

Lying Around the Bible

^{NRS} Exo 1:8 Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.⁹ He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we."¹⁰ Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land."¹¹ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh.¹² But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.¹³ The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites,¹⁴ and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.¹⁵ The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah,¹⁶ "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live."¹⁷ But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.¹⁸ So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?"¹⁹ The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them."²⁰ So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong.²¹ And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.²² Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

Jesus says you shall know the truth and the truth will set you free. He may be right, he normally is- but sometimes it sure doesn't feel like the truth sets you free...at least not right away.

When I was home for college one summer my mom did what a lot of moms do- she said, "Get a job!" And so I started looking. Having worked at McDonalds one summer, I pretty much would do anything to avoid that again. You know, everything there beeps. The fry maker beeps. The Chicken McNugget thing beeps. The burgers all have timers. After just a few weeks working there they have you trained like a Pavlovian dog- instead of drooling to bells you're racing to fried food. Whenever our oven or microwave goes off, part of me still cringes.

So I saw a help wanted sign in a big and tall men's store. I went in. I filled out their application. And then I went in a few days later for the interview. It was interesting. After talking to me for a little bit, everything seemed to be going well. And then they said they had a little test for me and that would be it. I asked what kind of test. Oh, they said, it was just a formality. It was basically an honesty test they said. Well, it started out easy. It asked things like had I ever been convicted of a crime or a felony. Was I using illegal drugs? Things like that. It was a pretty easy no, no, no. But then it started asking things that seemed much more philosophical. For instance, and I'm pretty sure this is the one that really tripped me up. The test asked if I had ever shoplifted. And I hadn't and answered no. But then it asked me if I had ever *considered* shoplifting. Considered...I was thinking. Well, of course I've *considered* it. I've considered a lot of things. But that doesn't mean I've done them. So I answered yes to that. And they had a whole bunch of questions just like this. Had I thought about committing violence? Please. It was June and I was living in Texas. Everyone in June in Texas thinks about committing violence. So, I figured it was an honesty test. So I really ought to be honest. Well, I must have sent off every bell and every whistle on whatever little machine they had that graded this thing. The woman who interviewed me called the next day with the bad news that they would not be hiring me. And she sounded totally different now. When we talked the day before she was so nice- now she sounded guarded and I imagine her face looked like she was smelling something unpleasant.

"Why?" I wanted to know.

"Well, the test results indicate you are a hiring risk," she said. "Really?" I asked incredulous.

“Really,” she said. “I’ve never seen anyone flunk the test this badly, actually.” And then she said goodbye and hung up. It wasn’t until much later the absurdity of the situation occurred to me. I mean it was a big and tall men’s store- I was neither big nor tall. I think you could have put two of me into the smallest pair of pants there. What was I going to do, steal a shirt I could use for a tent? But I didn’t think about it this way at the time. I was embarrassed and kind of ashamed.

This was definitely not a good experience with the truth. It did not make me feel like the truth was setting me free.

And yet, I think most of us would probably say if there’s one thing that foundational about the Bible and good old time religion- it’s that you should be honest. You shouldn’t lie. And we know we aren’t perfect. But if you ask most people, they’d probably agree Scripture says honesty is a pretty good thing.

The 9th commandment states: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. False witness means don’t lie.

Proverbs states one of the things God hates, yes HATES, is a lying tongue.

Paul isn’t a fan of lying either. To the Colossians he says, “Stop lying to each other. You’ve taken off that old self and put on a new one in Christ.”

And Jesus certainly isn’t keen on lying. He says you shall know the truth- and the truth shall set you free. Again and again he attacks the good pastors and good church people of his day for saying one thing in public, saying all these nice prayers, but then acting another way in private. He calls them out for living a lie.

Yeah, if there's anything you can hang your hat on- it's that the Bible is against lying. I mean time after time, in book after book- Scripture urges us to take the narrow path, the hard path, and to live an honest life.

And yet... And yet if this is true, then why is it that so many good people in the Bible lie? And stranger than this- why on earth does God not only not punish them- but actually reward them sometimes?

