

Exodus 1:8-2:10;

23.08.20

God's midwives

It is generally true that women are overshadowed by men in the Bible. Not, however, in today's story from the Book of Exodus: a key and foundational passage in the history of God's people. Here it's all down to the women, as we shall see – but first, the story so far...

In the previous book of Genesis God has chosen one person, a man called Abraham, through whose descendants God promises to bring salvation and blessing to the world. Significantly, Abraham and his wife Sarah are old and barren so it seems a strange and unlikely promise – where are these descendants to come from? But God is faithful and Sarah conceives and soon Abraham's descendants are numerous and they migrate down to Egypt to escape famine, and there they flourish and multiply. And our reading today picks up the story, beginning with the words, 'Now a new king arose over Egypt...' And this king, or Pharaoh as he's known, is deeply hostile to Abraham's descendants, now called Israelites or also Hebrews.

To begin with Pharaoh sees the Hebrews as a threat, but then he realises he can use them: 'Look', he says, 'the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them...' And so Pharaoh oppresses the Israelites with forced labour, harnessing their muscle for his great building programmes. Hard work and maltreatment will keep their numbers down, while also boosting the economy, thinks Pharaoh. But actually it has the very opposite effect. And so we read in verse 12 a very important few words - key words in the narrative to which we shall return. We read, 'but the more the Israelites were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread...'. The more they were oppressed the more fertile they became! And at this point Pharaoh has had enough. It's the usual story: we can't have all these foreigners crowding our nation. Doubtless they're terrorists and rapists and drug traffickers and they're different from us, and so Pharaoh takes more drastic steps and arranges for their elimination. All male Israelite newborns are to be killed by the midwives. That way we'll soon be done with the Israelites! Pharaoh, however, underestimates the midwives. We are told that, 'they feared God. They did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.' And thanks to the defiance of two named midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, we read that 'the people multiplied and became very strong...'. And there then follows the account of the birth of Moses, and the desperate means by which he is kept alive. And so God's people Israel survive, and endure, and the stage is set for the story that lies at the core of Israel's life and indeed our life as Christians, the story of Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt.

Now, I want to probe this story a bit more deeply, because there is rather more going on here than meets the eye. So let me go back to that phrase that we noted in verse 12, 'the more the Israelites were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread...' Those words actually echo a phrase that has already appeared earlier in the narrative, in verse 7, which says of the Israelites after they moved to Egypt that they, '...were fruitful and prolific, they multiplied and grew exceeding strong so that the land was filled with them'. And we hear something similar again in verse 20 after the midwives have defied Pharaoh: 'the people multiplied and grew very strong.'

Now a few weeks ago, in the context of the story of Noah and the flood, I drew attention to an important phrase that we find there. It's the phrase 'be fruitful and multiply', addressed twice to Noah and his sons, and it's a phrase that is also found in the story of creation at the beginning of Genesis. And this repeated phrase points to the fact that creation is fertile and life-giving. There breathes throughout creation the Spirit of God, and that is a Spirit of life and abundance. And we pick up here on a narrative that runs through these chapters of Genesis and Exodus in which deep down in its foundations the world has been designed to be a place where life surges and teems and proliferates. That is how creation is: inscribed into it is this life-force that makes it fertile and luxuriant and prolific.

What, however, becomes clear from these first books of the Bible is that there is another narrative running through creation, an opposing one: this one is about death and scarcity and want. We trace this narrative, for example, in Israel's ancestors, Abraham and Sarah who are at first

childless, and whose eventual descendants migrate to Egypt because they are threatened by famine. So there are two narratives, one of life and fertility and abundance, the other about barrenness, and famine and death. And these two narratives collide and clash with one another throughout the book of Exodus. On the one hand, here are the Israelites being fruitful and multiplying – prolific and teeming, in touch with the deep fertility of creation. And the midwives follow this narrative. They will not kill new-born babies. They follow the creation mandate to ‘be fruitful and multiply’. But, on the other hand, there is Pharaoh and his empire, ruling by that other, deathly narrative. He resists life. He oppresses and eliminates it. And where these two narratives clash here in our passage the midwives outmanoeuvre Pharaoh, and they ensure the survival of the Israelites, who later in the book God will lead out of Egypt in a triumph of life over death.

