“Through Heaven’s Eyes: We are Midwives”

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Exodus 1:8-2:10

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What pops into your head first, when you return to the stories found in Exodus? Stone tablets, inscribed with God’s law? The scorching wilderness where the Israelites wander for 40 years? The frogs, flies, and bloody red waters of the Nile? A baby floating in a basket? For me, I can’t help but think of Dreamwork’s excellent retelling and imagining of the Exodus story, *The Prince of Egypt.* Perhaps one of the best movie-versions of scripture ever made, this 1998 animated film brought the stories of Exodus to life for me, with beautiful art, music, and imaginative storytelling. Inspired by this film, and the lectionary texts that walk us through some of the stories in Exodus, your pastors have dreamed up a 6 week sermon series, where we will return to these texts, through the lens of the song lyrics, “Through Heaven’s Eyes.” You’ll be hearing Drew Phillip’s singing it in worship next Sunday, so I’ll spare you my rendition of it today. But it gives us a wonderful lens with which to look at the stories in Exodus. Jethro sings,

“So how can you see what your life is worth
Or where your value lies?
You can never see through the eyes of man
You must look at your life
Look at your life through heaven's eyes.”

When God looks at us, “through heaven’s eyes,” God sees God’s good creation. God’s core action is Creator. In Genesis 1, “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God’s creates life, and God commands life-his first words to the first humans are “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.” God, our midwife, delivers life itself and calls us to join us in the work of creation. Because what God created, is very good.

You might be thinking, right, that’s Genesis 1. Different story than we read today. Sure. But in the midst of these stories is the same creating, life giving, delivering God at work. When Shiprah, Puah, Jochebed, Miriam, and Pharaoh’s daughter see the goodness of God’s creation, they choose to join in this good work, making way for life. The 5 women in our Exodus reading today have a clear invitation for us to become midwives ourselves, seeing the goodness of God in each person, and supporting one another in the labor of God’s work, the labor of God’s love.

You might have no desire to imagine yourself in the role of a midwife, elbow deep in…But just as God calls us to be a dreamer like Joseph, or brave like Esther, or a shepherd like David, or a mother like Mary, or a disciple like Peter…the text also calls us to be midwives, like Shiprah and Puah, like our Creator and deliverer, God. Like Jochebed, and Miriam, and the Egyptian Princess. A midwife’s job is to support women through pregnancy, labor, and in the time immediately after birth. Each of these women, midwives by trade or not, supported the labor of God’s delivering work, making way for the life of Moses.

Sikh activist Valarie Kaur writes in her new memoir, *See No Stranger, “*Love is a labor that returns us to wonder-it is seeing another person’s humanity, even if they deny our own. We just have to choose to wonder about them.”

In wondering, in getting curious about the humanity of another person, Valarie writes, “When I really want to hear another person’s story, I try to leave my preconceptions at the door and draw close to their telling. I am always partially listening to the thoughts in my own head when others are speaking, so I consciously quiet my thoughts and begin to listen with my senses. Empathy is cognitive *and* emotional-to inhabit another person’s view of the world is to *feel* the world with them.” So that’s what I’m inviting you to do: Listen. See. Wonder.

Pharaoh does not wonder about the Israelites. The opening verses of our text today tell us he “did not know Joseph.” Egypt had lost the historical memory of the goodness God and God’s people had brought to the land of Egypt. Pharaoh does not have an Israelite friend. He chooses to look away from the humanity of the Israelites, and can consequentially justify enslaving them. So it must have been quite the shock when Shiprah and Puah received an invitation to the throne room.

God is calling us to be midwives. Midwives show up and see life in their everyday work, even when it means resisting the powers that be.

With the growing Hebrew population, Shiprah and Puah were busy women. They worked all hours of the day and night, coaching women through contractions, pushing, birthing and nursing. Theirs was the literal work of deliverance-bringing children into the world. Why would Pharaoh even think of talking with Hebrew midwives? Well it turns out he doesn’t really want to “talk.” He doesn’t speak to Shiprah and Puah as people, because the command he has for them is not one you could bestow on another human: “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.”

Shiprah and Puah were perhaps the last people Pharaoh should have asked to carry out his murderous command. These women’s whole vocation was about bringing life into the world. Every day, they saw new babies born. Every day they witnessed the miracle of the good life God created. Despite Pharaoh’s power and reach and oppression-“ the midwives feared God…they let the boys live.” Seeing what Shiprah and Puah had done, God does what God can only do-creates more life, giving Shiprah and Puah families, actively resisting Pharoh’s death-filled agenda.

