Miriam's question is the spark that sets this story aflame with the possibility of transformation. What Miriam is really asking is, "Will you join with me and my mother and the Hebrew midwives in nonviolently resisting the slaughter of innocents? Will you stand up to your father's death-dealing edict in defense of life? Won't you use your royal power to spare the life of my brother?"

Miriam is asking the unthinkable. By doing so, she reminds us that the spirituality of nonviolence knows no bounds. It brings tomorrow's possibilities to today's reality by daring to imagine the unimaginable. It expands every narrow-minded "no way" with the breadth of "what if." It forges ahead fearlessly and with great determination. The way of nonviolence stretches far and wide enough to touch even those we may believe are beyond its reach.

Miriam shows us that we must never underestimate the power of suggestion in the midst of a nonviolent moment. A person standing in the uncertainty of such a moment faces a difficult choice and is vulnerable. The power of suggestion can be a very influential tool. Having someone plead for mercy may be exactly what the person needs to make the difficult choice for nonviolence.

Pharaoh's daughter didn't expect a dilemma that would rock her world of royalty when she came to the river. Now that she has seen this child, does she wash her hands of the situation and return to life as usual? Or does she risk turning her world upside down in order to have mercy? Sparing the life of this boy would mean defying her father and accepting the consequences, whatever they may be. And they could be harsh, coming from a man who has ordered the slaughter of innocents not once but twice.

As Pharaoh's daughter beholds this fragile child, something is moved deep within her. Perhaps she has heard about the Hebrew midwives who

dared to resist her father's death order. This baby before her is living proof that someone else has refused to comply with her father's command. Who knows how many other Hebrews in the land were hiding their newborns! And this precocious girl standing before her has mustered the audacity to suggest that she, too, disobey her father's decree.

In a profound act of defiance, Pharaoh's daughter casts aside her father's order and casts her lot with the women whose actions have brought her to this moment. With the life of Moses hanging on her answer, she replies to Miriam simply, saying, "Yes" (Exod 2:8, NRSV).

"Yes," meaning, "Yes, go get someone to nurse him. . . . Yes, I will join with you and the other women in resisting the evil order of my father. . . . Yes, I will choose life for this child and create an opening for life to prevail in a culture of death." The "yes" of Pharaoh's daughter is the climax in the story of these five women who have courageously chosen life. Each of them has seized the nonviolent moment in her own way. And together they have disrupted the deadly plans of empire long enough to spare the life of Moses.

The choice of Pharaoh's daughter is extraordinary. This woman leads a life of privilege. She doesn't have to show concern for someone of another class and nation. She doesn't need to get involved. She certainly doesn't need to go against her father's order! Yet she does. She makes a selfless choice on behalf of a people not her own. And she demonstrates what can happen when the spirit of nonviolence breaks into our lives with its groundbreaking power.

We break new ground whenever we open ourselves up to the groundbreaking power of nonviolence. Sometimes this power will be strong and surprising, as it was for Pharaoh's daughter. At other times it may be more subtle and gentle. However the spirituality of nonviolence breaks up our fallow ground, it is an invitation to grow. We may take one small step along the way of nonviolence. Or we may forge ahead fearlessly into the unknown, holding fast to our faith. However we respond to the nonviolent stirrings within, the ground of our being cracks open as new growth sprouts forth. We give ourselves to the way of nonviolence and let it lead us where it may. And it just may lead us in directions we never imagined we would go.

Miriam wastes no time in finding someone to nurse her brother as she runs straight to her mother. Pharaoh's daughter says to Jochebed, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages" (Exod 2:9, NRSV). Moses returns to the breast of his mother, and Jochebed is paid to be his wet nurse.

The prayers of Jochebed have been answered. Moses is rescued from the reeds and returned to her loving embrace. Her nonviolent actions along with Miriam's have secured a future for her son. And nonviolence has secured a place in history as a force strong enough to bring the grace of transformation to the gates of empire.

There's a delightful dose of irony running through this Scripture story. Both of Pharaoh's deadly decrees command the killing of infant boys. Both allow newborn girls to live. Yet it is the actions of five females that spare the life of Moses. It is Moses who is sent by God to liberate the Israelites from their oppression. And through Moses the Israelites are freed from the bondage first imposed upon them by Pharaoh.

This story contains great wisdom about how we are to choose life before the powers of death. Pharaoh can be viewed as a symbol of leaders from powerful nations and empires today. These leaders may not directly order the killing of infants. But how often do they make decisions that result in the death of innocents, either directly or indirectly? Pharaoh felt threatened by the growing number of Israelites in his land. Today's pharaohs feel threatened by the growing number of forces deemed to be a menace to their lands or power. And so they implement death-dealing tactics and policies in an effort to neutralize these threats.

When the powers that be are in the business of death, the God of life calls us to take action. We answer this call with the courage of the five Exodus women. And we learn from the wisdom contained in the way each woman seizes her nonviolent moment.

