

August 23, 2020 (Focus: Exodus 1:1-2:10) “Midwives All”

Our scripture story will be told in pieces today...

The book of Exodus contains the key story of the Israelites, the fundamental story of their faith. It is the foundational story of faith that Mary learned when she was young and helped her to sing her song, the Magnificat, before Jesus' birth. It is the foundational story of faith that Jesus would have learned from his parents and his neighbors and in the synagogue when he was growing up. It is the story of God's saving grace. It is the story that proclaims “God saves” and ...

The prelude to our story comes at the beginning of the book of Exodus. The story begins long after Joseph had helped his family during the famine. In fact, it tells of a new king, a new Pharaoh, in Egypt, one who did not know Joseph. The Israelites were no longer the immigrants that were welcome into the land, that had been offered refuge and asylum from economic hardship and certain death. They were now despised because they had succeeded, they were prosperous and powerful, and the new king would not let such a thing stand; he felt threatened. So the Israelites were enslaved, forced into the worst work around, forced to build up the luxury that others would enjoy, but not them. They were no longer people, just another tool, a means of production, a means to an end for others.

And now we come to Act 1 of our story. The king, Pharaoh, is nervous about how numerous these Israelite immigrants have become, so he enlists some of his people into doing his dirty work, like cowards usually do. These people, just ordinary people, not rich or powerful, that the king enlists, they are the midwives, the Hebrew midwives, other maybe earlier immigrants to the land, and they are supposed to turn against these newer immigrants, and they are to separate children from their mothers as the children, or at least the baby boys, are to be killed. This king has no respect for life other than his own or those closest to him. He feels threatened by their existence, and so they are expendable; their lives don't matter.

There are many such midwives who are part of this story, although only two are named: Shiphrah and Puah. And for these midwives the power of the king paled in comparison to the power of God, and the power of God for them was love, especially love for the most vulnerable, like children, like immigrants, like the oppressed. They knew they weren't in a position where they could necessarily openly defy the king, but they acted in ways contrary to what he said to do, and instead they chose to act as they knew God called them to act, with love and

compassion and caring. So they did not separate child from mother, they did not harm the children of these immigrants. And they knew the king, well, maybe he wasn't too bright, and they could defy him yet make it seem like they weren't openly doing so, by saying, "hey, we tried, but these women are just too strong, and the children were born so fast that we had no time to separate them and kill the boys. Sorry..."

Of course the king still wanted to have his own way, so he commanded everyone to do his bidding, and to throw every boy born to the Hebrews into the Nile. And so we come to Act 2 of our story. There was a Hebrew woman, from the tribe of Levi, not named in this part of the story but later we learn her name is Jochebed. Jochebed gives birth to a son. Now she hid her son for three months, but she feared her luck would soon run out, so Jochebed in a way decided to follow the king's edict, but once again, like with Shiphrah and Puah, she did so in a way that the king's evil order would be defied. For, as the king decreed, she did put her son in the Nile, but in a basket, a basket she made sure would float and not sink, and Jochebed also had her daughter keep an eye on the basket, to make sure that somehow it came to a good end. It was all Jochebed could do, but it was done in love and hope, love and hope born of trust in a God who saves, who intends good for God's creation.

And so we come to Act 3 of our story. The basket with the child floats down the river, and comes near to where the daughter of Pharaoh, the daughter of the very king whose evil order intends harm for the child in the basket, well, she is bathing at the river. She sees the basket stuck among some reeds, and yes, she knows it is a Hebrew boy child, one whom her father wants dead, but there is pity and maybe even love in her heart, and so she rescues the boy. This daughter of Pharaoh, who we later learn is called Thermuthis, sees the girl watching after the basket, and that little Hebrew girl, who is unnamed but may be the one we later learn is called Miriam, has the boldness to suggest she helps this daughter of Pharaoh by getting a nurse from among the Hebrew women, and, the girl fetches her own mother, the baby boy's own mother, who can nurse him and care for him and see that he is safe, safe under the very nose of the one who sought to harm him. And the act closes as we learn that the baby boy will be called Moses, and we know where the story will go from there.