The way the midwives “feared” God was different than the way Pharaoh feared and “dreaded” the spread of the Israelites in Egypt. For Pharaoh, fear led to distancing, turning away, and separation. Fear led to oppression and an unwillingness to see. For Shiprah and Puah, fear of God was not about turning away, but grounded in their understanding that human life is sacred.[[1]](#footnote-1) God created life and it was good. In the ways the midwives stayed by the sides of the Hebrew women, helping them breathe, telling them when to push, and catching those babies so they could place them on their mother’s chests, they see life in their everyday work, resisting Pharaoh.

In growing desperation, Pharaoh pushes back, not to be stopped by two disobedient women, commanding all Egyptians, “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.”

God calls us to be midwives. Midwives see the goodness in new life, and get creative when it comes to protecting it.

Enter Jochebed. Although nameless in our story today, we learn Moses’ mother’s name in Exodus Chapter 6. With at least two other children already in tow, Jochebed conceives and gives birth to a son. Everyone must have known she was pregnant. There’s no hiding it. Her family knew, her friends knew, and certainly, the Egyptian overseers must have seen her round belly. I suspect she was praying for a girl. When the midwife announced that it was a boy, her heart must have sunk. But looking upon his face, Jochebed sees through heaven’s eyes. In our NRSV story translation, we read that “she saw he was a fine baby.” The word Hebrew word translated here as “fine,” is the same word used to described how God saw creation in Genesis chapter 1-it was GOOD. So she hid him. But when he is three months old, full of personality, noticing the world around him, crying louder and longer, perhaps beginning to roll over-she cannot hide him any longer. So she reluctantly follow’s Pharaoh’s decree, because if she doesn’t do it, someone else will do it for her-she will throw her baby boy into the Nile-but not without hope of life. In his own little ark, Jochebed’s son is placed carefully among the reeds on the bank of the river by his mother. Through heaven’s eyes, Jochebed saw him as good, and did all she could to protect his life.

Though he might appear to be alone now on this journey, floating down the Nile, a midwife was with him all the way, watching over his life.

God calls us to be midwives. Midwives watch out for and advocate for those in their care.

Miriam, delivered by wise midwives who saw the value of life in the midst of slavery, raised by a mother who saw God’s goodness in her children, stands at a distance, watching, to see what will happen to her little brother. It seems to me that Miraim and Jochebed didn’t just put Moses in the Nile all willy nilly for any old hippo or Egyptian or alligator to snatch him up. He is carefully placed in the reeds, close to the palace. It’s a desperate plan, with creative vision. Miriam watches with tense hope as the daughter of Pharaoh himself comes to the river to bathe. Perhaps she nudged the basket out a little further so the water would ripple around it. And when the Egyptian princess sees the basket and looks inside, Miriam is prepared to leap to action. “Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?” she says, already halfway back home to get the baby’s mother. Miriam supports the labor of God’s work by inserting herself right in the middle of it, watching out and speaking up.

To save his life, Miriam puts Moses into the hands of Pharaoh’s daughter, in the house of her oppressor. Will this powerful woman take over his care?

God calls us to be midwives. Maybe midwives don’t always know that they’re midwives.

When the Egyptian Princess looks in that basket, it is through heaven’s eyes that she sees the child. She knows of her father’s opinions on the Hebrew people. She knows that he has commanded baby boys to be thrown into the Nile. She does not fear God or believe in the liberation and deliverance of the Hebrew people. But when looking into the crying face of this baby boy, she takes pity, seeing the value of his life. You don’t have to be an Israelite to get swept up in God’s work-you just have to care about life itself.

Moses will live. Pharaoh will fail. God’s people will be free. Through heaven’s eyes, life is delivered again and again, by the midwives, men and women, who see life as good, and support one another in the labor of God’s work, the labor of God’s love.

In *See No Stranger,* Valarie shares that after we get curious about another person’s humanity, after we do the work of wondering, “when the story is done, we must return to our skin, our own worldview, and notice how we have been changed by our visit. So I ask myself *What is this story demanding of me? What will I* do *now that I know this?”*

Shiprah, Puah, Jochebed, Miriam, and our unnamed Egyptian Princess are all midwives of God’s creative goodness and love. When they see new life, they show up and do the work. They get creative. They advocate for those in their care. They do the next right thing, because life is life.

Before we move on to the burning bush, and the Passover, and the parting of the red sea, and the wilderness wandering, and the 10 commandments and the journey towards the promised land, stop here first, with the five midwives of God’s good gift of life. Listen. See. Wonder-the labor has already begun. God is calling you to be a midwife.

1. Interpretation, 32 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)