

“CALLED TO BE MIDWIVES”  
Sermon Notes for The Rev. Joyce Kelly  
ADVENT I - November 27, 2011 at Knox United Church  
Based on Exodus 1 and Luke 1- see text at end  
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Pharaoh's fist is strong, but God's Hope is stronger. Like a plague, word spreads through the land of Goshen: all Hebrew baby boys are ordered killed at birth. But even this fear-driven fear-inducing command cannot vanquish Hope. That's where our Advent path to the manger begins – with Hope – despite what the world says.

For Hope lives at the heart of faith, and no law can kill it. Hebrew women, pregnant with Hope, pray all the way. Maybe their baby will be a girl. Maybe their baby will not be discovered. Maybe God will intervene. Maybe! Maybe! Hope lives at the heart of Maybe. Maybe the long-awaited Deliverer will deliver them from the worst any mother can imagine.

Despite all that says NO, Hope rises like a fountain in the hearts of people who know the living God – including Egyptian midwives Shiprah and Puah!

Little does the king know that these two grown-up Egyptian baby girls standing before him, now midwives to the slaves have come to know the God of the Hebrews who surpasses all religious and national boundaries. The living God brings Hope to their hearts and courage to their lives. Little does he know that the courage of their faith will alter the course of history.

Shiprah and Puah, used to being ordered around, do not argue when the King orders them to kill the baby boys. They know their lives are totally expendable in the hands of this powerful king. They don't argue, but they do pray, hard, and as they pray, courage rises in them. Having dedicated their lives to bringing life into this world despite all around that denies life, they resolve not to be used as instruments of death; they will not be part of the king's genocide. So, day by day, they work in their own quiet way, and continue to deliver healthy baby girls - and boys - into the world.

Now, the king is evil, but he's not stupid. He demands an explanation. Wise as foxes, since the king does not know 'the ways of women', Shiprah and Puah say, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and they give birth before we arrive; the mother is already nursing her fine healthy baby by the time we get there – and some of them are boys."

Little do they know that delivering one of those baby boys, Moses, makes them midwives to a whole people, midwives to God's plan of salvation for all God's people, down all generations, including you and me.

## I

Zechariah and Elizabeth are too old to have a baby - everyone knows that. Women mock her – barren, unable to give her husband a son! But one day at Temple, Archangel Gabriel comes to Zechariah and tells him that they will have a son – who will be great before the Lord.

Now his faith does stumble! He's dumb with shock, not able to speak until the baby is born. Picture him stumbling out of the Temple, gesturing to the waiting crowd; and, later, coming through his own front door – with an incredible story to tell – and no voice to speak it. How does he get the message through to Elizabeth? or does he just get on with making the miracle happen? Does she even know about the angel visit? And - does it matter?

Elizabeth hides herself away for 5 months – maybe to give the judgmental world around her a shock – maybe not - and she is confidante to cousin Mary. Well, you know how the story goes. Elizabeth and Zechariah's son John becomes a priest, in his father's Levite footsteps; he is prophet, baptizer into Jesus' ways, Light-bearer in a dark world.

Elizabeth and Zechariah know not at the beginning (any more than any of us know when our child is born) the amazing goodness of their child's life - or the despair, that he will stand against the hard ways of the world for the sake of God's goodness, that his head will end up on a platter of a self-centered woman.

All they know is that God has been in this from the beginning, and will be to the end. So they stand strong in their faith, and delight in God's blessing upon their lives, and upon their child's - hearts brim-full of Hope. Zechariah and Elizabeth are midwives to God's great design!

## II

Joseph, Nazareth carpenter, can legally break the engagement quietly, and not embarrass Mary. Or, he can cast her aside with great public support in this little town where everyone thinks they know everyone, and everything about them. Whatever he understands, or doesn't understand, about angel whispers in his dream world, he chooses to let his faith guide him, and Joseph becomes midwife to God's plan – always so much greater than any little domestic plan, Joseph's or Mary's or yours or mine.

Angel Gabriel tells Mary that her child will “scatter the proud, put down the mighty from their thrones, exalt those of low degree, fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty.” I wonder - did Angel Gabriel nudge the hearts of Shiprah and Puah with some of these same words?

Archangel Gabriel does get around! I think it must keep all the angels of heaven busy nudging as many of us as they can. Nudging spans generations, building on choices large and small of all the Shiprahs and Puahs, Marys and Josephs, and Zechariahs and Elizabeths of all time. And us! We're in that line! Gabriel is still

whispering in the night, still nudging our praying hearts, still guiding those who are willing to listen.

Mary, despite all the Hopes and dreams of any mother-to-be, knows that this little baby growing inside of her will have a hard path to walk. Will it be too much? for him? for her?

But in a flutter of angel wings, Hope rises in her, and she knows absolutely, that she can do it - one step, one day at a time. For she knows by faith that God walks with her, and with her child. She is not alone.

Mary is midwife to a design of Salvation that God builds into life. Strands of Light spin out from the heart of Creation, and course through people of faith – Moses, Buddha, Mohammed, saints of all ages, and through people of no faith – for the design of Salvation is built into all human souls.

### III

We are not here by accident any more than Jacob's Joseph came to rule Egypt via jealous brothers and a slave caravan. Though the world had forgotten him, God had not. Decades later, in a generation who (as the text says) "knew not Joseph", baby Moses was delivered by Shiprah and Puah, midwives to new life for Joseph's people.

We are not here by accident any more than John the Baptist arrived a few months ahead of Jesus – to prepare the way.

