

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost 27 August 2017

[Exodus 1: 8-2:10 Psalm 124 Romans 12: 1-8 Matthew 16: 13-20 Vanderbilt Lectionary](#)

[Proper 15A/Ordinary 20A/Pentecost +11 August 27, 2017 Textweek](#)

Two midwives, a politician and a pope walk into a sermon... and I shall leave you to think up the punchline. You may have noticed that out of all the characters in the story of Moses' infancy, Shifrah and Pua are the only two who are named.¹ Exactly who they are, we can't know. They have been claimed as Jewish, even Levite; they have been claimed as Egyptian nationals; everyone wants a piece of them. Perhaps they were two at the head of a league of midwives.² We cannot know. But there are innumerable works of art dedicated to these women, helping us to imagine them: dark-skinned women, with scarves on their heads, and kohl-rimmed eyes.

Imagine them at the birthing stone: one stands behind, supporting the mother, embracing her: catching her under the arms, around the breasts. One squats in front, assessing, coaching, guiding the baby's head, catching this new life. There is Shifra, meaning 'fruit-ful', and 'improvement': she cleans the baby's body, smooths and straightens clenched limbs and hands, the wrinkled face. And there is Puah, meaning 'cooing': she is singing, murmuring, sooth-ing. These are the champions of a nation. These are the over-throwers of genocidal power; these are the ones who outwit the politician.

The politician always bears the same spirit. Be they ruler of Egypt, prime minister, premier or president; they do what they like, they break their promises, they forget how to rule with justice...they do not know Joseph. But in private, they tremble: on their thrones, in their palaces, boardrooms and towers. Yes, sometimes, secretly, they are filled with fear... perhaps a son will rise from the hoi polloi and take the throne; perhaps this rabble of a people will grow in number, and become organised under such a leader, and rise up, and topple me! Contain them; crush them; kill them.

So much power; so much fear. But it is not a warrior rabble or a charismatic political leader who undoes the king of Egypt's plan; this honour goes to the two midwives, the straightener and the murmurer; and to an unnamed group of people who represent every one of the world's "nameless, faithful slaves" who stand to defy unjust rule; to Moses' sister, courageously and wisely watching and waiting in the reeds, and to his mother, the ark-builder. "Like Noah's ark, [the baby's] boat has no rudder; like Noah, its inhabit-ant will save his people from a watery death while the wicked drown in the waves." ³

It's a very old story: Zeus, Perseus, Romulus, and Cyrus of Persia... all were "endangered infants who grew up to save their people". It's the story unfolding for us in the Gospel of Matthew, which gives us Jesus the neo-Moses, also saved when the children around him are slaughtered.⁴

And today we hear this saviour, Jesus, name the bedrock of his gathering people, his emerging church; and it's not a warrior pope, but a fisherman with a grace, a revelation, an inner know-ing; a simple man who comes to know God - and himself - in a new way, and now knows to say: you are the messiah, you are the very son of god. To such as these are given the keys. Two midwives, the faceless slaves, the fisherman, and maybe even the carpenter's son: God help us to be heroes like these. And God give us grace to know when we have been saved, that we might sing: If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up alive... we have escaped!⁵

And God help us when it is us doing the swallowing, the crushing, the killing. When we are containing and leaving people - men, women and children - to go mad, to sicken, and suicide, and die in captivity, God stir our hearts to pity; God help us.

God help us to loose what is loosed in heaven, and to bind what should be bound. To see truly, like Peter, to be like Shifrah and Pua, and the sister: wise as serpents and innocent as doves; doing God's work at the very edge of life; saving, straightening, cleans-ing, singing and soothing...there is something for everyone, in the ushering of God-life into being.

Men and women, girls and boys, you are all spiritual midwives.

The Lord be with you.

1 Amy-Jill Levine and Douglas A. Knight, *The Meaning of the Bible* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 241.

2 http://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3555182/jewish/Who-Were-Shifra-and-Puah-the-Hebrew-Midwives.htm³ Levine and Knight, 241.

4 *Ibid.*, 242.

Levine, Amy-Jill, and Douglas A. Knight. *The Meaning of the Bible*. New York: HarperOne, 2012.

5 Psalm 124

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