



Nurse Midwives: Models of Courage and Faith

“Work for children should begin before they are born ... These are the formative years, whether for their bodies, their minds or their loving hearts.”

- Mary Breckinridge, American nurse-midwife credited with bringing midwifery to the U.S.

Introduction & Call to Prayer

Perhaps more than the titles of many other medical professions, the etymology of the term “midwife” — with woman — captures well the hallmarks of their care. Indeed, midwives’ philosophy of care centers around a model that puts compassionate partnership at its center through acknowledging the life experience and knowledge that patients bring to their own treatment. A midwife bears with the mother the obscurity of waiting through attention and responsiveness. Their accompaniment invites a mother to enter the raw experience of labor and become present to the wonder of birthing. This is vastly different from what is considered traditional birth. Notably, while midwives use appropriate interventions and technology when necessary, midwifery is known for honoring and trusting in the natural processes of the body. Put bluntly, amid what is simultaneously one of the most painful and beautiful experiences of a woman’s life, midwives accompany and assist a woman to trust the process of ushering life into the world.

In the Exodus story of the Hebrew Scriptures, midwives play a key role in the salvation of the Israelites, demonstrating faith and courage in the face of manipulation and cruelty. As you read or listen to the story of Shiphrah and Puah, consider where in your own life you are being called to respond courageously.

Reading

A reading from the book of Exodus:

Then a new king, who knew nothing of Joseph, rose to power in Egypt. He said to his people, “See! The Israelite people have multiplied and become more numerous than we are! Come, let us deal shrewdly with them to stop their increase; otherwise, in time of war they too may join our enemies to fight against us, and so leave the land.”

Accordingly, they set supervisors over the Israelites to oppress them with forced labor. Thus they had to build for Pharaoh the garrison cities of Pithom and Raamses. Yet the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians began to loathe the Israelites. So the Egyptians reduced the Israelites to cruel slavery, making life bitter for them with hard labor, at mortar and brick and all kinds of field work—cruelly oppressed in all their labor.

The king of Egypt told the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was called Shiphrah and the other Puah, “When you act as midwives for the Hebrew women, look on the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she may live.” The midwives, however, feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt had ordered them, but let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, “Why have you



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done this, allowing the boys to live?" The midwives answered Pharaoh, "The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women. They are robust and give birth before the midwife arrives." Therefore God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and grew very numerous. And because the midwives feared God, God built up families for them.

The Word of the Lord.

ALL: Thanks be to God.

Reflection

"The midwives, however, fear God; [...] they let the boys live." In the face of a cruel ruler with an even more cruel decree, the midwives concretely demonstrate in whom their faith lies by neglecting the Pharaoh's instructions. Had they been found out, surely, they would have been sentenced to a painful death. Not only this, but Jewish *midrash* (the rabbinic tradition of interpreting the words of scripture) indicates that in addition to Shiprah and Puah letting the boys live, they also actively aided in their survival, collecting food and water from the homes of wealthy women and giving it to mothers in need. Shiprah and Puah actively oppose earthly rule in favor of loyalty to God, even at risk to their own lives. They advocate on behalf of those whom they have been told to forget. Consider for a moment the courage required for such action. Consider the depth of faith required to move one to such defiance. The midwives' trust and faith in the Almighty is such that nothing else matters, and scripture tells us they are rewarded.

- *How are you called to be a compassionate partner in the birth of new life?*
- *Where in your life are you called to be courageous for the sake of justice?*
- *How might you better accompany the forgotten who are in need of advocacy?*

Closing Prayer

God of Shiprah,

God of Puah,

We know that you walk with us in our day-to-day routines and that you are a compassionate partner as we labor to see your Kingdom brought to life.

May we channel the faith and trust of the midwives, demonstrating it in the name of justice.

Let us accompany those who wait to see life emerge, and give witness to Your presence with them.

We ask this in your holy name,

Amen.