

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Mighty Acts of God: Getting in the Ring”
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Exodus 1:1-22; Matthew 16:21-28

It was an epic mismatch. And I don't mean a Mayweather vs. McGregor mismatch, or a coyote vs. road runner mismatch. I mean an epic mismatch. In the blue trunks was Pharaoh, king of Egypt and by his own admission, a god. He ruled one of the greatest kingdoms of the age. He had one of the greatest armies of the time. He had the power to cower his own people. He was the Lord of all that he could see. In the other corner were two Hebrew midwives. They had no kingdom. They had no army. They had no power, even within their own community. They were just women. The battle was not a boxing match but a contest over life and death. Pharaoh had ordered the women to kill all the male babies born. He ordered them to be practitioners of death and not life. He ordered them to do so because he and his people were afraid of the Hebrews. The midwives refused to do so because they believed in a God of life and blessing. The result? The women won. They out foxed Pharaoh. They out maneuvered Pharaoh. The women won, God's people survived and thrived.

It was an epic mismatch. In the blue corner was Caesar, the ruler of one of the greatest empires of all time and by the admission of many of his subjects, a god. He had one of the greatest armies the world had ever known. He conquered. He ruled. His face was on statues, coins and monuments. He conquered, killed and often crucified any who opposed him. He was the one to whom all were to bow down. In the other corner was a small-town Jewish rabbi, with a handful of followers. He would never travel far and wide. He would not conquer any territory. He would heal, teach and preach. He would speak of a different kingdom; the kingdom of God. This kingdom was not one of brutality, but of love, forgiveness and grace. Once again, it was death versus life, and life won. Though this rabbi Jesus would be crucified, his life would not end. And today there is no Roman Empire. Its remains nothing more than a tourist attraction. But the followers of this Jesus' rabbi number more than a billion. Jesus won, and God's people survived and thrived.

These are perhaps two of the greatest mismatches in history. Two fights we probably ought not to have even heard about because Pharaoh and Caesar should have crushed the women and Jesus. Yet not only do we hear about them but those two matches changed the course of history. So how was it that two women and one rabbi could defeat two of the most powerful leaders and empires on earth? The answer is that in their corner was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In their corner was the God of life and blessing. In their corner was the God who has been and continues to be working to bless all the nations and the peoples of the earth. In their corner was the God who refused to let death win. This story and the others we will be looking at between now and Advent, are stories of the mighty acts of God. They are stories that will remind us that God is not distant and removed from this world but is active in the midst of all that is happening. But these stories will also remind us of something else...that God's people can only win when someone is willing to get in the ring.

What I mean by this is that the Hebrew people would not have been saved had not Shiphrah and Puah chosen to be in awe of God and choose life over death. They had to be willing to risk everything, including their lives in order that they save the lives of the male children and thus their community. Jesus and his followers had to be willing to lose their lives in order to save them. They had to be willing to risk everything to proclaim and live in an alternate kingdom in which all were welcomed. They had to get in the ring and take on the powers and principalities that pushed death rather than life, whether those powers were human beings or acts of nature. And there are many who followed them. There were the Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin who risked everything to reform the church in defiance of the Holy Roman Empire so that people did not have to live in fear of hell or the church. There were people such as Fredrick Douglas and Sojourner Truth who fought for the cause of abolition, believing that all human beings should experience life and blessing. There were women such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton who believed all women should enjoy life and blessing. There were people such as Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King and Caesar Chavez who resisted the nation's laws which demeaned people of color. There were people like Harvey Milk and Barbara Gittings who believed all people regardless of their sexual orientation should be able to experience life and blessing. There were people like Lois Poston, yes our Lois Poston, who believed that there should be low income housing here in Birmingham.

My friends none of these people were superheroes. They were ordinary men and women who believed in a God of life and blessing and then got into the ring in order to be agents of God's mighty acts. My challenge to you then on this Labor Day weekend is this, to ask yourselves, how have I gotten into the ring to bring life and blessing to the world around me?