

Proper 16A: Exodus 1.8-2.10**August 23, 2026****The Rev. Scott Walters**

In 1969, my mother was pregnant with my brother Kirk in Siloam Springs, Arkansas. It took some convincing to get Dr. Moose to agree to the natural childbirth method she'd used when I was born in Connecticut a few years before. Yankees have some strange ideas, after all. But Mom and Dad were persuasive, and, according to Walters family lore, after Kirk was born, slapped, and all the rest, Dr. Moose emerged from the delivery room and said, "Well, I can't believe it, but she did it!"

The reason we found that story amusing was not because Mom was strident about what miracles of modern medicine any particular mother should or should not avail herself of. She wasn't, and I'm certainly not. No, we laughed at what Dr. Moose's announcement said about how he, and much of the medical establishment then, seemed to view childbirth. It wasn't a natural process that had been taking place in the bodies of women, often accompanied by other women, for thousands of years. It was a medical procedure that a doctor, almost certainly a male one then, performed on the body of a woman. Kind of like an appendectomy, but the organ in question was marginally cuter than an appendix and hopefully had been on the waitlist of a few childcare centers for seven or eight years.

It's a bit unfair. But I think of Dr. Moose when I read the story of the birth of Moses and those intrepid Hebrew midwives. He wasn't a violent, tyrannical pharaoh. Not at all. But sometimes the men with all the power and authority in the room aren't as fully in control as they've been led to believe. Especially the closer a story gets to the source of life itself.

In fact, in the Bible, if you go to a story looking for God, don't go first to the powerful and the credentialed ones. Don't seek out the swaggering monarch, imposing his will on the world. Root around in the bullrushes. Call the midwives, if the God of the Bible is the one you're in search of.

This is a pretty radical inversion of the norm, given the stories told about the gods just about everywhere else in the known world in the time of the Bible. The gods were violent warriors, prone to murder, rape, incest and all sorts of awfulness. They were not moral exemplars. To name just one nearby example, in a Babylonian myth called the Enuma Elish, gods were constantly getting annoyed and killing each other. Sometimes just for being rowdy young gods making too much noise. In their creation account, the heavens and the earth came to be when Tiamat, who birthed a bunch of sea monsters and dragons in a fit of rage after the murder of another god, was cut in half by Marduk. The upper half of her body became the dome of the sky and her bottom half, the Earth. Pretty different from the calm creation story of Genesis, where day after day God calls each newly created thing good.

That's a bit of a diversion, but I think it's relevant. What's strangest about the Hebrew Bible is not that, on occasion, God is described as being angry and violent. That would have been the default position for god stories. What was strange, maybe even subversive, was that a story would not give us even one of the five names of the Pharaoh—who claimed to be a god himself, by the way, and acted like one. The story doesn't give us his name, but it does

introduce us to two Hebrew midwives: Shiphrah and Puah. Brave women who refuse to do the king's violent bidding. Just the sort of powerless, insignificant characters the God of the Hebrews seemed to seek out. The kind of people God kept choosing in the Bible to carry out God's purposes on earth.

Today's reading begins, "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph..." It's a quick nod to how the Hebrews got to Egypt at the end of Genesis. Remember Joseph? His family travelled to Egypt in a time of famine. Even as a desperate foreigner, Joseph rose to power in Pharaoh's court by interpreting dreams and thereby increasing the nation's power and wealth. And so the family of Jacob, who was renamed Israel after a divine wrestling match, became immigrants in a foreign country, but their lives were saved.

Unfortunately, the rights of immigrants have always been tenuous and conditional. You can lay bricks and mix mortar for our building projects. You can work in our fields and we're interested in your dream interpretations as long as it all serves our purposes. As long as you make us richer, that is. But as soon as a leader thinks you people are becoming a threat to our way of life, watch out.

I took that diversion into the creation story for another reason. The Jewish scholar Robert Alter translates the verse right before today's reading like this: "Joseph died, and all his brothers with him, and all that generation. And the sons of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied and grew very vast and the land was filled with them." Alter says the Hebrew text is making a clear allusion to the fifth day of creation, when God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures..." It's the throbbing miracle of life itself coming to be. A force Puah and Shiphrah and the other midwives were very much in touch with. It's the gift of God's fruitful, abundant creation. But only until some greedy ruler thinks there's not enough creation to go around. Until some Pharaoh feels threatened and starts seeing those immigrants as swarming vermin, come to take what's rightfully ours.

