Lessons in Midwifery
Exodus 1: 15 – 2: 10

Giving birth is one of the most exhilarating and terrifying moments in a women’s life. It can be frightening, because there is a huge realization of vulnerability. It is also exciting beyond words, because a mom is about to finally meet this life she has known for months but will now see in an amazingly new way. Childbirth can be overwhelming, because it becomes very clear that you are so not in control; your body, the baby, and the birth process takes on its own life force. It is also astounding to be part of an ages-old miracle shared by millions and millions of women, a process in which you discover a strength and love you did not know possible. Enter the midwife – the one who will be there to calm the wildest fears and help you tap into an inner and hidden power as you help your baby to be born. She is the one you trust to keep your life in her hands and bring your little one safely into the world. At the moment of birth all else ceases as mother and midwife work in tandem. Whatever they do there, however much it is a routine part of life, will indeed change the world.

The PBS series *Call the Midwife* chronicles the art of midwifery in 1950’s London. At each episode viewers are allowed into that hallowed bond between mother and midwife. The midwife, fiercely protective of her charges, would shoo out bothersome folks, utilize creativity and knowledge to ensure a safe delivery, and time upon time call on faith to guide the process. It was simply life in the East End of London, but those small moments, those choices and decisions, were nothing short of miraculous.

‘Call the midwife’ is not exactly what the Pharaoh of Egypt did – at least, not for the sacred rite of birth. Instead, he instructed them to go against all they had been taught and believed and kill all males born to the Hebrew women. The two midwives of our story are Shiphrah and Puah, beautiful and splendid. What lovely names for two women with such honored and trusted positions! Years earlier the Hebrews had held favored immigrant status in the land of Egypt. Joseph, a Hebrew, had been the Pharaoh’s second-in-command, holding an extremely responsible and powerful position. The people
shared their food and labor, enjoying living as one. That time was gone. A new pharaoh, a new king, came to power, and he had little regard for the Hebrews and no memory of what life had been like when Joseph was in charge. Concerned the foreigners would overtake the established Egyptian power structure, the Pharaoh threw them under a yoke of slavery, piling more and more strenuous work on them. The Egyptians became ruthless in their quest for total subjugation of the Hebrews. Yet even that was not enough for the power-hungry Pharaoh. The Hebrews continued to grow strong and multiply. They even thrived under such adversity. The next step of the Pharaoh’s ‘let’s get rid of all those who don’t belong here’ plan was to order the murder of all Hebrew males at birth. That is what he told Shiphrah and Puah to carry out – kill the babies.

Egypt was no backwater nation. It was a well-established and solid world power. Pharaohs had ruled the country for some 2500 years prior to this time – and they would for the next 1200. The first pyramid had been erected 1000 years earlier. This was the time known as the New Kingdom - the 18th, 19th, and 20th Dynasties. Among its pharaohs were some of the most well known in Egyptian history - Akhenaten, the one who would introduce monotheism for a brief time, and who was father to arguably one of the most famous of all pharaohs – Tutankhamen, or as we know him – King Tut. This was also the era of Rameses II, the strongest military ruler that Egypt would ever know. Under his rule the country grew geographically and economically. It was a great time to be an Egyptian – not so great to be Hebrew, especially a Hebrew male.

The mighty Pharaoh, who led the nation into a time of unprecedented prosperity, made a series of small, but costly, missteps. First, he assumed that these two midwives, women that they were, would follow his orders. Along with that was the assumption that females were no danger at all, so he only commanded the death of the male babies. Now Shiphrah and Puah were midwives first and foremost. The art of midwifery is all about the preservation of life, not its extinction. The Pharaoh also underestimated the faith of the women in the God of the Hebrews. They totally disregarded what one
of the most powerful rulers in the world told them to do. They let the baby boys live. When confronted with the fact that the Hebrew boys were surviving, they gave a wonderfully innovative example of non-violent resistance. ‘Oh, but esteemed Pharaoh, sir, those Hebrew women are so strong! Their babies are born before we even can get there!’ So the Pharaoh ordered everyone to throw any Hebrew male children into the Nile River.

Into the midst of the fearful chaos of the death threats, another baby boy was born among the Hebrews into the priestly line of Levi. Once again a woman, the baby’s mother, subverted the Pharaoh’s plan and carefully hid her son for three months. But babies are quiet for only so long. So she launched a daring – and iffy – plan by preparing a basket, sealing the cracks, and setting it carefully into the reeds alongside the bank of the river with her precious baby being gently rocked by the waves. The river, which was truly life for all Egypt and death for the Hebrews, would now carry the hope of the world. Inside the basket was Moses, the one who would lead the Hebrew people back to the Promised Land. In spite of a tyrannical Pharaoh, God would once again, as with Joseph, work through another Hebrew who lived as an Egyptian to bring the people to a place of hope and promise.

Moses should not have lived. Instead, he should have died shortly after birth or later been drowned in the Nile. However, there were two subversively defiant midwives, a woman who disobeyed the Pharaoh’s orders and nurtured her son, and one of the daughters of the Pharaoh who also stood in willful resistance to him and not only kept Moses alive but raised him as her son. But for them, the Exodus story of God’s people fleeing Egypt for the land promised to them through Abraham would have been very different. None of their actions were massive undertakings. They were actually small, seemingly insignificant. From the midwives – ‘we don’t know how they give birth so quickly’. From the others – river, what river? To the daughter of the Pharaoh – ‘ah, come one, Dad, let me keep him; you’ll never know he’s here.’ None of those actions of defiance even put a dent in the Pharaoh’s power, but their effect did ripple out, leading to the people of God settling finally in Canaan, becoming a strong
nation under King David, and then becoming a divided and conquered people who would be home for Jesus of Nazareth. From the son of a carpenter would come a major world religion, and then the ripples would reach us here in Sackets Harbor. All from a few ‘small’ choices! Through them all God was at work, bringing about the kingdom, showing the people how to live as God’s own beloved creations.

Our decisions to act or not act do make a difference. We may never know how what we do or say affect others, but our choices do impact the lives of others. Shiphrah and Puah were thinking of babies not salvation of the entire world. Summer here is always filled with drop-in visitors to the church. I have shared so many conversations with people who have talked of how their time here touched the lives – from Scouts to Sunday School to youth choir to weddings to funerals to even simply being able to come here for a few moments during the day. All simple, brief interactions, but such a difference they have made! What we say and do touches others, because the love we show at any given moment, no matter how small it might seem, is the avenue by which God’s love touches the world.

All we say, do, and are has the potential to become a life-changing moment for someone. We really can make the world a better place. Two midwives did when they decided to follow their hearts and not the orders of a tyrant. A young woman did as she responded to the cries of a baby hidden along the bank of a river. A man did when he fled from a life of privilege to lead people to a place he had never seen before. I can make a difference. You can make a difference. We all do make a difference. No, it is not our own powers of persuasion or creativity or talent; it is the love of God present in each one of us that can do mighty things. We believe in the God who works in all of life, the God who can take a small action and change the course of history. We believe in the God who is always present, always watching, always offering us a path to life. So when we leave here today, let’s go out and change the world. Because we can and we will.

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