Take Rahab from last week, the prostitute, who lived in the strong walled city of Jericho and winds up as one of Jesus' great, great, great grand-relatives. When the Jewish spies infiltrate Jordan, she allows them to hide out at her place. But, somehow they wind up being discovered, the police come. Now any normal person at this point, when the police show up, you or I, we say, well we tried our best, but the jig is up. You know we're willing to go so far most of the time, but then our sensibility kicks in and we say there's only so much you can really do to help, right? I mean you have to be realistic.

But not Rahab. The police show up. They ask her where the men are. And she's hidden them in a room upstairs under some flax. And she looks like the police right in the eye and says that yeah, the men were there, men were always around, but she didn't know where they were now. Risking her life, she looked them right in the eye and lied straight through her teeth. And then, when the police left she risked her life again and helped the men climb down the wall of the city using a long, crimson cord. And when the Israelites came in and sacked the city- they remembered Rahab, they remembered what she had done. And Caananite or not, prostitute or not, they folded her in to the family.

And given how clear the Bible seems to be about lying, you might think when people remembered her they might be a little embarrassed. Like, well, she ended up doing a good thing even if she made some bad choices along the way. But you don't hear this at all. She's simply remembered as a hero. The book of James and Hebrews in the New Testament both single her out as a hero of faith for helping these spies- they don't even mention her deceit, much less apologize for it.

And it's not just over lies of commission, like Rahab committed that the Bible celebrates, but the more nuanced lies of omission, too. When the wise men follow that star across those hundreds and hundreds of miles of wasteland, they finally make their way to King Herod, who receives them with a smile like a jackal. He pretends to be interested in their story just long enough to make them swear that they will find that baby and tell him where he is...so Herod can "honor" him. Right. The wise men head out into the night. And searching up and down, they find themselves before that impossible old farm house. And they hear the cry of that little one, and they duck in out of the cold. And maybe it was that sweet, sweet little face- his eyes so bright, so alive, so old already. Or maybe it was seeing his father and mother there in the corner, exhausted, and absolutely poor- but filled with such happiness, such peace. I don't know what it was, but something they saw caused those men to break their word to Herod. For they did not return back as they promised, but, as Matthew provocatively writes, they leave for home by another road.

Did they break the 9th commandment by not keeping their word? Yep. But that's not how we remember them. That's not what we think about during Epiphany. We think of that journey they made. And we think about those gifts.

And now this morning we've got Shiprah and Puah. Shiprah and Puah- household names for all of you, right? I know you've never heard of them before- but it's a shame, really. They are two of the most courageous people in the entire Bible.

See ol' Pharaoh was enjoying having all those Hebrews around- all that cheap labor. He was enjoying all the fruits of their labor. But then things got out of hand somehow. Before anyone had noticed it really the Hebrews were all over the place. Hebrew restaurants were popping up everywhere. In the post office you could get forms in Hebrew as well as Egyptian. People were even saying that maybe Hebrew children should be able to learn in Hebrew as well as Egyptian in the schools. It was like the Hebrews were taking over. Something had to be done. Cheap labor was good, but this...well something had to be done.

And so ol' Pharaoh calls Shiprah and Puah into his office. And he smiles at them and tells them he's glad they made it. And after he asks them about their families and chats about the weather he tells them he has a problem and he thinks they can help. And tells them there just are too many Hebrews. And he tells them how they can help. When it's a girl. Smack her on the bottom and pass out the cigars. When it's a boy? Well. Drown it. Smother it. Cut it. He didn't care. Just make sure something happens. Oh, he wasn't happy about it. He knew it wouldn't be pleasant. But this is just how it had to be. He was crystal clear. There was no ambiguity. No room for interpretation. And there is nothing for them to do, but to swallow the lumps in their throats and nod their heads. He

didn't have to say a word for them to know it was either them or those little ones. If they refused he'd kill them. And then he'd just find others who would do the job.

And a strange thing happens to us in this situation. When put in a situation where it's either us or them- otherwise good, rational, sane people are capable of terrible things. Hannah Arendt writes that the most frightening thing about the holocaust was that it didn't come about because of the actions of terrible, horrible, inhuman people. No. She says what was most frightening about the holocaust was the banality of evil. 6 million people didn't lose their lives because of madmen, but because otherwise good, otherwise sane bankers, and accountants, and housewives followed orders and looked the other way- thinking what other choice did they really have.

