

Calling All Midwives

Exodus 1: 18-22

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.”

It is an honor to be among God’s courageous and faithful people today. And to share with you a word from the God who deeply cares about you. I know these times posit many challenges for us emotionally, physically and spiritually so I pray there is something in today’s reflection that renews or refreshes you and your spirit.

Even before COVID-19, it was said that leaders in the church function in one of two roles. We are either hospice care workers who help our churches die with dignity. Or we are midwives who help our churches to birth something new.

In the midst of the pandemic and racial outcries for justice, it seems we fit into both categories simultaneously. Yes, the church is dying, but it is mainly the white patriarchal church which is and has been dying. And it is about time that idol gets destroyed. But we also have the sense that God’s Spirit is birthing something new and exciting. That is, if the church allows itself to become midwives for what God is doing among us and through us.

God uses midwives. Midwife is a word which get translated from the old English that literally means, “with women,” and it can be used for any gender which offers support to those in labor. So men, you aren’t excluded. You can be midwives too!

In our story, Shiphrah and Puah are Hebrew midwives whose job is to offer natal care to other Hebrew women under the new Pharaoh's healthcare plan. We are told the previous Pharaohs were decent to the Hebrew people. But the new Pharaoh does not remember Joseph. That is to say, he doesn't care to know the story of his own history. He refuses to participate in long-term traditions which do not benefit him. He is an insecure, narcissistic, racist leader who lacks any wisdom whatsoever (it has been known to happen from time to time).

So, the new Pharaoh does what all insecure, narcissistic, racist leaders do when they feel the threat of losing their power: he singles out a group of minority people and blames them for society's problems. Pharaoh sees the Hebrew's growing population and says they are a national emergency. He starts spreading fictitious lies about them being dangerous on social media. Then he calls his administration into his office and says, "Let us be shrewd." Translation: let's be intentional, strategic and calculated. Like when the Confederate monuments went up during Jim Crow. Or the separation of children from their parents at the border. It was intentional, strategic, calculated.

Pharaoh increases their workload. He tries to tire them out and crush their spirits. But to his frustration, the more he tries, the more babies the Hebrew people continue to have. Apparently, they are tired, but not THAT tired!

Defeated by Plan A, Pharaoh takes the next step straight out of the totalitarian handbook: he crafts a genocidal policy ordering the midwives—who yield perhaps the least amount of power in society—to rip Hebrew baby boys from their mother's arms and discard them. But notice: he decides to leave the girls alone. Apparently, Pharaoh is not threatened by the girls...but he should be. (Here is where if we were in church someone could say "amen!")

We know that the spirit of Pharaoh is still among us today. Still finding ways of being shrewd by silencing voter's voices. Still using lies and spreading conspiracies as a control tactic. Still crafting inhumane policies against displaced people.

But I want to tell you today, that even though the spirit of Pharaoh remains, there is another Spirit here, in this place, among us at this time.

Shiphrah and Puah. Two displaced Hebrew midwives tap into this Spirit and they flip the narrative. Shiphrah and Puah are ordered by Pharaoh to enforce the laws of his inhumane policy, but they do not do it. There is something their conscience fears far more than an authoritarian ruler. They fear the God of creation. And it is Shiphrah and Puah's tenacious, defying act of resistance which begins to birth a revolution.

Sometimes the only courageous thing we can do is to simply do the next right thing. Sometimes the most faithful thing we can say is, "Nope. Not on my watch!"

It turns out Shiphrah and Puah are far more than midwives who help pregnant women; they are midwives for the Spirit of God.

And as people of that same Spirit, so are we.

Because where the Spirit of God is there is empathy.
Where the Spirit of God is there is accountability.
Where the Spirit of God is there is perseverance.
Where the Spirit of God is there is freedom.
Where the Spirit of God is there is wisdom. (Now I'm getting excited!)
Where the Spirit of God is there is audacious hope.
Where the Spirit of God is where peace and justice kiss.
Where the Spirit of God is there is mosaic community.
Where the Spirit of God is there is compassion for the displaced, relief for the burdened,
reprieve for the overwhelmed, room for the outsider, and arms just waiting to embrace the
weary—virtually of course.

Where the Spirit of God is there is a revolution born through the womb of justice, which is far
more powerful than any insecure, narcissistic, racist leader who lacks any wisdom could ever
dream of controlling.

The power of that same Spirit is here today. Among our teachers who are pouring themselves
out for our children. Among those marching in our streets to keep fighting against racism and
voter suppression. Among those who fear the God of creation and show it by simply doing the
next right thing.

In times of Pharaohs,
God calls on midwives
to help birth the Spirit of a new day.

Midwives like you and me,
who courageously and faithfully say,
“Nope! Not on my watch.”

Now let the midwives of God say, “Amen!”