

## ***Midwives of Us All***

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on October 10, 2021  
based on Exodus 1:8 - 2:10*

Let me acknowledge that today's reading is a bit long, but I think it's one of the Bible's best narratives.

Most of us know the bare bones of the story of the Hebrew baby, Moses, who is drawn from the water and raised in the palace of Pharaoh, and who grows up, not as a prince, but as a man destined to be the liberator of a slave people who many Egyptians of that day considered to be trash.

The story of Moses and the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt is epic, so epic, that Hollywood has borrowed it, both for animation in *The Prince of Egypt*, and by Cecil B. DeMille for his classic, *The Ten Commandments*.

What those movies give short shrift to, however, and what we often forget, are the events that set the stage for Moses. Because for Moses ever to be Moses there had to be *several* courageous heroes; heroes who paved the way for him. And what is so notable about this list of heroes is that every one of them is a woman.

Moses' mother is one of the Bible's rock stars. She defies Pharaoh by hiding her baby. "She took a reed basket and sealed it with black tar and she put the child in the basket and set the basket among the reeds at the riverbank.

But she couldn't save him alone. Moses' sister stood guard at that moment so that when Pharaoh's daughter discovered the baby, she said to her, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" Wink wink nod nod. And we know that she won't get just any random woman to nurse the child.

And Pharaoh's own daughter is a hero, too. That fact makes this story *especially* interesting. She defies her own father by rescuing this Hebrew baby. Everyone else might be terrified of the Pharaoh but nobody was going to kill this baby if she could stop them.

Men in that world, and too often in this one, make bad policy; policy that leads to putting children in cages, and it is left to empathetic women to look hard at the damage and say, no – a person is still a person no matter what color they are.

As I said, all of these heroes are women, and not the least among these heroes are the Hebrew midwives who play such important roles in the story, and who we happen to know by name: Shiphrah and Puah.

Among the likes of Ruth and Esther and Mary Magdalene, they are among the lesser-known women of the Bible; the often forgotten. But the Hebrew people, the ones who made it out of Egypt, the ones who wandered in the desert for forty years, and finally settled in the land of the promise, *they* did not forget these women.

No, the story of their disobedience to Pharaoh and their decision to choose life over death was told over and over again to generations of young Hebrew children. It was kept alive through their oral tradition, until one day, someone who feared it might be lost (or who wanted it told a certain way) dictated it to a scribe who wrote it down and it was preserved.

And when they wrote it down, they remembered to include the *names* of these two midwives. The name of the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, who oppressed and enslaved Moses's people? – not so much. He is forgotten, But Puah and Shiphrah, *they* are remembered by name. Isn't that a lovely?

Now, as is often the case in these early books of the Old Testament, these names have a particular meaning. Shiphra translates as "improvement," which I hear may be a reference to the way a midwife would "improve" the appearance of newborns in her care by cleaning them up, and straightening their limbs.

It is thought that the name, "Puah," means "cooing," a reference to how a midwife might be the first human to adore a new baby. So, we've got cleaning up and adoration here – together the two make quite a nice combination.

One interpreter, Roberta Hestenes, tells us that in ancient Israel, midwives were usually women who couldn't bear children.

Which was so hard for women in that patriarchal world where having children (especially male children) was the supreme purpose of womanhood.

Midwives had little to leverage for power in that world. They were essentially objects brought in to deliver babies and excused when the birth was over.

But here we have these two courageous women, facing off with the most powerful man in the world. And they do so, not in some dramatic, spectacular event, but by simply using the one thing they know how to do best: deliver babies.

Emily Sylvester in a beautiful sermon entitled “The Midwives,” says, “Puah and Shiphrah made God’s presence tangible in their world ... They had a vocation, a calling. They’d witnessed the mystery of life and death, [and had] taken the oath of their calling, to in all ways, serve *life*...” So when Pharaoh ordered them to essentially commit genocide and to kill every new born Hebrew boy, they deliberately disobeyed.

They could’ve said they were too weak, too ordinary to make a difference. They could’ve used the excuse that it wasn’t *their* policy -- they were just following orders.

They could’ve even justified their actions with the fear that their own lives would be taken from them if they didn’t execute these babies.

But for these midwives, God was more real to them than the Pharaoh that stood before them. And they chose to side with a God who entreats us to choose life, over a tyrant who commands us to choose death.

Perhaps that was why they had decided to become midwives in the first place, to be the ones to do their best to ease the burdens of their sisters in the critical moment of bringing forth life.

They knew how cruel and oppressive this world could be; that these boys would grow up to be slaves, but each time they held new life in their hands, each time they witnessed the miracle of a birth, their hope and their belief in life was renewed.

These women, too stubborn to give up on life, too compassionate to take it, kept delivering babies and in doing so, they changed the course of history one crying baby at a time. They found themselves in a unique position of power. And they used that opportunity to make a difference. In this way they were midwives not just to individual babies, but to an entire people.

Amazing things are possible if we just take what we've been given and find ways to use it for the betterment of this world. Just like these midwives.

Whatever privileges you were born with; whatever gifts you were given; whatever you know how to do: be it delivering babies or delivering the mail, God calls us to use that.