Such is the storyline here, is it not? And remember. This is not some insignificant sidebar in the Bible. This is the origin story of Moses, greatest of all the prophets. Moses, who, as we read just a few weeks ago in church, will appear with Elijah at the Transfiguration of Jesus. He's kind of a big biblical deal, folks.

But back to Exodus. Don't you love the chutzpah of those midwives? Not only do they disobey Pharaoh's law that baby Hebrew boys should be thrown into the Nile. When he summons them for an explanation for why all these kids are surviving, they shrug and lie to his face. "I don't know, Mr. Pharaoh-god-guy. These Hebrew women. They're vigorous. They're having their babies all by themselves before we get there! What are you gonna do?"

One little boy is thrown into the Nile, of course, but in a wicker basket made watertight with bitumen and pitch. Robert Alter points out that the Hebrew word used for that basket is *tevah*, which means "ark." Like Noah's boat. Lovely, right? The daughter of Pharaoh finds the wicker ark one day, and she too refuses to obey her father's unjust law. Moses is saved from the waters of chaos, and, like Joseph before him, infiltrates the Pharaoh's household. And off the story goes again, in the opposite direction that a god story is supposed to move. The divine story is not being driven forward by the doings of warlords and kings. But off in the bullrushes with the birth of the one-day leader of a tribe of immigrant slaves.

Christians make the wild claim that, centuries later, an Israelite named Jesus was not just another prophet, but the God of the Hebrew midwives, incarnate. This Jesus looked less like the

violent old false gods than any human ever has. He refused to play war-games, imploring us not to slay our enemies, but to love them. Told us not to engage in personal battles, but to turn the other cheek. Not to exclude the untouchables, the foreigners, even the heretics from our tables, but to invite them into our lives as children of the same loving God.

It would be no surprise to Moses's people that Jesus also lived in a world ruled by a violent emperor who claimed to be a god. But his life took the story even further in the ridiculous direction the Bible had been moving in from the beginning. Jesus refused the emperor-god's war-games to the end, and this time the lesser god seemed to get his way. He succeeded in having the one who threatened his reign killed. Not just killed. Executed. Not just executed. Crucified. Do you know what caste of humans a Roman crucifixion was reserved for? Not for royalty. Not even for citizens. Crucifixion was how Rome executed its criminal slaves.

But it is in that moment, when the one true God is executed as a slave, Christians believe the universe of the false and violent gods was ruptured completely. Torn in two like that veil in the temple. And this divine refusal to play by the rules of the false gods of this world is the site of our souls' redemption.

When Paul said such a story is foolishness in the eyes of the world, it was not because the way of Jesus was a departure from the biblical story. It makes a deep and strange and biblical sense that, all those generations later, the God of Puah and Shiphrah would be found, not in Caesar's palace, but on Golgotha, dying the death of a slave. It's the same old story in its ultimate form, the Resurrection announcing once and for all what kind of life is of God. Announcing once and for all, the life that lives forever.

The question presented to you and to me is really the same as it's ever been. Toward which of the gods will you orient your life? Toward the emperor-gods who are still waging their wars, claiming to be setting things right? Or toward the God of the midwives. The God who is to be found, not in palaces, but off in the bullrushes, near the bobbing wicker ark of a condemned immigrant child. The God, not leading a conquering army, but refusing the old gods' terms for battle, even if it means dying like a slave.

Friends, if you ask what is the grace on offer in the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Eucharist, it's that in them we present ourselves, our souls and bodies, to the same divine, life-giving energies that those faithful Hebrew midwives lived by. The eternal love that drove Jesus's life to the end. The love that raised him, and can still raise us, to the new life of grace.

But to live by the power of his Resurrection, we must still refuse the ways of this world's false and lesser gods. We have to set their violent stories aside and draw near to the One who works through midwives and immigrant slaves. Let Shiphrah and Puah, not the pharaohs, be our guides for living lives fired by the Love that is still the source of the abundant, swarming life of everything on God's good Earth.