

“Astounding Voices”

Exodus 1:8 – 2:10

Richard C. Allen

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When I began my tenure here on February 1, 1988, I followed an effective interim minister, the Reverend Brenda Pelc-Faszczka. Throughout that first year, I heard from many South Church women who told me that they had found God accessible for the first time because they had heard God’s story, finally, in a feminine voice. That was an awesome thing for me to hear and I have held that truth in high regard ever since.

So many of the Biblical narratives name the men but not the women. We know Job, for example, but the woman to whom he was married is only known to us as his wife. In Luke’s Easter story of the Road to Emmaus, we read about disciples such as Cleopas breaking bread with the risen Christ, but the women who discovered the empty tomb and were first to report the Resurrection go unnamed. Even in my all-time favorite story, we meet the prophet Elijah but the woman who feeds him by taking a leap of faith is known simply as the widow of Zaraphath.

So, when the Biblical writer of Exodus 1 describes the feisty nature of the Hebrew midwives, and names them by name, Puah and Shiphrah, I tend to sit up and take notice! No longer faces in a crowd, these two midwives are singled out for their astounding voices. They speak truth to power. The modern reader might say that takes courage. But Puah and Shiphrah would say it takes faith.

Puah and Shiphrah may be stuck under the oppressive thumb of Egypt’s Pharaoh, but they live and move and have their being under the authority of God.

It's not that Hebrew women are more vigorous on the birth stool than Egyptian women; it's that these two midwives are clear about where they place their highest loyalty. And when it comes to a show down, they speak from that place of spiritual conviction. In the text it says, "But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live." It is their faith that guides them. They may sweat it out when Pharaoh makes a pronouncement, but they know they are answerable, ultimately, to God.

The modern reader might label Puah and Shiphrah as participants in civil disobedience. And that they are! The Biblical writer hopes we will see them as women of faith who speak their truth with astounding voices. They are in the same sorority as Rosa Parks, Antoinette Brown, Harriett Beecher Stowe, and Brenda Pelc-Faszczka. I'm told this sorority has an open enrollment policy.

The midwife becomes a powerful symbol for ministry in the church. The midwife is the one who attends the birth, who distinguishes a real contraction from a false contraction, who knows when it's time to breathe and when its time to push and when it's time to refrain from pushing. Like the midwife, the members of a church are responsible for discerning those moments of theological birth, of divine revelation, when God is struggling to do a new thing, to initiate a new mission, to bless a new ministry. Like the midwife, it is our role to come to the birth stool to assist in the delivery of whatever God may have conceived.

When the world woke up to the threat of the AIDS virus, South Church members acted as midwife when they formed the AIDS support network, hosting healing services, preparing meals for Peter's Retreat residents, offering educational material for all ages, asking the church to pray for care-givers.

Alexandra Taylor, Lynn Larson, Debbie Sweet and many others, male and female, served as mid-wives, coming to the birth stool, partnering with God in a compassionate mission. At that time, there were other Pharaoh-like voices in the culture saying, ‘throw AIDS patients into the Nile River, they get what they deserve.’ But South Church midwives spoke with astounding voices; acted without confusion about their ultimate loyalty. They followed the example of Puah and Shiphrah.

A number of years ago, maybe 1989, Austin Sheldon made it clear that he was dying of cancer and that he wanted his ashes to be buried on the grounds of the church where he had lived out his faith commitments. A number of us heard his deeply held conviction and sensed it was not only the voice of Austin Sheldon crying out in the wilderness, but the voice of God calling South Church to provide a sacred ground for those who shared Austin’s vision. Ed Swift and Katie Shipman rushed to the birth stool, imagined a plot of ground, selected plantings, designed a fence, incorporated a millstone, moved a bench, and tended to the birth of a memorial garden. I hope Ed doesn’t mind being known as a midwife, for it seems to me that he and Katie spoke with astounding voices, partnered with God in ushering in a sacred ground for the Austin Sheldons of this world.

Over the last decade, churches across America came to the realization that basic safety could no longer be taken for granted. Stories of child-abuse made the headlines of newspapers and what had been un-discussable in churches became discussable. Though we were not aware of any such incidents within our own congregation, Puah and Shiphrah spoke up! The church midwives rushed to the birthing stool for they sensed God once again calling the church to advocate for the rights of children, in many ways the most vulnerable of our parishioners.

Kristi Vitelli and Drew Kronk and Colleen Mulkerin and Ann Magnavita and many others spoke with astounding voices, raising our consciousness, calling us to action. A first-response team is in place. Classroom and office doors now have windows. And a policy is in place for all our volunteers who work with children and youth. There were some who felt that no such policy was needed here, but then there were those who felt that way at the time of the Pharaoh's decree that all the male children should be killed.

This image of the midwife speaking with an astounding voice is an excellent metaphor for ministry. Puah and Shiphrah lead the way. They invite us to speak truth to power. They invite us to honor our highest loyalty. They invite us to act on faith even when it means going against the grain. Our church is blessed with many midwives, male and female, who understand their baptism as a summons to the birthing stool, a summons to ministry, a summons to use their resources to affirm God's gift of life!

Moving forward, whether it be in the capital campaign or with youth ministry or with Ladies Aid or with deacons or with music ministry, let us carry this image with us. Let Puah and Shiphrah become household names! May we speak with astounding voices at the birth stool! In the greatest of hope, Amen!