

Holy Midwifery

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Isaiah 51:1-6
Exodus 1:8-22

If questioned about stories in the book of Exodus, more than likely you would answer with stories of Moses and the burning bush, Pharaoh and the plagues, the Hebrews' escape across the Red Sea, Mt. Sinai and the Ten Commandments.

Not many of us would answer with the story from our scripture lesson this morning; this remarkable story of Shiphrah and Puah, two midwives, women who help other women in childbirth. They were ordered by Pharaoh to kill all the male babies born to Hebrew mothers in Egypt.

Pharaoh is afraid of the Hebrew slaves because their work has made them strong, and their population is growing. The Egyptians would no longer be the dominant demographic.

He needs someone to put his plan into action. He calls for the midwives and orders them to snuff out the lives of the newborn sons before their mothers have a chance to see them. In short, Pharaoh asserts his power to force these ladies whose very lives are dedicated to giving life into a conspiracy of murder and deceit.

The story does not go into any detail about the midwives as they made up their mind whether or not to follow Pharaoh's orders. We are simply told, "But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live."

The midwives had to decide about their obedience to a Pharaoh who commands death or to a God whose will is life.

They put their own life on the line: Obedience to God meant disobedience to a tyrant.

Why are Shiphrah and Puah willing to take the risk?

Look at Pharaoh, intent on power and control; his way of dealing with people and problems is complete loyalty. What he says, you do it!

In the world according to Pharaoh, he exercises total authority and domination over everybody else's life, even to the point of death.

From the way his world works, at least the way he wants it to, Pharaoh's murderous order represents the obvious solution to his fear of the Hebrews.

Now look at Shiphrah and Puah. The two midwives are simply unable to even imagine taking part in Pharaoh's deadly plan; in part, because they are Hebrews themselves. But the story emphasizes that their decision is determined by who their God is and what their God wants.

And it's all tied up in what it means to be a midwife. They understand they don't control the birthing process. And not only do they not have control, they cannot predict exactly the outcome: Boy or girl, stillborn or healthy. The midwives can only create a best environment for mother and child.

So why are Shiphrah and Puah willing to take the risk to disobey Pharaoh? Because the deep truth of the midwives' story is that they know neither they nor Pharaoh nor even the mother giving birth can control what God is bringing to birth among the Hebrews.

Maybe you've never heard of Shiphrah and Puah, but their story here in the first chapter of Exodus to save the Hebrew boys, without this story, Moses would not have been born and there would be no rest of the story in Exodus, no other stories of Moses freeing the Hebrew slaves, no Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai and God's people moving into Israel, no story of King David of Israel, nor of his descendent Joseph going to Bethlehem with Mary for the birth of another Hebrew boy,

Their story is important because without their holy midwifery, when or how would we have had the gospel story?

Holy midwives show up throughout scripture; judges and prophets, shepherd kings and young couples, fishermen and spirited apostles...those men and women who participate in the birthing of what God is bringing to life in the world God loves so much.

Our reading from Isaiah in the Old Testament is part of a story of holy midwifery. The people of Israel were in exile, Babylon taking the place of Egypt, another harsh place where the Israelites were suffering as an oppressed people.

The prophet Isaiah speaks hopeful words to those led into captivity in Babylon. Did they feel like a motherless child in their captivity? Look to Abraham and Sarah, he says, who were childless, yet God promised that they would give birth to a family tree that would include more people than they could count.

Did they feel like a helpless minority in a strange land? Did they wistfully compare memories of a beautiful lost homeland to life in arid refugee camps? They were invited to contrast desert and Eden and then thrill to thoughts of the renewal of Zion that was imminent, of what God was

bringing to life, that God's justice would be born for all the nations.

