

August 27, 2017
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Exodus 1:8-2:10

Who are the Midwives?

Advocates, advisors, encouragers, coaches, people who offer skill and support, people who looks for arrival signs and then make ready.... Who does this? Midwives. Who are the midwives? Shiphrah and Puah. They may not be very familiar names, they have interesting spellings, and sounds: Shiphrah and Puah. Shiphrah and Puah are the names of the midwives in today's Old Testament reading.

Remember them. Remember these two women, who appear at the beginning of Exodus. We're in a new book of the Bible today. Back in June we began in Genesis with Abraham, and then we heard about Abraham's son Isaac—and Abraham's son Ishmael, too. And then there was Isaac's marriage and his sons Esau and Jacob, and then there was Jacob's marriages, and his new name, and his twelve sons, the children of Jacob/Israel. These are wonderful Bible stories—but they're mostly about men. Of the many stories of faith that are included in the Bible, many more are about men than women. These are not the only stories of faith, men are not our only ancestors in faith, clearly, obviously, biologically, it takes more than men—but the Bible is a book compiled by human hands. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Cor. 4:7) as it says in the letter to the Corinthians. And so, as has happened historically, women are underrepresented—sometimes not even named. So it is so good today to hear a story that features women—quite a few women. After Shiphrah and Puah we hear about the mother of Moses, who loves her child so much she is willing to send him away from her so he may survive. And we hear of the Pharaoh's daughter, who sees a vulnerable baby and knows she must care for the child—it does not matter that the child is a different race than she. And we hear about Moses' older sister Miriam, who has the courage to step forward and suggest a clever plan that allows Moses to be saved and retain contact with his mother, be nursed by her. These women and their faithful actions are all there today, I want to point them out, but then focus on the beginning of the reading, on the two women there, and what they do.

The reading begins an ominous note: "A new king arose over Egypt." This phrase should have us all worried, "A new king arose..." Note that the Bible does not bother to note the new king's name—though he might have been very proud of it. It's as if the Bible is saying that this new king is not worth the breath, not worth the stroke of a pen. In contrast, this ancient story, which was told, and then inscribed thousands of years, millennia before women's liberation, this ancient document does makes a point of recording the names of the midwives who defy the new king. We continue. "A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph." We heard about Joseph last week, he was one of the sons of Jacob/Israel, the son who first came to Egypt—came there as a slave. Nevertheless, despite being from another land, despite being terribly mistreated, Joseph helped Egypt get through a terrible famine. Egypt prospered because of the hard work and planning and dreaming of someone who was not from there. But this new king doesn't know Joseph. The new king doesn't know Joseph because Joseph has been dead for hundreds of years! That's not the point. The Bible is not speaking of personal acquaintance, in this short phrase the Bible is mourning, in the most sadly succinct way, the loss of the past. To say that the new king does not know Joseph is to say that this new king does not know history, has no comprehension of consequences, relationship, and obligation. The new king has no appreciation for what his country and his fellow countrymen—and his fellow countrywomen—the new king has no appreciation for what they have been through, upon whom

they have relied. This new king thinks only of perceived threats to self-preservation. This new king believes that people from countries others than his are enemies. This new king believes that victory is achieved by oppressing others. And this new king thinks he is very shrewd. So he orders the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill all the boy babies.

Shiphrah and Puah refuse. Shiphrah and Puah fear God—which is to say, Shiphrah and Puah know who is in charge, and it's not that king. Shiphrah and Puah believe that boy babies and girl babies should live. The new king does not like this, when people do things differently that he has decreed. The new king calls the midwives. Actually, it is something like that TV show *Call the Midwife! Call the Midwife!* must be at least partly inspired by Exodus 1, for the midwives are the heroes there, and here. And like the TV show, Shiphrah and Puah also save the day, while working within the constraints of the day, inequities of the day, broken vessels of the day. Note how Shiphrah and Puah respond to the king's demand, their answer a study in subversive resistance. They know the new king is ruthless, and afraid, and none too shrewd, and so to explain why the boy babies are still being born, Shiphrah and Puah say, "Oh, women like us, our labor is different, we have babies more quickly." Which is totally untrue—as midwives know. It doesn't matter your race or country of origin, babies get born in the very same way. Shiphrah and Puah probably spoke politely, as they explained what happened to the king by way of a racial stereotype he no doubt held, but what they're really saying here is, "You xenophobic idiot." That the king believes them reveals that not only does he not know history, he doesn't understand women.

Babies continue to be born, despite the king. New life cannot be repressed, despite the pretensions of those in power. Who are the midwives? I've said their names enough times by now you should have them memorized, so I'm going to ask one more time, and then ask you to respond aloud, today's sermon requires audience participation. Who are the midwives? Shiphrah and Puah. Yes, those are the names of the midwives in Exodus one, but those are not the only midwives we know. There's another word pair that correctly answers that question, and these two words are easy to say and spell and very familiar. Who are the midwives? You and me.

Call the midwife! That means you, that means me, it doesn't matter if you are a woman or a man: you are midwife, or a midhusband. Clearly, our language is inadequate, our language is an earthen vessel. We ourselves are earthen vessels—but we are the ones God calls to usher in new life, to see it coming and to help it along, to make a space for it, to make it safe for it. This is what the people of God do, faithfully, laboriously. It's often a long and drawn out process, painful—but oh the joy of what arrives! And midwives are there for it, advising, encouraging, coaching, supporting, protecting, all acts of resistance to pretensions of power and forces that oppress. It is an act of resistance to make life possible, to make love possible, to make love.

Oh how this is needed, especially in ominous times. We are called, as people of faith, to bear the gospel, to help it be born. Our calling in Christ requires audience participation, requires we speak up and act. And when we do that, we become part of God's story. Not all those stories get written down. There are so many more stories of new life, of resurrection, that we can be part of, that we can write ourselves into. And when we do, as it says at the very end of another book of the Bible, at the very end of gospel of John, "If all those stories were written down, the world itself could not contain the books that could be written."