

THE MIDWIFE REBELLION

SHERARD EDINGTON

Exodus 1:8-21

How many of you believe in witches? I'm not talking about dress-up Halloween witches, but spell-casting, potion-brewing, demon-worshiping agents of the devil. I doubt that many people today believe in witches, but for 300 years—from the 1300s to the 1600s—witch-hunting was a popular pastime across Europe. In those three centuries, tens of thousands of people were tortured, executed, and burned. Not surprisingly, 75% of these were women.

In Scotland, for example, nearly 4000 people were accused of witchcraft under the Witchcraft Act of 1563. Again, most of the accused were women. Those accused were imprisoned and brutally tortured until they confessed their “guilt.” Often, they would be forced to name other “witches” in their confession. Those executed as witches were usually strangled or hanged and then their bodies were burned so that they would not come back to life.

People were accused of being witches for many reasons. Some were mentally ill. Some had land or money that others wanted to get their hands on. Some were accused for retaliation for some offence. Many of the accused were simply scapegoats for a failed crop or a diseased herd. There are many cases of one person simply not liking their neighbor and wanting to harm them. It is all too easy to fabricate some story implicating a person of practicing witchcraft.

There were also many people who were accused of being witches because they were healers—they practiced some sort of medicine at a time when medicine was not yet a science and looked a lot like magic. The double-edged sword of healing is that if you cure someone of an illness, then you might be a witch. Or if a person in your care dies then you would also be called a witch.

It should be no surprise that the healers most affected by the witch-hunting craze were midwives—people who assisted in the delivery of babies. After all, it is midwives who usher life into this world. Yet, at a time of high infant mortality, they could also be blamed for deaths. Midwives serve at the nexus of sexuality, fertility, and life. They oversee what can only be called the miracle of childbirth. It is not a great leap to attribute them with otherworldly powers.

One common factor among those women accused of witchcraft is that many possessed strong, independent personalities. One of the accusations made against Joan of Arc was witchcraft. She was burned at the stake in 1431.

America was not immune to the witch craze. Most famous are the Salem Witch Trials in 1692 and 1693. During this time, more than 200 people were accused of

practicing witchcraft. Of these, nineteen were executed. Another was tortured to death, and five died in jail.

Across the American colonies, midwives were prone to the accusation of witchcraft. The most famous of these was Margaret Jones. She lived in Boston with her family and was a respected midwife and healer. However, the rumors began to circulate that she received her powers from Satan. In 1648, she was tried and hanged.

Our scripture reading for today centers on the story of two midwives and how they stand up to the king of Egypt and save their people. Over the summer, I have been preaching largely from the book of Genesis. Genesis tells us of Creation and the stories of Babel and Noah. It also tells of the great covenant that God forged with Abraham calling Abraham and his wife Sarah to leave their home and relocate in Canaan, which they do. We follow the stories of their descendants—Issac (as well as the son Ishmael), and Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons including Joseph. Joseph's brothers became so irritated with Joseph that they conspired to kill him but relented and instead sold him to some traders headed for Egypt.

In Egypt, with God's blessings, Joseph rises through the ranks until he becomes the pharaoh's chief administrator overseeing the country. God warns Joseph of an impending famine and so Joseph orders the constructions of massive warehouses across Egypt and stockpiles food. This food supply enables the Egyptians, as well as their neighbors, to survive the famine. Joseph reconnects with his brothers and forgives them and invites them to move to Egypt. They do and they and their descendants prosper there. That is where the book of Genesis ends—with the descendants of Jacob (who by this time is known as Israel) living in Egypt.

The second book of the Bible—Exodus—tells the epic tale of the Israelites escaping Egypt for a land promised to them by God.

The book of Exodus opens with this harrowing statement, *Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph*. And with this simple sentence, generations of history are erased. The story of Joseph's great act of saving Egypt is forgotten. The memory is lost. The population of Hebrews living in Egypt are no longer considered neighbors but are reduced to immigrant invaders.