I remember living in my first apartment in my first pastoral position in NE Portland. I had this mailman who, I noticed, was always looking in my windows when he came around to deliver the mail. I thought he was either a busybody or a peeping tom. And then one morning he showed up in the newspaper.

Come to find out, he had saved several heart attack victims he had seen lying on the floor in their homes; yes, and more, he had delivered three babies while on his route. Turns out, he was a mid-wife of sorts, for heaven's sake.

He had realized early on that there was a special calling within his calling – his job wasn't just to deliver the mail – it was to deliver babies. It was to look out for every single person on his route, every day.

Think of the implications of that, and the calling of the Hebrew midwives, too. It sounds almost too easy in a way. We get to be exactly who we were designed to be, but by doing that with a sense of it as a calling we can make the world a better place.

Our cats and dogs know this, right? They go along with their little doggie lives, and life for those they love and are loved by is more bearable because they jump in your lap or put their heads in your hands right when you need affection and diversion the most.

We live in a broken and complicated world where we, at times, stray from what God intends for us. As humans, we often make this world an inhospitable womb, and like Pharaoh, we often act out of fear, holding on desperately to our status and to our way of life, which we've become accustomed to, even if it means that other people and the earth and its creatures are exploited for our own comforts. In the midst of our brokenness, it is difficult to even conceive of a different way.

But says, Emily Sylvester, God is in labor to give birth to a new world. And God can't do it alone. God needs our help. God needs us to be her midwives so that a new creation can be born.

And as any woman who's given birth will tell you, labor is no easy process. There can be complications that come along; it can take forever. Well, giving birth to a new world, a new creation, is just as difficult.

Unfortunately, people with great power and privilege don't always make it any easier. Pharaoh was the most powerful man in his day, and look how he used his power. Only for himself.

Well, if one is looking for a modern version of Pharaoh you could do worse than putting a spotlight on Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg. The latest light trained on him by his former employee and now whistleblower, Frances Haugen, caught him wearing no clothes at all.

In front of Congress she detailed her vast knowledge of the internal workings of the company through both her position and thousands of pages of internal documents she shared with lawmakers. She explained the technical workings of Facebook's platforms in a polished and uncomplicated way, citing specific examples of the harms they cause.

She told lawmakers, "Facebook's products harm children, stoke division ... weaken our democracy" and put profit over moral responsibility. Although Haugen was highly critical of Facebook, what made her so credible was that she was constructive and even hopeful.

"These problems are solvable," she said. "A safer, free speech-respecting, more enjoyable social media is possible. Facebook can change, but is clearly not going to do so on its own ..."

Frances Haugen even said she would work for the company again, if given the chance. She also said she is against breaking up Facebook, instead emphasizing collaborative solutions with Congress, or else "these systems are going to continue to exist and be dangerous even if broken up." A very astute reflection.

Haugen suggested that Congress give Facebook the chance to "declare moral bankruptcy and we can figure out how to fix these things together."

Now this is the most interesting part of this for me: Asked to clarify what she meant by "moral bankruptcy," Haugen said she envisioned a process like financial bankruptcy where there is a "mechanism" to "forgive them" and "move forward."

"Facebook is stuck in a feedback loop that they cannot get out of," she said. "They need to admit that they did something wrong and that they need help to solve these problems. And that's what moral bankruptcy is," she said.

Wow. Sadly, Mark Zuckerberg just doubled down on his denials and then did what all low-lives do – he attempted to smear the eye-witness.

On Friday, a Philippine journalist who I have been following for years, Maria Ressa, won a share of this year's Nobel Prize for Journalism. She has been harassed by the tyrannical government of her country for over a decade and though threatened with prison, she refuses to stop speaking truth to power. She used her moment in the spotlight to target Facebook for prioritizing profits over the lives of children.

God bless those two women, but look, we are *all of us*, are called to be midwives that usher in life and change, especially in the midst of great hardship and difficulty.

We are meant to be midwives who choose to stand with the oppressed and marginalized, even if it means disobeying the powers and principalities that rule this world.

We are midwives who, unlike Pharaoh, are not afraid to look into the eyes of those who are considered expendable, and see a life worth saving.

And we don't have to do this alone. That's one reason we are here together today.

I mean, the way Christians have always understood that God becomes the most real to us is in community. We, all of us, need a community of faithful friends to accompany us in our faith journey to help remind us of God's presence in this world and our special calling within that.

Roberta Hestenes notes that when the midwives had to meet the challenge of evil, they had a companion, a friend, a colleague who stood alongside them. Shiphrah had Puah. We, too, need the company of others as we commit to follow in their bold footsteps.

We may think the world is going to hell in these difficult days. No, I believe these are merely the birth-pangs on the way to the birth of a more beautiful world where the hate and lying we see too much of today will be shown to be what it is. I have to believe that. It's part of my calling. **Amen.**

*I am indebted to The Rev. Joann H. Lee for her sermon, Midwives of Change, which was a great help to me in preparing this sermon.*

**Response** – When were you Shiphrah, or Puah? When were you doing what you did for a living, or as a volunteer somewhere, and that platform – your vocation or avocation, opened up an opportunity to make the world a little more compassionate?