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THE MIDWIFING OF MOSES

By Rev. Dr Fei Taule'ale'ausumai

Lucy Letby, the name on everyone's lips this week. The killing of innocent babies seven murders achieved and six perhaps many more who were saved from the brink of death. The nurse who was trusted by everyone who over a period of more than six years had access to the Neo-Natal Unit where babies on the critical list were kept. One Clinical psychiatrist suggests that Lucy Letby had a God complex and believed she had the power over life and death. She got a kick out of the code blue emergency resuscitation attempts because of the power this gave her.

Then there is Lauren Dickason, recently charged with the murder of her three children believed that they would all be better off dead, but problem is she didn't manage to kill herself. King Pharoah of Egypt sent out a decree to kill all newborn Hebrew baby boys. The slaughter of the Innocent. He too believed that he was God. He summoned two Egyptian midwives Shiphrah and Puah to carry out infanticide on Hebrew boy babies.

Here we have the story of five women. The two midwives Shiphrah and Puah who have been singled out from the many midwives of Egypt to carry out the task of genocide or infanticide. They are instructed to kill all the baby boys born at birth. Then there is Miriam the sister of Moses who watches over him as he floats on the river Nile, and then there is Moses mother who after hiding him for 3 months, makes the basket for him and hides him in the river and there is the Princess,

Pharaoh's daughter. Moses' mother is summoned by the Princess the daughter of Pharaoh to become the wet nurse for Moses. Unknowingly the Princess was returning Moses to his birth mother to nurse.

The story begins "A new king arose in Egypt, who did not know Joseph ..." This great man, who had figured so importantly in the society of the day, was now a 'has-been' he is not named therefore insignificant. Things moved on – and not for the better. In the midst of a genocide, a boy is born, hidden from slaughter, only to be discovered, rescued and named by the daughter of the Pharaoh – "Moses, because I drew him out of the water." Uniquely named, uniquely found, uniquely anchored in the events of the day.

Why did Pharaoh call two Shiphrah and Puah the Egyptian midwives to carry out his commands, the infanticide or genocide of all the male Hebrew babies? Because Pharaoh would not have trusted Hebrew women to kill their own babies.

According to Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac also known as Rashi one of the most influential renowned medieval French commentator on the Bible and the Talmud speaks about Shiphrah and Puah as if they were the only midwives in Egypt— which would be impossible!¹² What is even more mind-boggling is the possibility that the midwives weren't necessary at all. As the midwives tell Pharaoh: "The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptians, they know how to deliver. They can give birth before a midwife even gets to them."¹³ We know that this was not merely an excuse the midwives gave to throw Pharaoh off, because Pharaoh could have easily verified their claim.

Midwives, who deal with the beginning of life, are asked to become dealers of death

- Pharaoh does not seem to understand that killing Hebrew males will deplete his slave-labor force
- Those that Pharaoh saves – the daughters – are the ones who undermine his policy

In this story of Moses, the God of Israel abhors slavery; and acts through human agents to liberate; that liberation is a refusal of the oppressed to participate in an unjust society. Here in this story women nurture the revolution. The Egyptian midwives disobey Pharaoh. His own daughter thwarts him, and her maidens assist. This Egyptian princess schemes with female slaves, mother, and daughter to adopt a Hebrew child whom she names Moses. As the first to defy the oppressor, women alone take the initiative which leads to deliverance. If Pharaoh had realized the power of these women, he might have reversed his decree and had females killed rather than males! The ironies here again are that:

- Pharaoh's chosen instrument of destruction (the Nile) is the means for saving Moses
- Member of Pharaoh's own household thwarts his policy

While the midwives are motivated by their fear of the Lord, and the mother by her attachment to the beautiful baby, the actions of Pharaohs' daughter emerge from her pity. But whatever their motivations, the actions of the women align with God's own life-giving work. The princess is not intentionally serving the Hebrew God when she rescues Moses. She *sees* the baby and hears his cries, and she is able to

acknowledge his vulnerability. By virtue of her own humaneness, she recognizes his humanity and need and acts on it. While many readers mistakenly think that Moses is adopted immediately and raised by Pharaohs' daughter, in fact, Moses is returned to his mother through the quick intervention of his sister, Miriam. Nevertheless, he will grow up under the protection of the princess even before he is officially adopted. Defiance of Pharaohs' commands comes from within his own house at the hands of his own daughter.(Willis, 2011) The Ironies here are that:

- Egyptian royalty heeds a Hebrew's girl's advice!
- Mother gets paid to do what she wants to do

The work of these agents counteracts the psychology of hatred and fear that motivates Pharaoh. Moreover, their collective work is a gracious defiance because of the way it embraces life and blurs Pharaoh's attempts to draw lines of distinction between "us" and "them," between Egyptian and Hebrew, between dominating and dominated.(Willis, 2011)

- Pharaoh decrees the genocide of the Hebrews

Clearly irrational to kill off the core of your labor force suggests fear and rage have produced a deep insanity in the royal rule.

Many of you would have heard of that Chinese proverb, every great journey begins with one step. Here in the first step to liberation, the Hebrew women step out to begin the revolution and liberation of their people from slavery by saving one child from death and begin the nurturing and loving process of bringing that child up within the very household that oppressed his biological family and people. The amazing thing about this story is that liberation began in the home of the oppressor.

That is a great image to leave with us today. Liberation began in the home of the oppressor. When we see the NZ statistics of violence against women we like to believe that when a woman is able to find justice against her oppressor that there for liberation begins in the home of the oppressor. Does that resonate with you? Whoever, whatever, that may be for each one of us today you will all know someone or be able to relate yourself to this.

Today's story is about hope, in the midst of crisis. That often when we feel lost, enslaved, overwhelmed, at our wits end, hope springs forth eternal from within the very heart of our pain and disillusionment. God is our midwife God uses the people around us to share in nurturing us through these times. Look the women of the Moses community rallied around the princess to offer a wet nurse for Moses. Christ the second Moses uses the people in Christ to rally around us in our time of need to nurture us towards liberation from the things that weigh us down and cause us to feel oppressed and disillusioned. Look around you, here among us are the community to nurture you and I through to wholeness and liberation.

- The importance of the activity of women in the divine economy
 - The five women in these stories play crucial roles: Israel's future dependent on their wisdom, compassion, and courage
 - God is able to work in and through them to achieve God's purposes
- The effectiveness of the service given by lesser-known members of society
 - "God is able to use persons of faith from even lowly stations in life to carry out the divine purpose. Moreover, there is no indication ... that this courageous activity ever becomes public... But the deeds of these

women are made known somehow, and their names remembered, while the king of Egypt in all of his pomp and splendor remains forever nameless.”

- God uses the weak, what is low and despised in the world to shame the strong (see Jer 9:23; I Cor 1:26-29)
- God works through persons who have no obvious power

The refusal of the midwives to cooperate with the command of the Pharaoh to kill the baby boys, and the determination of Moses’ mother to save her son, are metaphors for faith in God’s overarching providence. No human power can or should frustrate God’s good purposes. God had a plan for Moses. Nothing could get in the way of that.

A couple of points can be taken from this:

- The action of Moses’ mother in concealing her son is a proof of her faith (see Hebrews 11:23)
- There are resonances of the child in the basket to the child in a manger – a humble beginning to a life that would do remarkable things – (see Luke 2:7; Matthew 2)

Let us look for the stories of liberation in our own stories and celebrate those heroes and heroines of our own histories. So be it. Amen.

Trible, P. (1973). Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*(Am Acad Religion).

Willis, A. M. (2011). Exodus 1:8-2:10