Now, with that background, I want to pick up on the role of women in this story. And I feel awkward about doing this, being a man, but the text compels me to profile this feature of the story: the fact is that the honouring of life, the honouring of creation’s mandate to be fruitful and multiply, the defiance of Pharaoh, is all down to the women. And it’s not just the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. There is also the mother who hides her baby; and there’s Pharaoh’s daughter who finds the baby and realises what is going on but risks defying her father; and there is the baby’s sister who plays her part. And these women do not have great power and so they must be resourceful and cunning to outwit Pharaoh. I love the excuse the midwives give when they are called to explain why the Hebrews babies are still multiplying: ‘Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.’ It’s hard to know how to interpret this: is it a recognition that the Hebrew, Israelite, children are more in touch with that life-force of creation than the children of the empire and so survive more? Or are these midwives just hoodwinking Pharaoh by talking sheer gynaecological nonsense which as an ignorant man he will not detect? Who knows, but either way these women use their guile and their solidarity together to conspire against Pharaoh. And without them there would have been no Moses and no Israel.

So my question today is why is it that throughout history the figure of Eve has been blamed for her role in bringing sin into the world, casting a shadow of suspicion over women who have been regarded as seductresses and instruments of the devil and burned as witches – while there has been zero recognition of Shiphrah and Puah whose defiance of Pharaoh saved God’s people and was essential to God’s plan of salvation? Why has more attention not been paid to the role Shiphrah and Puah play this foundational story in the Bible, this core narrative that lies at the heart of our faith, and why have they not been more celebrated?

And this leads me to wonder, why is that in recent days especially it is women who seem to be making the news for standing up and saying ‘no!’ – in some cases very young women like Greta Thunberg and Malala Usavzai, as John Bell also pointed out in his sermon here a few weeks ago. And there also the three founders of the Black Lives Matter movement who are all women. And going back further we could think of Rosa Parks who said ‘no!’ to segregation; or, more locally, Corrie Ten Boom who said ‘no!’ to the Nazis; or further back still someone like Harriet Tubman who after risking her life in the cause of emancipating slaves, and with that battle won, turned her attention in her latter years to the women’s suffragette movement. And often, as with the founders of Black Lives Matter, these are controversial people who divide opinion, but whistle-blowers and those who defy the empire, women or men, will always divide opinion.

So let’s return to those midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. What can we learn from them, men and women and alike? Well, I would suggest that their role as midwives is significant – and not just because they helped to bring Hebrew children into the world. I would suggest that they were midwives in a deeper sense, one that implicates us all as Christians. Let me explain. I spoke earlier of this life-force at work deep in the foundations of creation, this Spirit of God that animates creation, causing it to teem with life, and that finds expression in God’s command to us to ‘be fruitful and multiply.’ This is the very breath of God that pulses through all things and that causes life to proliferate and abound. And against it is pitted the spirit of death, embodied in Pharaoh, and focused in Egypt, and which breathes its fetid breath upon everything, enslaving people, killing

babies, scattering the dust of death everywhere. Well, Shiphrah and Puah are midwives not just to babies but also to that life-force, that Spirit of God: they channel it into the world. Shiphrah and Puah are midwives to God and God's Spirit as Hebrew babies emerge safe and vigorous from the womb, and they are midwives to God and God's Spirit as Pharaoh is hoodwinked and made a fool of. They are midwives of God as Pharaoh's death regime is resisted and God's people are fruitful and multiply: through them God's Spirit is nursed and born into the world.

Do we glimpse here something of our calling as Christians? What if we were to re-imagine life in Christ as Christ's midwives? Look around. The power of death is at work. Pharaoh broods over everything. But in acts of defiance, acts of refusal and of saying no, acts of cunning we are midwives of God. In acts of kindness, and forgiveness and grace and generosity and hospitality: in these ways we become midwives of Christ, and blessing abounds, fruitful and multiplying. We become God's midwives, and so we honour Shiphrah and Puah. Amen.

Almighty and gracious God,
 loving and holy one, Creator, Saviour, Redeemer,
 we worship and bless your holy name.
 We praise you, God, the source of life,
 who is in yourself the eternal life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
 And we praise you that your divine life has overflowed
 in creation, as all that you have made teems with living things
 that are fruitful and multiply, filling the earth.
 Yet death is also at work in your creation.
 Life is resisted and diminished,
 and there are natural disasters and famines and floods:
 but there is also injustice and greed and exploitation,
 and fullness of life denied to many, while others prosper.
 O God, forgive us for all the ways we collude with death.
 Forgive us for all the ways we stifle life and resist your Spirit.
 And we praise you that you have come to us in Jesus,
 enduring death but triumphing over it and rising to new life.
 Make us partakers of that new life, we pray.
 In our dealing with others, in our dealings with creation,
 Make us channels, we pray, of your Spirit,
 And so may we resist all that kills abundant living.
 We pray in Jesus' name, and in his words we pray, saying...