

“Call the Midwife”  
REV. ELIZABETH CUNNINGHAM  
Sunday, November 3, 2019  
D Min Sermon #2, Year 3

Exodus 1: 8 - 22

When I gave birth to my children, midwives were few and far between. I was in a hospital, and my children were delivered by an obstetrician. But I would say that in the last 20 years, midwifery’s star has risen. When I meet women to talk about the baptism of their babies, they have invariably had a midwife attend or deliver their baby.

Midwives have been around since ancient times. “Midwife comes from an old English word meaning “with woman”. There are references to midwives in ancient Greek and Roman texts.<sup>1</sup> And there are midwives in the Bible. Our text today from the Book of Exodus dates back almost 3,500 years ago. A new king has risen over Egypt, one who did not know Joseph.

And this pharaoh is worried about the growing population of the Hebrew slaves. He decides to decrease their numbers by trying to kill them through hard labour. The Hebrews are sent to build cities and work on large-scale farming projects. But the Hebrews survive and continue to multiply. He then decides that he will kill all the male babies. Kill the boys because they may one day grow up and revolt against him. But the girls, he will allow to live. They will become child-bearers for the Egyptians.

The pharaoh lived and slept in a culture of fear, a culture he created as king. He would kill what he determined was a threat. The pharaoh calls into his presence two midwives: Shiphrah and Puah. The Pharaoh says to the midwives, “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” A culture of fear plays a game based on scarcity and control. And so, the Pharaoh, hedging his bets on death, says to the midwives, kill the boys as soon as they are born.

Cynicism is a powerful force. It deflates dreams. It closes doors. It boards up hope. Cynicism is pervasive and corrosive, undermining societal values. Under a kingdom like this, people die, ideas die, hope dies. Cynicism is not new to our culture. Barack Obama famously asked the American people, “Do we participate in a politics of cynicism or do we participate in a politics of hope?”<sup>2</sup> That was in 2004. Fifteen years later, Americans are even deeper into the wells of cynicism that Obama flagged. And that cynicism has crossed over the border into Canada.

A culture of fear saw our Member of Parliament, the Hon. Jane Philpott kicked out of the Federal Cabinet. The recent negative campaigning and mud-slinging in both provincial and federal politics struck us all. In September, Provincial House Speaker Ted Arnott released a memo to all returning MPP’s, singling out behaviour such as “mean, excessively rude, or nasty”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://people.howstuffworks.com/midwife1.htm>, October 29, 2019

<sup>2</sup> Barack Obama, Keynote Address to the Democratic National Convention, Tuesday, July 27, 2004.

commentary in the legislature.”<sup>3</sup> A culture of fear finds Donald Trump calling his own Republican senators, ‘human scum’.

Diana Butler Bass comments about our insatiable need to experience life in its frustration, over and above moments of gratitude: “We have few cues to initiate routines of gratefulness and do not regularly experience its rewards. Many people are far more cued into habits of frustrations – like when a car cuts them off on a morning commute ... which results in the “reward” of feeling superior or in control – or habits of anger, sadness, or cynicism.”<sup>4</sup>

Of church culture, David Lose observes: “There is, among our churches and people, a pervasive lack of hope regarding the future of the Christian tradition in these lands.”<sup>5</sup> A lack of hope fuels Cynicism. Cynicism in churches leads to chorus’ of ‘There’s not enough money’, ‘There’s not enough people’, ‘There’s not enough energy’. Cultural isolation contributes to cynicism. Why make the effort to even dream when the church is dying? Cynicism is *our* Pharaoh.

The Pharaoh says to Shiphrah and Puah, “If it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” **“But they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them.”** Shiphrah and Puah did not do as the King ordered. They choose life over death, even though it might cost them their lives. They choose to save every baby.

In the birthing process, the midwife watches for the contractions – the hardening of the abdomen as the body prepares to birth. The midwife coaches you through the uncontrollable, relentless pushing that takes over the body. The contractions steadily increase in strength as life urgently desires to be born. Then the pushing is done, you hear the first cry, and then with joy and laughter and tears, you hold the miracle that is your child, in your arms.

