

During the dark days of World War II, an American ship was hit by a bomb. Fortunately, the bomb didn't explode and damage was minimal, but just in case, experts were called in to disarm it. To their surprise, the bomb was empty – empty, that is, except for a scrap of paper with a message written in Czech, apparently by Czech factory workers. Translated, it read: *“This is all we can do for now.”*

We can just imagine the crew's reaction when they heard that! *“This is all we can do...”? By leaving the bomb empty, those workers saved our lives! They did a lot! And they did do a lot, didn't they? Of course, they probably never found that out. Like most people, they probably went through life never realizing what a difference they made simply doing what they could.*

I think there is a good lesson here for us – about the importance of doing what we can. Given the complex problems all around us, and given our limited time, ability, and resources, it may seem like there isn't much we can do to change things for the better. But so what? Instead of focusing on what we cannot do, we need to do what we can. Like those Czech workers did. However little it may seem. Especially as people of faith, we have every reason to focus on what we can do. Think about it. Isn't the Bible full of people like us who couldn't do very much on their own? Yet time and again, God worked wonders through these people, didn't He? And what was the common denominator in each and every case? They didn't focus on what they could not do. They did what they could.

There's a great example in today's first lesson. The names **Shiphrah** and **Puah** probably don't ring a bell, but by doing what they could, these two women changed the course of history. Remember the situation. During the time of Joseph, the Israelites had settled in northern Egypt. Over the centuries, their numbers had grown and grown – to the point where the current Pharaoh started getting worried. Fearing rebellion, he decided to cut down the Israelite birth rate in the most drastic way imaginable. Midwives were told: **When an Israelite woman goes into labor, if she's bearing “a boy, kill him...”**

No doubt most of the midwives followed orders, but Shiphrah and Puah – they feared God, so they let the baby boys live. Yet think how futile their efforts must have seemed to them: *We're just two out of heaven knows how many midwives. There is so little we can do to save the babies' lives! We're just two up against the high and mighty Pharaoh. There is so little chance our efforts will make any difference!* What's more, Pharaoh was bound to punish them if he found out. Defying his orders could cost them their lives. And for what? For just a few foreign babies, who might be put to death anyway? Talk about negatives! But Shiphrah and Puah didn't focus on the negatives. Instead, they focused on what they could do. They could save some baby boys. They could save a few. So they did what they could. And what a difference their efforts made! One of the

babies they saved grew up to be Moses – Moses, the great liberator of the Israelites; in fact, the greatest leader in the Old Testament. Moses! Yes, Shiphrah and Puah changed the course of history by doing what they could!

Now, you and I may look at our own efforts and think they'll never make a difference like that. But who's to say? And really, is that the point? Even if it seems there is little we can do, there are still good reasons for doing it.

One – obviously! – is that **doing what we can is better than doing nothing**. You've probably heard the old story about the boy at the beach who was throwing starfish back into the water. Asked why he was bothering to do this when, with so many starfish, it couldn't possibly make any difference, he looked at the one in his hand, threw it in the water, and said, "It made a difference to that one." And to me, at least, this is more than just a story; it's a very helpful perspective, because otherwise – well frankly, you could go nuts focusing on all the good that needs to be done, that you cannot do on your own. How many children around the world go to bed hungry every night? How many grown-ups struggle with loneliness and despair? How many families are barely managing to stay together? How many young people are going down a path that's bound to ruin their lives? And for that matter, how many people are heading towards eternity without a clue that they need a Savior, not a clue what it really takes to be sure of going to heaven? You could go nuts focusing on all the people you cannot help, all the needs you cannot meet. And in fact, some people are paralyzed by thinking that way. They're mentally, emotionally, and spiritually paralyzed into doing nothing. They figure: *Why even try to help when it won't really make much difference?* But there is a good answer to that. We can make *some* difference. Even if we only help one person, it makes a difference to that one! And doing even that little bit is better than doing nothing!

