“Her Story: Shiphrah & Puah”
Exodus 1:8-22
Crestwood Christian Church
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Summary of vs 1-7

Before we launch into today’s text, we need to remind ourselves of the back story, verses 1-7 provide the reader’s digest version of the latter half of Genesis where the family of Jacob, Rachel, Leah, and their sisters have 13 sons, 12 of which become the 12 tribes we know of, and the 13th Joseph reunites with his long lost family by moving them to Egypt in order to save them from famine and drought. In the midst of all this, God gives Jacob a new name: Israel, to which his descendants are then named, the Israelites. Our story begins with these generations of the Israelites long since passed. We’re in a new time, but in the same place.

Exodus 1:8-22

It’s all in the name:

Names matter. I’m sure we’ve all experienced the “creativity” of name calling found on the playgrounds. Growing up with a name like Robyn, I heard my fair share of bird jokes, they were all pretty fowl if you ask me, and even had my name as a spelling word. One obnoxious boy in the class hollered out this injustice in the middle of the spelling test – I didn’t point out the spelling error. Our names mean something, and this becomes even more important when we look at texts like todays. Though I spared you from hearing the list of names in the early verses, because really, we usually just gloss over the tough names like Naphtali and stick with the familiar ones
like Jacob and Joseph; we know that if you’re actually named in the Bible, you must be important. But what’s so striking about this text is in order to get from the familiar names of the promised generation, to the liberating generation of Miriam, Moses, and Aaron, we have today’s story as a bridge, spanning those many, many generations. And there are only two names that stretch to hold together this family: Shiphrah & Puah, the midwives, of no relation.

All about the midwives:

Though they’re remembered for their actions as midwives, the meanings of their names helps us to better understand what it means to be a midwife, as well as the deep impact these midwives had in bringing God’s promise to life.

Shiphrah, meaning to comfort and swaddle, or to cover in beauty; and Puah, which means to coo and cry out, suggest these women knew the language of infants; however their actions reveal they also knew the language of God.

Transitions

As one Jewish midrash suggests, as Joseph brought the Israelites to Egypt, the Egyptians originally provided the protection and comforting womb for the starving Israelites, but at the time of today’s story, they had now gotten stuck. Thus enter the midwives. While visiting a friend after the birth of her first daughter, she was recounting those hours of labor, and how they weren’t what she expected at all! She said near the end when she was exhausted, she felt like she was trapped inside a tunnel, and it was her midwife who got her through to the other side. You see, a
midwife’s job is to work in partnership with you, and the life that’ trying to break into the world. It’s this very time of transition, from unborn, to born, where we all need a midwife.

Once known as the Israelites, we hear the unnamed King transition into calling them Hebrews, derived from the ancient near eastern word *hapiru* meaning lower class, or slave – less than human.

Once known as friend, we see the Egyptians transition into ruthless oppressors.

We have two groups, once friends now pitted against one another in an oppressive class system. Both are trapped inside this tunnel of a story. Both have need for a midwife.

**Class Reality**

So we better start understanding what a midwife actually does. The role of a midwife hasn’t really changed much throughout the years. Working in cooperation, communion even, with others, the work of a midwife can't be done alone. As Shiphrah and Puah cared for the babies, boys and girls alike; they also cared for the mothers, fathers, and communities of both the Egyptians and Hebrews. The writer of this biblical account cleverly keeps the nationalities of the midwives ambiguous. It is not clear whether they are Egyptian, Hebrew, or another nationality. We do not know from which community their personal values derive, but what is clear is they had the trust of the people, and partnered with both classes in their births, and even held a respected enough vocation to be in council with the King.
I imagine they equally cared for both classes because we know this is how God sees all of us, equally valuable and beautiful; however we also know as humans, we don’t always live this way. And so this is where I think their profession came into play. Midwifery doesn’t just work with bodies, physicality; they work holistically, factoring the emotions and spirituality of those they’re working with. The community values and even differing religions are incorporated into a midwife’s work, thus creating a sense of respect for differing traditions.

We see this come into play with the clever response Shiphrah and Puah give to the King when he demands to know why they haven’t followed through with his command. We know by their actions they disagree with the King; yet the way they respond protects all the people involved. Using the term “vigorous,” which is most often used in reference to animals, when describing the Hebrew women, they play upon the King’s prejudice against the Hebrew’s; all the while they protect these same women, as well as themselves from a fate of death. By doing this they not only saved these babies, families, or simply the community of the Hebrews, they saved a nation and spoke of God’s promise given to Abraham & Sarah, Jacob, Leah, & Rachel, that God is present amongst us.

**God’s actions**

And this my friends is where it gets really surprising. For we know God is present in the story, vs 17 tells us Shiphrah and Puah feared God, meaning they respected, or were in awe of God. God is always present, but like a midwife doesn’t work alone,
God does not act without us. It wasn’t until the midwives worked in cooperation with the whole community, Hebrew and Egyptian alike, that God started acting in the story. 20 verses into the text, 20 whole verses into book of Exodus God finally does something ... and it was the midwives the midwives who got the whole ball rolling.

It was something like this old fable that tells of a person falling into a deep hole. Getting hurt as he hit the bottom, he laid there for days, crying out for help. A minister walks by, and upon hearing the cries for help, stops, looking to the heavens lifts up a beautifully moving prayer to God, and then walks on her way. Soon, a doctor goes by, and peering into the hole assesses the pitiful man’s wounds, and then tosses down some ointment as she continues her journey. A teacher goes by, and surveying the hole, offered some instructions on how to get out before proceeding on her journey. Just when he was about to give up, a midwife jumps down beside him. Looking at her, utterly worn out and frustrated, he screams “Why did you jump down here? Now we’re both stuck!”

She said, “Yeah, but I know the way out. Follow me.”

The midwives led the way out by living up to their names, a midwife named Shiphrah, blanketed a community with beauty, allowing us to see the value of all people, irregardless of class or power. A midwife named Puah cooed, offering us comfort in our hardships, all the while crying out the injustice of the very children she helped birth into the world then had to suffer every day.
We are all called to be midwives for God’s vision for the world. Shiphrah and Puah partnered with the Hebrews and Egyptians through the transition to liberation – liberation from oppression, as well as feeling the need to oppress. Paul tells the early church in Romans “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit. (8:22-23a n.d.) What is keeping us stuck? Are we feeling oppressed like the Hebrews? Are we feeling the pressure to remain in control, like the Egyptians?

Laboring for God’s world certainly isn’t easy, it’s pretty messy; however, it is not done alone. As these midwives of today’s story reveal, the in breaking of God doesn’t happen one life at a time, one person at a time – it’s done one community relationship at a time. We’re called to be midwives for one another, encouraging each other to allow the God in you, the God in me, the God living in every single one of us, to break forth into the world. God is always present, but God wants to act with us. As a mentor of mine always says, are you willing to be a Co-Laborer for God’s Kin-Dom? I hope so!