

## Sermon on Sophie & Hans Scholl and Shiphrah & Puah

Yesterday, on 24 February, exactly 75 years ago, Sophie and Hans Scholl were buried in the cemetery in München-Perlach, just a few blocks away from our church.

I came across their names first, when I was a teenager and someone gave me a small book with the title “The White Rose”. The photo on the cover is the photo we have on our bulletins today.

I am sharing a lot of details with you when I share Sophie and Hans Scholl’s story, and I also use real names of people involved because I want to show how human everyone was who was part of their story. I want to show what normal people – like you and me, in a way - with normal names in very normal places are able to do, when they need to resist or when they are caught in the wrong ideology...

Sophie Scholl was born on May 9, 1921, the daughter of Robert Scholl, the mayor of Forchtenberg. Her full name was Sophia Magdalena Scholl. The family lived in Ludwigsburg, Germany from the summer of 1930 till spring of 1932, after which they moved to Ulm and finally to Munich where Sophie attended a secondary school for girls.

At the age of twelve, she was required to join the Bund Deutscher Mädel (League of German Girls) as were most young women at the time, but her initial enthusiasm gradually gave way to strong criticism. She was aware of the dissenting political views of her father, of friends, and also of some of her teachers. Political attitude had become an essential criterion in her choice of friends.

The arrest of her brothers and friends in 1937 for participating in the German Youth Movement left a strong impression on her.

After leaving school in 1940 Sophie became a kindergarten teacher at the Fröbel Institute in Ulm. She had chosen this kindergarten job hoping that it would be recognized as an alternative service to the National Labour Service, a prerequisite to be admitted to the University.

In May 1942, she finally enrolled at the University of Munich as a student of biology and philosophy. Her brother Hans Scholl, who was studying medicine there, introduced her to his friends. Hans spent two years in the military, and was a medic serving on the Eastern front, along with his friends Alexander Schmorell, Willi Graf and Jürgen Wittenstein.

Although this group of friends were eventually known for their political affairs, they were initially drawn together by a shared love of art, music, literature, philosophy and theology. Hiking in the mountains, skiing and swimming were also of importance. They often attended concerts, plays and lectures together.

In the summer of 1942, the friends began to question and resist the principals and policies of the Nazi regime. The group decided to adopt the strategy of passive resistance that was being used by students fighting against racial discrimination in the United States.

This included publishing leaflets calling for the restoration of democracy and social justice. These were distributed throughout central Germany. And the Gestapo soon became aware of the group's activities.

This is where today's sermon text can enter the stage...

The two Hebrew midwives, whose story we heard a moment ago, are almost forgotten in the tradition of Christian preaching. Little attention was paid to them over the centuries.

Shifra and Puah?

As a member of Peace Church you may have come across them, because I love their story and did preach on it even though it has never been a suggested lectionary text.

Should their story be brand new to you, no worries at all! It is not your fault.

Those two brave Hebrew women share the fate of so many women in the Bible who were considered not worth mentioning.

There may be two reasons for this: they were women, and the men who collected the Bible texts, and interpreted them over the centuries did not find them interesting at all. And second their story was a story of resistance.

Shifra and Puah resisted the orders of a mighty man. Their subversive resistance to state authority may not have been a favourite topic to many leaders in church and politics then and now.

But for us today they are important. They are important when we look at the political situation in the world at present with journalists imprisoned here and presidents threatening each other with weapons and wars there...- and especially when we remember the destiny of Sophie Scholl and her brother Hans and their friends.

The White Rose group, as they were called, co-authored six anti-Nazi Third Reich political resistance leaflets. The White Rose instructed Germans to passively resist the Nazis. The men of the group had been horrified by the behaviour of the Germans on the Eastern Front where they had witnessed a group of naked Jews being shot in a pit.

The core of the White Rose consisted of students; Hans Scholl, Alex Schmorell, Willi Graf, and Christoph Probst, all in their early twenties. Also members were Hans and Sophie's sister Inge Scholl, and a professor of philosophy, Kurt Huber. Sophie also joined the group, however contrary to popular belief, she was not a co-author of the articles.

Her brother had been initially keen to keep her ignorant of their activities, but once she discovered his activities, she joined him and proved invaluable to the group: as a female, her chances of being randomly stopped by the special police forces of the Hitler regime were much smaller.

And here let us get back to Shifra and Puah.

Throughout history women's lives were often not paid so much attention to. So they could more easily act and resist. What they did happened outside the courts and governments and big public places...

Life for the Israelites was already very dark, full of fear, full of cruel exploitation, full of oppression and violence, when Shifrah & Puah enter the narrative.

Our worst fears are fulfilled, when we hear the words the king of Egypt speaks to the midwives of the Hebrews.

The order is extremely abrupt; the language full of horror. There is no courtesy about this speech, no attempt at diplomacy... nothing but utter cruelty.

The pharaoh chooses midwives to work his planned massacre. He chooses midwives to kill and destroy, and wipe out...

Shifrah's & Puah's role was to deliver babies, to help to bring to life, to lead out of pain into joy. And the pharaoh commands them to be the agents of death.

The language that describes the two women's resistance is as simple and straightforward as that of the pharaoh's command. The narrator does not celebrate the women enthusiastically as heroines, but simply explains their motive: they "feared God".

Very much what Sophie and Hans Scholl and their friends did. They feared God. Between June 1942 and February 1943, they prepared and distributed six different leaflets, in which they called for the active opposition of the German people to Nazi oppression and tyranny. Several of the group members had been deployed to the Eastern Front for military service during the academic break.