Some fifty-five years ago, Dr. John Galbreath, the founding pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church went south to participate in one of those holy midwifery moments. It was the March to Montgomery led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In a sermon he preached a few weeks after returning, and let me say that the March started at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. It was a day remembered as Bloody Sunday as a young John Lewis, now U.S. Congressman John Lewis, along with so many others were brutally attacked and beaten. There is a movement today to change the name from Edmund Pettus, who was a symbol of Confederate racism, to the John Lewis Bridge.

But in the sermon he preached, he spoke about the issues, and the basic issue then was everyone, all people of all races having the right to vote, undergirded by the violence and injustice of racism.

A wonderful sermon, maybe more of report of his journey south, and in it he offered this profound insight when he said that the issue is not a "North vs. South issue at all. It is freedom versus tyranny."

Fifty-five years ago along the road from Selma to Montgomery; twenty-five hundred years ago to Isaiah and the exiles; all the way back to Chapter One in the book of Exodus in these stories of freedom versus tyranny, these holy midwives show up to participate in the birthing of what God is bringing to life in the world God loves so much.

Let me quote from Dr. Galbreath, "The church is here. The demonstration would be totally impossible without the

church. It is the four [African-American] churches that are the very nerve center of the whole process. This is where they meet.”

And he goes on to say that it is from one of the church kitchens that with one kitchen stove and two little camp stoves, they served an average of 3,000 meals a day for four days. The churches were also a place of sanctuary for those workers threatened on the streets of Selma as the March continued.

Today is sandwiched between the actual date of Martin Luther King’s birth on January 15 and tomorrow set aside to commemorate his birth. Dr. King came along in a time when things needed to change because we seemed stuck in a past dominated by social, political, and economic systems that supported a separated, walled-off world in our country between white and black and to be honest, between whites and all other races.

Maybe Dr. Galbreath had to point out the church was there because some churches were not always there.

Two years earlier, Dr. King had been arrested in Birmingham, Alabama as he led protests against integration. The white clergy of Birmingham wrote an open letter titled, “A Call for Unity”, that urged citizens to withdraw support from the peaceful demonstrations planned by the area’s civil rights leaders.

King’s response was written on April 16, 1963, from the Birmingham, Alabama, jail following his arrest during a nonviolent civil rights protest in the city. He speaks directly to the question of where were the churches, the white clergy, and the good people who sat in the pews. He said, “We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful

words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.”

We're two generations beyond the Civil Rights of the 1960s, and your view of “progress” depends upon where you stand, but to me we're still a slow work in progress, the birth pangs of justice continue to cry out. Racism, consumerism, nationalism, globalism, and all the other “isms” continue to exert their Pharaoh power over our world.

H.G. Wells, the noted author, raised a wonderful question back in the 1930s; remember that was a time when Hitler was on the rise in Germany. He asked, “What would a world of human beings gone sane look like?”

Dr. Halford Luccock, a great preacher and at the time a young professor at Yale, heard that question and said it would be world:

“Where human life and welfare would be at the center of things!

Where people would see the things that bring lasting satisfaction!

Where obedience to the moral and spiritual order would be the indispensable condition of human survival and welfare!

In other words, it would be a world walking in the footsteps of Shiphrah and Puah. Is it not the role of the church and its people to assist, to work for, to midwife such a world? Is it not the mission of the church to share in bringing the sanity of Jesus Christ to the madness of our world?

We do it by being in the business of holy midwifery right where we are: in the office where you work, on the street where you live, in the school where you study. We do it right

where we are to help God bring to birth the new life promised to every human being, midwives in the work of birthing God's justice and righteousness, salvation and love for the world.

I close with these words adapted from Dr. Martin Luther King, and I put them on the lips of Shiphrah and Puah, words for holy midwives everywhere:

We refuse to believe that we are unable to influence the events around us.

We refuse to believe we are bound by racism, war, and injustice.

We believe those around me are our brothers and our sisters.

We believe in dignity every day and that our brokenness can be healed.

We believe we can overcome oppression and violence without resorting to it.

We believe no one really knows why they are alive until they know what they'd die for.

We believe the time is always right to do what is right.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.