

"What Shall We Bring to Birth?" May 10, 2015

What Shall We Bring to Birth? Exodus 1: 13-2:8; John 15: 11-17

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May 10, 2015 (Mother's Day)

Good morning, my name is Shiprah, and as you heard, I was a Hebrew midwife long ago when Pharaoh ruled over our people in the land of Egypt. Life was hard but things got much worse on the day when Pharaoh himself called me and my co-worker Puah into his court. We were nobodies, even enemy nobodies, so this could only mean trouble for us. When Pharaoh saw us, he immediately cried out: *"Kill all the baby boys born to Hebrew women!"* I raised my eyes just enough to see the rage and worry on his face. I was horrified. How could someone command another person to kill even one child, much less our own baby boys? Our call was to bring new life into the world!

Pharaoh was very agitated: *Look, the Israelite people are becoming too numerous and too powerful. Let's strike them at their most vulnerable spot. Otherwise they will continue to increase, join our enemies and fight against us, or escape from our land. The harsh tasks we have imposed haven't been enough to kill their spirit. So let us now kill all their baby boys.*

To disobey Pharaoh's order would mean our deaths. But the thought of committing such an act against the Creator and another human being shook us to the core. I needed time with my God. But as I was walking home, a young Hebrew girl ran up to me: *Please, help, my mother is in labor! Can you come?* I heard myself say, *Yes, I will come.* The birth was a difficult one. I prayed that this mother's life would be spared, that the baby would be healthy—and a girl. What a beautiful head emerged covered with fine dark hair! But I felt dread instead of joy; for it was a boy.

Kill all the baby boys, Pharaoh had commanded. *I cannot,* I said aloud. Every birth is holy; **every new beginning offers us an opportunity for growth and transformation**

A few weeks later, Pharaoh ordered us into his presence again; he was in an even greater rage. *Why are there Hebrew baby boys still alive?* he demanded. I had prepared an answer with the help of Puah and our friends, but I couldn't speak at first. Finally I responded: *Pharaoh, the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women. Because of all the hard work they do, each woman is as strong as an ox. They give birth before we arrive, then the babies are whisked away and hidden.* There was silence, no accusations or threats, so we seemed to be safe for the time being. When we got home, Puah and I looked at each other in amazement at our boldness and at the enormous risk we had taken without caring about the cost.

Thanks be to God for sending me Puah, such a courageous woman and faithful friend. We drew strength from one another and from women in our community **as we tried to ease the pain of those in labor, assist in birthing new life and sustaining hope for the future.** Whenever Egyptian women smiled at our newborns in the marketplace, I always hoped that we could somehow **birth new possibilities** beyond the division of “us” and “them.” But in this dangerous situation, Puah and I had to be cautious, alert, and competent. Our God says to us: *Do not be afraid. You are precious in my sight, and I love you.* I vowed to care for those who needed my love and my skills.

You know as well as I do that **we all have our pharaohs**, those people or institutions that put pressure on us to adopt their narrow perspectives, go along with the crowd or socially acceptable viewpoints. We can be persuaded to do things that we know aren't right. The truth is that we always have to be on the alert for Pharaohs, who try to intimidate or manipulate us. It's hard at times to stand up for ourselves and for others. But we must, especially when anger, fear, hatred or denial are escalating. Euphemisms like “collateral damage” keep hearts from breaking when they need to be broken open.

Of course, it is not only mothers or women whose love can as ferocious as a she bear's defense of your young. **You are all called to be passionate co-creators with God in the birthing and renewing of our world.** You may not be midwives in the literal sense, but each of us has a calling to bring to birth the unique gifts that lie within us and within each other. **We are midwives of partnerships and community. Our God is like a midwife**, who guides and assists us as we struggle through **the delicate process and timing of birthing something new**, no matter how small it may seem—an idea, a project, something new to replace a destructive habit, gestures that affirm our worthiness and language that speaks the truth with love.

Yes, birthing involves upheaval, pain and danger. And it is threatening to the Pharaohs of our world. But birthing doesn't mean only pain; it pushes and pulls us toward life and vitality and possibility.

Rather than drown her baby, a Hebrew woman put her son in a basket, in the midst of reeds alongside the Nile River. She was trying to save him but oh how she must have feared for his life! She did what she had the power to do. And can you believe it? As the basket floated down the river, the daughter of Pharaoh himself found it, and wonder of all wonders, her heart was moved with compassion! **God finds a way!** The power of love never ceases to amaze me; it keeps shattering evil intentions so that life might flourish.

I laugh with joy when I think of the bold spirit of the baby's sister and mother,

who ended up serving as wet-nurse. Pharaoh's daughter embraced the baby as her own—her enemy's baby!-- and named him Moses, because, she said, *I drew him out of the water*. Indeed, the holy waters of our Creator's love. How God turns things upside down, inside out—and then right side up!

We were not alone, Egyptian and Hebrew, princess and slave; we shared a common compassion and commitment. It is a wonderfully weird feeling when enemies find themselves connected in such an unexpected way. I am still astounded that God chose to work through women like us. And it is even more amazing that Puah and I are remembered by name. It is enough that God promises: *I know you by name and you are mine*.

Sometimes I worry that human hearts are becoming as hard as the great pyramids. Every day I see or hear about people mistreating one another. Not that I'm an angel, oh no, I too get angry and do hurtful things. Each of us knows what it's like to be hurt and what it's like to hurt another person. All too often, I've caught a glimpse of **Pharaoh in me**, the temptation to build myself up by putting others down, or trying to control others so that they'll do what I want. But you and I have also witnessed people who act with the kind of honor, compassion and wisdom that lifts up human life. That is how you and I seek to live, **facilitating the birth of visions that will bring us together**, one step at a time. Seeds of new life are lying within us and between us right now; what might they be? How will you, how shall we nurture them?

Moses couldn't have grown to serve God as a leader without the compassion and generosity of Pharaoh's daughter, without Puah's strong and steady hands, without the creative planning of his mother and the daring spirit of his sister, without a community to support them and even a connection between enemies Truly, it does take a whole village.....

This morning we are remembering and honoring people who have encouraged us with love, who inspire us again and again, named and unnamed mothers, aunts, grandmothers, all who have "mothered" us well, in the past and in the present moment. Like you, I have seen the potential developed within us and others to work together on behalf of our common life and all that life promises.

What kinds of new connections are you willing to imagine and initiate through this church-- between you and you and you, between Boards, between generations, between visitors and members, between this church and communities out there? It only takes a spark to get the Spirit going!

Take a moment to look at the people around you! **Yes, we seek to serve God, but we must always ask ourselves: "With whom shall we serve, and what shall we bring to birth?"**

Thanks be to God.

Amen.