In late fall the men returned from the East front and the White Rose resumed its resistance activities. In January 1943, using a hand-operated duplicating machine, the group is thought to have produced between 6,000 and 9,000 copies of their fifth leaflet, "Appeal to all Germans!", which was distributed via courier to many cities.

Copies appeared in Stuttgart, Cologne, Vienna, Freiburg, Chemnitz, Hamburg and Berlin. Composed by Hans Scholl with improvements by Professor Huber, the leaflet warned that Hitler was leading Germany into the abyss; with the gathering might of the Allies, defeat was now certain. The reader was urged to **"Support the resistance movement!"** in the struggle for *"Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and protection of the individual citizen from the arbitrary action of criminal dictator-states"*. These were the principles that would form *"the foundations of the new Europe"*. (just as a side note: this was 75 years ago...)

Professor Huber drafted the final two leaflets. A draft of a seventh leaflet, written by Christoph Probst, was found in the possession of Hans Scholl at the time of his arrest by the Gestapo, who destroyed it. The leaflets caused a sensation, and the Gestapo initiated an intensive search for the publishers.

In old Egypt the Pharaoh searched for the two midwives.

Because of their fear of God, Shiphra and Puah didn't owe the pharaoh anything. They knew where their loyalty lay. And this loyalty to their God, to his creation, to life in general, enabled them to defy the pharaoh and to confront him with astonishing directness. They refused his awful plan. They refused to wear the uniform of his soldiers underneath their outfits as midwives.

They did not tell him to his face that they will not do as he commands. Shiphrah & Puah don't show their disgust and refusal. They simply go away and carry on doing their work as they have always done it.

At no point in the story are we told that the pharaoh was informed about the midwives' activities. But a little later we can well imagine them being in real danger... standing in front of a merciless tyrant who is mad with fear and obsessed with power.

...the Hebrew women are bursting with life, they tell the Pharaoh, by the time the midwife gets to them, they have already given birth... And with these words the audience ends.

Shifrah's & Puah's reward spills over to the whole people of Israel. All the Pharaoh tried to do to bring the Israelites down only led to their growth and the keeping of God's promises to make them into a large nation... - thanks to two ordinary women who simply feared their God.

I think, the secret of Shifrah's & Puah's courage and resistance is that those two knew who they were. They knew their vocation. They knew they were called to assist life, not death. They knew they had no power before pharaoh...

Nor had the Scholls before Adolf Hitler.

On February 18, 1943, the Scholl's brought a suitcase full of leaflets to the university here in Munich. They hurriedly dropped stacks of copies in the empty corridors for students to find when they flooded out of lecture rooms. Leaving before the class break, the Scholl's noticed that some copies remained in the suitcase and decided it would be a pity not to distribute them. They returned to the atrium and climbed the staircase to the top floor, and Sophie flung the last remaining leaflets into the air.

The truth Sophie and Hans Scholl and their friends, and Shifrah and Puah understood, was that pharaohs, in some form or fashion, always exist. And as Shiphra and Puah faced the pharaoh of their day, Sophie Scholl and the White Rose faced Adolf Hitler's cruel regime.

As Christians they wanted to face with courage and with determination those who wanted to take away freedom, dignity and peace.

Sophie Scholl's frantic action throwing out the last remaining leaflets was observed by a custodian of the university. The police were called and Hans and Sophie were taken into Gestapo custody, Adolf Hitler's special police force. The other active members were soon arrested too, and the group and everyone associated with them were interrogated and charged with treason.

Shiphrah & Puah, the two Hebrew midwives of so many years ago were luckier. They got away with their lives. And together with people of resistance at all times and in many places they teach us how to stand on the side of freedom. How to make our choice for liberation. How to find the courage to be defiant. How to choose civil disobedience. How to sacrifice safety and comfort for the sake of healing and life.

But how, we may want to ask, how did they make their stand so boldly?

And the only possible answer is: Together!

It was together that these two women were able to choose the risky path to freedom.

Pharaoh had tried to impose his power on them.

But instead, these two claimed the power that already belonged to them, a power which refused to kill and brought blessing and hope.

Together, strengthened by one another, they rejected the slave master who wanted to control and use them. They followed their calling to be on the side of life to enable the growth and nurture of God's people.

And this is very much what Sophie Scholl and her friends did. Together they were courageous and bold. But this did not prevent them from being killed:

In the People's Court before the notorious Judge Roland Freisler on February 21, 1943, Sophie Scholl, the 21 year-old woman, was recorded as saying "Somebody, after all, had to make a start. What we wrote and said is also believed by many others. They just do not dare express themselves as we did."

Sophie Scholl and her brother's defiance, in the face of terrifying consequences, gained them enormous admiration.

On February 22, 1943, Sophie Scholl, her brother Hans and their friend Christoph Probst were found guilty and condemned to death. They were all beheaded by executioner Johann Reichhart in Munich's Stadelheim Prison only a few hours later at 5pm.

The execution was supervised by Dr. Walter Roemer who was the enforcement chief of the Munich district court. Prison officials emphasized the courage with which Sophie Scholl walked to her execution.

Her last words were "Die Sonne scheint noch"—"The sun still shines."

For Shiphra and Puah the sun really shone after their act of resistance.  
Not so for Sophie and Hans Scholl and their friends.

If we want the sun to continue to shine for them and their brave conviction we must remember them. We must tell and preach and discuss the story of the White Rose just as much as we have to remind each other of Shiphra and Puah.

If we want the sun Sophie saw just before her execution, to shine on an earth today in which peace and justice reign we must face the pharaohs of our time – as our brave brothers and sisters did before us.

We must cooperate in resistance – great and small - to all that limits, binds, and destroys life, peace, justice and happiness of all people – no matter who they are and where they live. Amen.