We are here by God's design, to face the challenges of our particular life - which are unique, different from the person beside you, behind, at home this morning, the one panhandling on the corner. But every one, all of humanity, sooner or later will be gripped by contractions that have the potential for new life. It's the human condition.

It is from ashes that the Phoenix rises, from war that peace comes. It is from impossibility that God's possibilities are born. We are here by God's design, to bring forth all this is life-giving, called to be midwives.

You are Shiprah & Puah. Though everything around defies Life, you can walk by faith.

You are Zechariah; and if you think you're too old, that the time has passed when you could make a difference, think again.

You are Elizabeth - never too old.

Mary - never too young.

You are Joseph, and the world is watching and waiting to see what you will do.

You are you. God knows your name, and the path that you can walk. You can be midwife to God's goodness, no matter who or where or what you are, or have been.

Right now, midwives are choosing Life ... despite all that says 'no' ... in Somalia, Haiti, Iraq, Afghanistan, India, Congo, Zimbabwe, Israel, Palestine, on your street, in all the world.

In this impossible world, as Elizabeth assures Mary, "With God all things are possible." So expect God's surprises.

#### IV

One more midwife: Joe McDougall is a retired doctor in New Brunswick. Forty years ago he was practicing in Nova Scotia. This is a true story that Bruce and I heard him tell.

Among his patients one autumn was a 23-year-old woman I'll call Debbie. The lower lobe of her right lung had a hole in it; tuberculosis had eaten a cavity in it an inch in diameter. And it was getting bigger every day. Nothing could be done.

"If I'm still alive on Christmas Eve," she said, "promise me that I can go home for one more Christmas with my daughter and husband." Dr. McDougall, who didn't think she'd live that long, agreed.

In early December there was new hope. He heard about a new procedure, which used little tubes to inject air into the chest cavity, forcing the diaphragm up against the lung, acting like a bandage over the spreading hole, closing it for the time, and giving nature a chance to heal.

They tried it; but the operation nearly killed her. They gave up; the cavity grew bigger.

On Christmas Eve, barely alive, she held the doctor to his promise. Warning her not to hold her little girl, and to wear a surgical mask at all times, Dr. McDougall tucked her into an ambulance and sent her home for the night. Debbie returned the next day.

Over the weeks her condition worsened. By the end of February she weighed less than 80 pounds, and couldn't eat.

Then - more complications appeared. She became nauseous, not able to hold down any food. Dr. McDougall was stumped.

Another doctor said the symptoms sounded like she was pregnant. The very idea was ridiculous. Nevertheless, Dr. McDougall did a test. To his astonishment, the results were positive. Debbie was pregnant.

And she insisted on carrying the pregnancy as long as possible. So she was fed intravenously for weeks. "Never once," says Dr. McDougall, "did I doubt she was dying."

But she refused to die. The pregnancy progressed. Suddenly, to everyone's amazement, she began to eat. She gained weight. An X-Ray showed that the cavity in her lung had stopped growing. In fact, her diaphragm was being pushed

up against the lower lobe of the sick lung to make room for the baby growing inside of her. The sides of the deadly hole were being pressed together. Nature was working where science had failed. "The child," said Dr. McDougall, "was saving its mother's life."

Every year for forty years, Dr. McDougall has received one special Christmas card. Debbie will be sitting down just about now to write it. It's just an ordinary card, but it's signed by Debbie and her husband and their two children, and says, "All is well." To him, it's a reminder of another Christmas miracle.

We're on our way to the Christmas manger. Thanks be to God. Amen

## A TWO-VOICE READING OF VERSES FROM EXODUS 1 & 2

Read by Joyce Kelly & Bruce McLeod

J Remember young Joseph in the Technicolor dreamcoat - how his jealous brothers sold him to a slave caravan - how he found favour in Egypt (especially interpreting dreams) and rose in power and privilege? Remember how Joseph brought his father and brothers (and all the family) to Egypt, and how, eventually, they became slaves? As long as the kings of Egypt remembered Joseph, his people were slaves, but favoured slaves. This story is from Exodus 1 & 2. Listen:

B The Israelite people were fruitful and prolific in the land of Egypt; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so the land was filled with them.

But a new king arose over Egypt, who knew not Joseph. He said, "Look, they are more numerous and more powerful than we. Let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land."

They set taskmasters over them to oppress them ... but the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied, so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. They were ruthless in all the tasks they imposed on them.

J The king of Egypt said to the midwives of the Hebrew women, one named Shiphrah (which means 'beautiful') and the other Puah (which means 'fragrant flower'), "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, let her live."

But the midwives had come to know the Hebrew God. They did not do as the king commanded. They let the baby boys live.

The king of Egypt summoned them and said, "Why have you done this?"

B The midwives said to the king, "Because Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes."

So God dealt well with the midwives; the people multiplied and became strong.

Then the king commanded his soldiers, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

J Now a Hebrew man from the house of Levi married a Levite woman. She bore a son; he was a fine baby; she hid him for 3 months. When she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket, plastered it with bitumen and pitch, and laid the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister (Miriam) stood at a distance, to see what would happen. (Miriam, in Hebrew the same word as Mary.)

B The king's daughter came down to bathe. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him, "This must be one of the Hebrew children."

J Then the baby's sister came out of hiding, and said to the king's daughter, "Shall I go and get a Hebrew woman to nurse the child for you?" The king's daughter said, "Yes." So the girl brought the child's own mother, to whom the king's daughter said, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you wages."

B So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to the king's daughter who took him as her son. She named him Moses (which means 'one who draws out') "because," she said. "I have drawn him out of the water."