This new king looks around Egypt and sees the Israelites—Joseph's descendants—and he proclaims, *Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we*. First of all, this is a lie. The Israelites are not more powerful or numerous than the Egyptians. They are an immigrant minority. It's clear that the king is building support for his next action. He commands, *Come, let us deal shrewdly with them or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land*.

The king's plan is to oppress the Israelites. He tells his people that if these foreigners continue to proliferate that they will become a security threat. In the case of war, they will side with the enemy, and fight against Egypt, and then, when it's over, they will escape. That last part, about their escaping, that is the most telling part of the king's accusation. It is an economic assertion, and from it we learn that the king is not so much afraid of the Israelites rising against him, as much as he is worried about losing them as a workforce.

So, the king establishes policies to oppress the Israelites with forced labor. He utilizes this labor for large public works programs. But his plan to reduce the Israelite population backfires. They only become more numerous. The Egyptians continue to oppress the Israelites forcing more intensive tasks on them.

When the king's first plan to reduce the Israelite population doesn't work, he implements a second plan. This time he addresses the midwives of the Israelite people. One of these women is named Shiphrah and the other is named Puah. The king says to them, *When you act as midwives to the Hebrew woman, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl she shall live.* The king has been unable to kill the adults, so he figures he will kill the children by ordering the midwives to slay newborn boys.

But the midwives refuse. As we are told, they feared God. Of course, this means that they revered God. And this reverence for God outweighs the orders of the king. So, when male Israelites were born, they let them live.

As the Israelite population continues to increase, the king calls in the midwives for an explanation. They tell him a story—a story that plays into his immigrant stereotypes. They say to him, *...the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.* In other words, they are saying, “Your Egyptian women are cultured and delicate and their labor lasts longer. But these foreign women breed like bunnies, and by the time we get to them, they've already delivered and left. There's not much we can do.”

And then we are told that God rewards the midwives and blesses them with families and descendants. In fact, it is most telling that the scripture gives us the names of Shiphrah and Puah while this king is never identified.

There is no indication that these two midwives were in any way connected to witchcraft. They were simply two women doing their jobs dedicated to bringing life into the world. They don't create life, but they do serve as agents for a new life. Their task is a holy one. They're like angels at Creation standing with God. And they place the lives of those in their care over their own safety. They were willing to defy the king of Egypt. And in doing so they protected the lives not just of the boys they refused to kill but their children and their children's children.

The king demanded the death of the newborn boys which the women refuse. We will see a reflection of this in the final plague that convinces the king to allow the Israelites to depart Egypt—the death of the first born of Egypt when angel of death passes over. The king had feared the Israelites siding with an enemy and leaving Egypt. Instead, they sided with God who led them out of bondage and into freedom.

The story of Shiphrah and Puah is one we tend to overlook as we begin the great story of the Israelites. It's a small story about two women. Sadly, we won't hear from them again. Instead, we will follow Moses and the people out of bondage and through the wilderness and finally to the land that would show them. Along the way, the people will learn what it is like to live in the presence of the Lord.

But Shiphrah and Puah already knew. They knew the Lord and they feared the Lord. And they stood firm in their faith. They refused to do the evil demanded of them by the king who believed that he had all the power. But the true power of the midwives was their faith in God and their commitment to life.

On March 27, exactly 5 months ago today, a shooter entered the Covenant School in Nashville and shot and killed three children and three adults before being killed by the police. Because of the public outcry at this tragedy, the governor called for a special session of the Tennessee legislature to address certain issues concerning gun violence.

The House leadership imposed strict rules for this Special Session about how people could protest within the capitol and committees. The leadership banned the use of small signs which observers normally hold in committees to indicate their position on a particular issue. In this case, a group called Covenant Moms had signs calling for gun reform. On Tuesday, we the public were treated to heartbreaking photos of these Covenant Moms being escorted out of the capitol for the simple act of standing up to the authorities and fighting for life.

As people of faith, we worship a God who embraces life. As followers of Christ we should commit our whole selves to being midwives between this reality and God's realm, between human authority and what is right in the sight of our Lord. As you leave this place, as you go through your week, ask yourself this question: "How is that I can serve my God as a midwife of life?"