*This is what the midwives could not kill.* This synergy of labour and love and the will for a first breath.

Lynn Japinga observes, “Midwives coach the mother through the birth process, but they cannot do the work for the mother or take her pain away. They can be present, and they can make the delivery more comfortable and less frightening. So, it is with God, who does not promise to take pain away or do the hard work for us but is present, active, supportive, and encouraging in the midst of struggle and pain.”<sup>6</sup>

God is a midwife.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thestar.com/politics/provincial/2019/09/09/pc-mpp-who-referees-ontarios-legislature-wants-to-see-better-behaviour.html>

<sup>4</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*, (New York: HarperOne, 2018), 55.

<sup>5</sup> David J. Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World – And Our Preaching – Is Changing*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 49.

<sup>6</sup> Lynn Japinga, *Preaching the Women of the Old Testament: Who They Were and Why They Matter*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 51.

The Psalm writers saw this - “Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother’s womb.” (Psalm 71:6) and, “Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.” (Psalm 22:9)

The miracle of birth is happening all around us. In all of creation, animals, insects, fish, and birds are being born, hatched and incubated. Islands form from volcanic eruptions. Stars are born in galaxies millions of lightyears away. It’s as if the entire energy of the cosmos is rivetted to the miracle of birth. With so much birthing energy in this world, and with God acting as midwife, why don’t we see it more?

Two young girls blazed through the steel gates of Cynicism, their mission driven on the wings of personal will. Sixteen-year old Greta Thunberg, and before her, the equally young Malala. Greta, with her blistering attacks of ‘how dare you’ continue to draw mass crowds and public awareness of the direness of the global climate crisis. And Malala, stunned the world, with her bravery and courage, when after being shot in the head for going to school, said, girls will go to school, and took her message to the world.

Greta and Malala are Shiphrah and Puah.

Greta and Malala are the Shiphrah and Puah of our time, birthing hope in a time of tyranny and greed, choosing life for the Earth, choosing life for the children. They show us that to embrace action is to risk everything to gain everything.

‘Embrace Action’ is the third core value of this church, along with Experience Belonging and Explore Spirituality. For this church to embrace action will mean to risk, *greatly*. We will be asked to risk in a way that is radically different from our experience.

Jeremy Heimans makes a distinction between what he calls ‘old power’ and ‘new power’: “**Old power** works like *a currency*. It is held by a few ... Once gained, it is jealously guarded ... **New power** operates differently, *like a current*. It is made by many ... It uploads, and it distributes.”<sup>7</sup> So, old power, you hoard it, you keep it, it works like a currency. New power, you upload it, you share it, it’s like a current.

In October, I offered a book study on “Accidental Saints”<sup>8</sup>, by Nadia Bolz-Weber, the Lutheran pastor of the ‘House for Sinners and Saints’ in Denver, Colorado. Nadia shows up in Jeremy Heimans’ book. He chooses her worship service because she has structured her church to work with this new power.<sup>9</sup> He writes, “The mainstream approach to [worship], as Bolz-Weber tells us, would be to create a formal governance structure: “I need eight people to be the Worship Committee.”<sup>10</sup> Instead, their Sunday morning worship is “performed by between fifteen and eighteen ordinary attendees who grab a part as they arrive and then collaborate to lead the

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<sup>7</sup> Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms, *New Power: How Anyone Can Persuade, Mobilize, and Succeed in Our Chaotic, Connected Age*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2018), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*, (New York: Convergent Books, 2015)

<sup>9</sup> Heimans, *New Power*, 26.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

congregation.”<sup>11</sup> This is *not* how we worship at Stouffville United Church. Hierarchy and structure identify our worship. This other worship is spontaneous, and flattens the hierarchy found in ours.<sup>12</sup> What is the Spirit birthing here?

So, *what is* embrace action  
but to let go and not hold on,  
to leave what is familiar,  
to feel uncomfortable.

*What is* embrace action  
but to risk all that you know  
for something you don't,  
to experience birth.

And as you embrace action,  
you will not go unaccompanied.  
For like the midwife,  
God is with you. Every step of the way.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.