You know, I wonder if this may be one reason why God told us to love our "**neighbor**" instead of just telling us to love everyone in general. Certainly, God wants us to love everyone, but there is something about focusing on the neighbor's need that makes it much more "do-able." Maybe I can't feed all the children in the world, but I can help out a neighbor whose struggling to make ends meet. Maybe I can't cure all the loneliness in the world, but I can be there for this particular person. Maybe I can't lead the masses to faith in Christ, but I can invite this neighbor to church; I can teach this child the love of Jesus. And so it goes. No one can do everything, but everyone can do something, and something – well, something counts, doesn't it? So we need to focus on how we can help. **Doing what we can is better than doing nothing**.

Plus...once we start in doing what we can, **we may wind up doing more than we thought we could**. That's often the case in life, isn't it? You look at a garage crammed full of junk and think: *I'm never going to get all that cleared out!* You look at a kitchen full of dirty dishes and think: *I'm never going to get them all washed up!* And you know the old saying: "If you think you can't, you can't!" It

becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. But on the other hand, if you start in somewhere, doing what you can, it's amazing how much you can accomplish.

Why, just the other day I started in on a crossword puzzle that seemed impossible. It was one of those *New York Times Toughest Puzzles*. But instead of giving up, I put in the words I knew and just kept at it. And the result? I'll be honest: there were a few empty spaces left when I was done, but I actually got most of it. And it occurred to me: *Isn't that how life is? You face a challenge that just seems impossible, and it is so tempting to give up before you even get started. But if you do get started, and if you do keep at it – hmmm! – isn't interesting how far you can get just doing what you can?!*

And here's a much more significant example – from our own congregation. The other day, while I was working on this sermon, I got a call from the **Tri-Cities Chaplaincy** asking if I would host a table at their "*Lighting the Path*" Breakfast in November. I said I would, of course, but after we hung up, it dawned on me how far the Chaplaincy has come since the 70's when Pastor Gedde and a handful of our members got it started. Back then, the need was obvious...but the challenges were overwhelming! Yet that didn't stop them from starting in and doing what they could. And look how far they were able to go! When John Moody began as the first chaplain, who would have ever guessed what a large, diverse staff the Chaplaincy would have today? When Carol Siefken began volunteering as the first hospice nurse/director, who would have ever guessed what a rich, meaningful ministry would develop? But it did. And how? Little by little, inch by inch, year by year, people did what they could. Here's proof once again how far you can get when you just start in doing what you can!

Of course, they didn't accomplish it all on their own. They accomplished it with the help of God, and that brings us to a third point worth considering: that **the little we can do may just be part of a bigger picture**. This was certainly the case in our text. With 20/20 hindsight, we can see how Shiphrah and Puah's efforts were part of a bigger picture – in fact, part of God's plan to save the Israelites, make a covenant with them, and lead them into the Promised Land. But we want to remember that Shiphrah and Puah couldn't see the bigger picture. They didn't have a clue how they fit into God's plan. Just as we don't. Instead, Shiphrah and Puah did what little they could, because that's what faith and integrity required of them. Just as we must. And Shiphrah and Puah trusted that somehow God would honor their efforts, somehow God would use them. Just as we can.

In fact, that's what it means to walk by faith, isn't it? Faith is trusting that even though we can't see the bigger picture, God can. Even though we can't see the whole plan, God can, and He is actively **“working together for good,” “doing abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.”** In a way, it's kind of like God's putting together a gigantic puzzle, and each of us has our own unique piece to contribute. We don't need to know where it goes, or why it's shaped the

way it is, or how it will make a difference over all. That's God's job to figure out. Our job is contributing our little piece of the puzzle ; just doing what we can.

When we think about it this way, it takes off a lot of pressure – as well it should! God doesn't expect us to do what we cannot do! At the same time, it puts the spotlight where it belongs. Emphasis on the positive! Emphasis on the possible! *What can I do?* And that is the question we take home with us today. Is there a neighbor who needs a helping hand, an encouraging word, a shoulder to cry on? Is there a person I could and should be praying for? Is there a place here at church or in the community where my time and talents are needed? Or like with Shiphrah and Puah, is there a situation where I need to stand firm against what's wrong and do what I know is right? Even if it's just a little bit, what can I do? There is always something. As Luther said, *"Let no one give up the confidence that God wants to do a good work through them."* So let's take this confidence home with us today – and this question: *What can I do?* Amen.