But of course there is always a choice. There is always a choice. Shiprah and Puah had a choice. And even though they knew it most likely meant their deaths, they could not bring them to carry out Pharaoh's orders. They didn't kill those babies. They couldn't. And when Pharaoh, enraged, called them back to account for all this. You know what they did? They didn't get in his face. They didn't tell him here's where I can stand we can do no other. No. They lied. They lied again. They lied again through their teeth. They say, oh it's those Hebrew women. They've just got everything going on so fast down there, they're just popping those babies out before we can even get there. It's the darndest thing, Pharaoh. Honest.

They just lie. And the most interesting thing happens. In the face of these boldfaced lies, lies that we've already established God and the Bible are clearly against, the writer of Exodus says God deals well with them- which is a way of saying God rewards them. You know, it's not that God is even being neutral here- saying, well, lying

isn't a good thing, but given these circumstances I'm going to let it slide. No. God says what Shiprah and Puah are doing is just plain good, and God deals well with them and the people multiply.

So according to Scripture is lying bad? Yes. And according to scripture can lying be ok, even good? Well...yes. Dah!

I wish I could tell you that to every moral dilemma we faced, we could just go to the Bible, or some other authority and just come away with the clear and obvious truth about what we should do. The Gideon's have tried this. Have you ever flipped over a Gideon Bible in a hotel room? There's an index there. Like what happens if you are tempted to raid the mini bar? Or what happens if you're having doubts about your faith? They've got references for you. What happens if you are tempted to lie- they've got two references there, both of them negative.

But the problem is it just isn't this easy. The Bible is not life's little answer book. The Holy car manual you can turn to for a quick fix. No, you know what it is? Sometimes I think of the Bible as a collection of love letters from God to us. Sometimes I think of it like Calvin thought of it- as spectacles, as a way of seeing and making sense of the world. But when I think of Scripture in light of Shiprah and Puah, you what Scripture seems like to me? It seems like this wise old grandparent you've gone to for advice. And rather than just fly off the handle at what you're saying like your parents might do, or rather than rattle off some old platitude, this grandma or grandpa starts telling you stories. Stories about your own family- some folks you know well, some

folks way on the other side of the family you may never have even heard of, stories about people who did the best they could to live faithful lives. And sometimes they told the truth, and sometimes they didn't- and sometimes this was good and sometimes it wasn't. And the point of the Bible is not to tell us what to do in every instance, it can't, no one can- but to tell us about our family members and the choices they made. And then to trust us to decide what to do. You know that expression, give a person a fish, you feed them for a day; teach them how to fish you feed them for a lifetime? With the Bible it's: give a person an answer, you help them for the moment; but give a person a story- you help them for all the moments to come.

At the church I served before you, I remember driving in the car with the chair of the PNC. He and I were close after doing all that work together. And we were talking- we were talking about fathers. And I asked him what his father was like. And Bruce said this- he said there were a lot of things his father had done, had said. But there was one moment that summed up in an instant what he was like. When Bruce was a boy they lived way out in the hill country of Texas. It was an hour drive into the nearest town. And one day, his dad threw him into the truck, and they drove in to get a few things at the hardware store. Bruce remembered the long drive back- the hot sun baking them in that truck LONG before air conditioning came standard. When they made it back, they got out, but then Bruce saw his dad looking at the change left in the bag and scratching his head. "What is it, dad?" he asked. "Get back in the truck, son," was the terse response. And Bruce said they then drove another hour back into town to that same store. They went back into that same store, and Bruce saw his father lay 15 cents on the counter. The

clerk looked puzzled, and his father said, “You gave me too much change.” And without a word, Bruce and his dad climbed back in the truck and drove another hour back into town. And Bruce said every time he’s tempted to let something slide, no matter how small, he thinks of his dad and that nickel and dime, and he knows what he has to do.

In the days ahead we will face hard choices when it comes to the truth. And I know when we face hard times, we’d really just like someone to tell us what to do and to make it all ok. But people of faith don’t have this- we have something better. We have stories. Stories about our family long ago- stories about our family today. And these stories are enough. They are enough. **Amen.**