Women, mostly Hebrew women who conventional wisdom would say had no power, and a daughter of royalty who uses her power and her privilege for good instead of for fully selfish reasons, defy an evil order and do what they can to do

what is right, what is good, what is loving, what is hopeful. These Hebrew women, these oppressed women, these women on the lower rungs of society, do not wait for God to magically act, they know that God acts through them. Yes, even through them, God acts, through their actions, through their choosing to do what was right, not what was easiest. God's love and hope were known through their actions, even though it would have been easier and maybe safer for them not to act.

Last week we celebrated the 100th anniversary of women gaining the right to vote in this country, and it might be easy to see this as a purely feminist story. But it so happens that in the setting in which this story is set, it was women who were seemingly the most powerless, and so of course it would be the seemingly most powerless through which God would act – this God whose power is love is the sort who would act like that, using not the rich and powerful, but acting through the ordinary (but what we might call essential today) people, so it isn't a story just about what women can do, it is also a story for men too, at least for men who would choose God's ways over the ways of societal power and privilege.

The midwives, and Jochebed, and Miriam, and Thermuthis were not the ones to lead the Israelites out of slavery and back to the promised land—that was Moses. But there would be no Moses without the midwives, and Jochebed, and Miriam, and Thermuthis. We may not be the ones that ever hold positions of power that change the world, we may not lead great organizations or movements that change the face of poverty, violence, inequality, or other ills in our world. But all of us can be the midwives that help foster those who bring about such change in our world. We do it every time we help our young people grow in the faith, every time we welcome someone into the life of the church, every time we show by example the love and hope, the compassion and caring, the righteous anger over wrongs that need changing. Every time we shine a light on injustice.

What are we called to “midwife” into our world in this moment? There is much life that needs some help to grow and flourish...lives of people of color, institutions and systems more fair, young lives that deserve safe schools and homes of domestic tranquility and opportunities and even nourishment to feed their bodies and their brains. We are constantly being given opportunities to midwife new light into our world.. Especially now our world needs new light to be born into our world. Let's foster the light, let's midwife it into our world.

Let us turn our hearts and minds again to God in prayer.

We turn to you, gracious God, in prayer today as a congregation. Each one of us is capable of praying for our own needs, and the needs of others. But we pray today as a congregation, together in faith and hope, together for one another, together for the good of others. Bless us in our coming together, for together each of us is blessed, and together all can be blessed.

We continue to live in uncertain times, and living in uncertainty and living with bad news for so long, with no end in sight, can be so very exhausting. We are tired, we are weary, we are worn. Give us rest in body, and in spirit. Give us peace in our world, and in our inmost being. Give us hope, bright hope for today and all our tomorrows. We are frustrated and angry with inaction and wrong actions by others and by our leaders; bless us that our frustrations and anger will not keep us from what actions we can take for the good of our community, especially those most vulnerable.

We are grateful for this time of communal prayer, helping us to experience that we do not carry the spiritual load alone, that we do not struggle alone, and that you, gracious God, intend good for us. Help us to see beyond the questions and concerns to see all the good that is being done, all the people helped, all the acts of kindness and goodness. Help us to be the good that the world needs, helping people, offering acts of kindness and goodness wherever we can. Grant us your strength and courage and power of love, for we seek to be your people, your heart, your peace, your hope in all that we do.

There are so many among us, in our community, and in the world in need of your healing compassion and care – grant all in need an experience of your renewing touch, especially...

Silent prayer/meditation...

Holy God, mysterious and wondrous, bless us today and in the days ahead. Help us to proclaim in word and deed that the living Christ is in us and among us and for us all and all creation. Guide us to follow him always, even as we pray together the words he taught us to pray to you, saying, Our Father...