

Christian Midwives
A sermon by Matt Matthews
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Exodus is a just a great book filled with great stories that shed such a bright light on who God is, what God does, and how tenaciously God loves. The story of the midwives is one of those great stories.

We pick up our text today as the Pharaoh/King of Egypt charges the nation's midwives to kill all of the newborn Hebrew male children. This makes perfect sense in terms of "national security." Egypt was, after all, becoming overrun with its population of immigrants. The number of Hebrew slaves might soon outnumber the ranks in Pharaoh's army. So, kill the boys, and if rebellion comes, it'll be the girls who have to do the fighting. Pharaoh's orders and his motives make perfect sense (in a twisted way, yes?)

Pharaoh makes perfect sense to everyone, perhaps, except to the midwives Shiphrah and Puah. Shiphrah and Puah fear Pharaoh, but they fear God more. Pharaoh discovers their transgression and asks them, "Why have you allowed these boys to live?" The women say that the Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; Hebrew women are *vigorous*—this is a word that means roughly, they are "beasts." *By the time we midwives get there, the Hebrew women have already given birth.*

In this story, we do not know the name of Pharaoh. Pharaoh who? (Some scholars say this Pharaoh may have been Dudimose or Tutimaios.) But the names Shiphrah and Puah are known, and their bravery is known, and their story will be forever told as examples of how God uses ordinary saints to deliver his people. One commentator says the actions of Shiphrah and Puah is the first recorded instance of civil disobedience. (They have been ordered by the law to do one thing, but the heroes of this story, do another thing instead.) Rabbis have long considered these midwives as healers and protectors. Shiphrah and Puah are heroes. The memory of Pharaoh-what's-his-name has faded, but Shiphrah and Puah will not.

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I don't know a whole lot about actual midwifery. I advise young fathers-to-be to be careful about what they say when their wife is in delivery. Don't say things like, "I feel your pain, dear," or, "All you have to do is breathe."

But at a deeper level, I don't think we need to know our way around a birthing stool to 'get' this text.

I'd like you to consider midwifery as a metaphor for ministry. When we think of those engaged in ministry (and we are *all*, ministers, yes?) there are many words that define it: "minister," "pastor," "shepherd," "priest," "father," "clergy woman/man," "parson," "padre/madre", "sky pilot," "reverend," "chaplain," "teacher," and the like. Each of these names suggests a duty that a pastor/minister/disciple performs. One word you don't hear very often is (you got it) "midwife." Dave McNattin might introduce me as his friend or as his pastor, but he's NOT going to introduce me as his midwife. But, it's not a bad metaphor for ministry.

Broadly speaking, a midwife helps us give birth to something new . . . to a new idea, a new vocation, a new stage of life. A midwife helps us make the transition from living with our spouse to being a widower. A midwife stands by as we do the hard work of getting through a job change, getting through a divorce, getting through a tough patch. We do most of the work, but the midwife brings the water, the midwife boils the sheets, the midwife circles the wagons, the midwife listens, the midwife speaks a word of comfort, the midwife holds out hand, the midwife says I know this is difficult, the midwife prays with and for us . . . A midwife is there.

Ministry as midwifery is not too great a stretch. And we all are called to do it. Shiphrah and Puah are brave examples. They stood by to help even though they were called to do harm. They nurtured life when

they could have hastened death. They were faithful to their calling, despite the fact that Pharaoh and the powers of this world called them to be something they were not. They were midwives. And they were going to be midwives no matter the cost.

Do you know somebody like that?

I do. Shiphrah and Puah, of course. Rosa Parks. My mother. My father. Rob Dalhouse who pours his heart into his work at CU at Home, helping neighbors experiencing homelessness. Tracy Dace, Ritchie Drennen/Tim Young, Damen Rowell—all men who have taught me about sacrifice and about service.

Do you know any midwives who quietly are doing God's holy work?

Mentors, pastors, nurses, coaches, neighbors, midwives. Call it what you will. It's holy work. It requires patience. A listen ear. Healing hands. A willingness to stand by, to be used by God, maybe for a long time.

Who are the midwives in your life? Thank them. Thank God for them. Pray for them. Remember them. And remember Shiphrah and Puah who lived into their calling despite a lot of pressure to do otherwise. Let's remember them, give thanks for them, and live up to our calling to be faithful like them.

To God be the glory.

AMEN.

Exodus 1:15-22 **15** The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, **16** "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." **17** But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. **18** So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" **19** The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." **20** So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. **21** And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. **22** Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews[a] you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."