The example of Shiprah and Puah reveals the pioneering spirit of nonviolence and teaches us an important lesson. When there is no path, the way of nonviolence blazes a trail for others to follow. There are times when nonviolence calls us to veer off the beaten path and create the way by walking it. The terrain may be rough and rocky. We may not know where we are going. But like these women we know deep within that we must act, and we rely on our moral compass to be our guide.

Shiprah and Puah seize their nonviolent moment with the fortitude of faith. They align themselves not with Pharaoh but with a God who cherishes life. They demonstrate a faith that professes a deep commitment to God's law of love. This is the faith that forms the firm foundation of the spirituality of nonviolence. It flows from the heart of a God who has acted tenderly, tenaciously, and tirelessly in defending life throughout the course of salvation history. And it flows from the heart of a faith whose leaders

have written, "Respect for life is . . . a fundamental moral principle flowing from our teaching on the dignity of the human person."³

There are times when nonviolence calls us to follow in the footsteps of Jochebed, whose actions were quite different from those of the midwives. By keeping Moses out of sight for three months, I believe this courageous woman gave herself time and space to come up with a plan that had a very specific purpose in mind. Her witness reminds us that there are times when we must approach our actions with a spirit that is deliberating and discerning. We take the time and the space we need to plan. We think about and prayerfully consider the purpose of our actions and the outcome we are seeking.

When we take time to discern the goal of our actions, we engage in our work for peace with a greater sense of purpose. And we communicate this sense of purpose in the way our action is carried out. Over the years I've been involved in many nonviolent actions and campaigns. Those that have a clear purpose reflect this in the way the action or campaign is carried out. The tone of the action is focused. The intention is communicated clearly. There is a sense that all involved are united around a common goal. If the action continues over a period of time, the leaders pay attention to each step of their planning. They consider what has been accomplished, what has failed, and what is needed to continue moving toward the goal.

I've also been a part of nonviolent actions where there is no clear or unifying sense of purpose. These actions often come across as unfocused. A sense of purpose is not communicated in the way the action is carried out. If the action continues over a period of time, there's often no clear sense of how one step relates to the next. The message becomes muddled, and the impact of the action is diminished.

When we are up against powers that plan their actions with great cunning, our chances of success are greater if we go about our work in ways that are focused and conducted with a sense of purpose. When I look at nonviolent campaigns that have been the most successful over the years, a clear pattern emerges. Those that accomplished their goals went about their work in a way that was sustained and strategic.

This type of nonviolence was implemented in very effective ways during the civil rights movement. Week after week, nonviolent protesters went to lunch counters to sit where they were not allowed by law to sit. When

3. US Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Confronting a Culture of Violence*, Section I, "Introduction."

one band of protesters was arrested, another wave immediately moved in. There was no letup. Month after month this continued until the protesters achieved their goal and the lunch counters became integrated. I remember this kind of sustained nonviolence being used in New York City years ago after the killing of an unarmed black man by police officers. Day after day there were civil disobedience actions at city hall calling for justice. The persistence of protestors eventually forced the city to bring charges against the officers and put them on trial for their actions.

Coordinated campaigns and sustained actions can be a lot of work. Yet these types of actions have shown that they can accomplish great things. They build momentum and power. They disrupt business as usual. They make nonviolence a pervasive force tenaciously seeking to achieve its purpose. They send a message that we intend to be a relentless presence for peace that will not be easily turned away. In its finest hour, sustained and strategic nonviolence can generate power strong enough and momentum sweeping enough to halt the advance of empire and hasten the advent of peace.

This happened when President Obama called for military intervention against Syria in response to the 2013 gas attacks that led to massive death and suffering of the Syrian people. As soon as peacemakers received word of his intentions, they began to mobilize. The message was focused and consistent—military intervention will only escalate the violence and will not solve the problems there. The call was clear—diplomatic action through sanctions and concerted efforts to bring about a cease-fire. Social media spread the word far and wide to Americans to contact their members of Congress. And people responded.

Within just a few days there was a clear majority of voices crying out against military intervention and calling for peace. These voices received a major thrust when Pope Francis called for an international day of prayer and fasting, and people of faith throughout the world responded. In less than a week, a diplomatic resolution was being considered and threats of intervention had stopped. The hand of empire had been stayed by a huge outpouring of empathy.

This campaign was short in duration, yet it was strategic in the way that the message was so clearly focused. It was coordinated through concerted actions directed toward Congress. And it was sustained by the intensity of people crying out for peace in public and praying in private day after day.

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In addition to being strategic, our nonviolent actions must be alive with the kind of creativity that led Miriam to make an outrageous request of Pharaoh's daughter. When we transcend "inside-the-box" thinking we quickly discover the freedom that frolics outside the box. These types of actions embrace a spirit willing to leap into the great beyond with boldness and daring. And when we bring to our actions the spirit of the unimaginable, unimaginable things can happen.

Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin brought the spirit of the unimaginable to their work, and the Catholic Worker Movement was born. A French laywoman and a French bishop brought the unimaginable spirit of reconciliation in the wake of World War II, and Pax Christi, the international Catholic peace movement, was born. Rosa Parks, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and others brought the unimaginable spirit of equality to the segregated South, and the civil rights movement was born. We must ask ourselves— where is the spirit of the unimaginable stirring in the work of peacemaking today? How is it stirring in our hearts? What is the movement that is begging to be born at this nonviolent moment?

When the spirit of the unimaginable is present, the unlikeliest people can become partners in transformation. Miriam reached out to the daughter of Pharaoh, a very unlikely ally, and invited her to be an active participant in transformation. We must remember that the goal of our work for peace is not victory over the pharaohs and emperors of our day (or their relatives). The goal is a transformation that will only be complete when both oppressed and oppressor are free.

Last but hardly least, we bring to our nonviolent action the courageous and compassionate spirit of Pharaoh's daughter. This noble woman doesn't brush Miriam off as we might expect from someone in her position. She reaches beyond any selfish concerns and creates a space in her heart to grant Miriam's merciful request. She breaks her ties with the evil ways of empire, at least for a moment. When she does, she experiences a breakthrough. She breaks through the oppression that is holding this child hostage. And she discovers a way to relinquish the death sentence imposed upon Moses.

Of the women in this story, perhaps it is Pharaoh's daughter who speaks most profoundly to those of us living in the world's most powerful nation today. Shiprah, Puah, Jochebed, and Miriam were all Hebrew women, and so they were among those oppressed by Pharaoh. But Pharaoh's daughter was one who held a powerful and privileged place in society. She had to

choose between being faithful to the command given by her father or being faithful to her conscience. She was forced to choose between solidarity with her country or solidarity with those being oppressed by her country. This kind of dilemma is not uncommon to those of us who find ourselves living in the United States today.

I remember a lesson I learned during the time I spent as a volunteer in Belize after college. I lived and worked among people who did not have the privileges I took for granted. A number of us who were volunteering began to question what we wanted to do with our lives after our time of service. Our hearts had broken open in new ways, creating space for seeds of something more to grow. We talked with our Belizean mentors, and their advice to us was clear. "Take what you have experienced here back home with you," they said. "Use it to change the policies of your government that are contributing in a big way to the oppression you see here."

This is the work of those of us who live with the blessing and burden of privilege. We are called to be faithful to our God who loves the poor as well as the privileged. We have the power to cry out on behalf of those whose voices are silenced. "An ethic of respect for life," wrote the bishops in their pastoral letter, "should be a central measure of all our institutions—community, economic, political and legal."⁴ We are called to advocate for those whose lives are compromised by the conduct of our nation. We must follow the voice of our conscience by refusing to support actions that lead to suffering and oppression. Our dual identity as inhabitants of this wealthy nation and nonviolent Christian disciples compel us to work for the transformation of institutions and individuals alike.

When Pharaoh's daughter said "yes" to nonviolence by saying "yes" to Miriam, she issued a command that resounds throughout the ages. Her "yes" commissions faithful followers to rise up in defense of life wherever it is threatened by the powers that be. This command echoes from one generation to the next, encouraging us to persist in our efforts. It is the "yes" that reminds us the actions we take can stir someone else to action. It is the "yes" that resounds in the heart of a God who longs for fullness of life for all.

Each time we respond to this summons, we choose life by opening the door to a future that looks very different from life as we know it. We choose a life where control by the privileged gives way to collaboration by the many. We choose a life where security is fostered not by stockpiling

4. *Ibid.*, Section II, "A Culture of Violence."

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weapons but by safeguarding the common good. We choose a life where wealth is measured not by the riches of individuals but by the resources of the community. We become midwives bringing to birth a world where the coveting of power gradually yields itself to a covenant of peace.

Let us remember that five women, small in number but stalwart in spirit, became midwives of liberation long ago. And through our laboring for peace we can become midwives of liberation once again.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation

1. What, in particular, struck you about the nonviolent resistance of the Exodus women? What lessons do their examples hold for you?
2. Have you ever refused to cooperate with something that violated your faith or conscience or witnessed others engaging in this type of resistance? What are your thoughts/feelings about this type of nonviolent witness?
3. Have you ever engaged in nonviolent resistance in a private way? Have you taken steps to make your resistance more public? Why/why not?
4. Where is the spirit of the unimaginable stirring in the work of peace-making today? How is it stirring in your heart?
5. Do you think the times in which we live call us to be more sustained and strategic in our work for nonviolence? Why/why not? If so, how might we accomplish this?
6. Have you ever been stirred to take action because of the nonviolent witness of another person? Have you taken a nonviolent action that encouraged someone else to act in a spirit of nonviolence as well?