

August 27, 2023 13th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Exodus 1:8-22, Psalm 138
Romans 12:1-8, Matthew 16:13-20

[The few sections in quotes are from SALT's lectionary blog: <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/8/18/who-do-you-say-that-i-am-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-twelfth-week-after-pentecost>]

Grace and peace to you, beloved ones of Christ Jesus. Amen.

A good friend of mine, Tamara, is a nurse midwife.

She posted a note on social media recently,

reflecting on a conversation that happened in the quiet between the pushes at a birth.

The woman's partner asked, "How long have you been doing this?"

Marveling at the journey, looking at the student-midwife who was across the bed, just beginning.

Tamara responded: "20 years."

Then in her post Tamara did the math, how the first babies she'd welcomed,

in her first clinical rotations, are turning 20 this summer.

And how she's helped welcome enough kids to fill an elementary school.

Our first reading today from Exodus is about the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah.

It's a story we don't hear often enough,

a challenging passage, I know.

As we noted, Shiphrah and Puah come just before, indeed set up, a Sunday School special:

The story of Moses' birth.

The generalized threats of Pharaoh,

become personal and terrifying, as a boy-child is birthed in this family.

Moses' mother saves her child's life by placing him in the reeds along the Nile River,

carefully picking a spot where he'll surely be found, and cared for well.

Baby Moses in the Nile, his sister Miriam keeping a look out, many have heard that story before,

but Shiphrah and Puah, that is less familiar.

Our passage from Romans reminds us that we have different roles, different gifts.

So true in the story: all these different women, each with a role...

the politically-minded, compassionate midwives,

Moses' wise and grieving mom and his faithful sister Miriam.

King Pharaoh's daughter and her attendants who notice the baby,

who lift him from the water, and care for him.

All these different woman, and each with a role, each with a way of serving.

And did you notice how the names of some of these women are included in the passage?

Isn't that interesting? This doesn't happen often in the Bible.

All these thousands of years later, we still utter the names of women like Shiphrah and Puah.

Shiphrah and Puah, those midwives,

who knew well the politics - how many Hebrew midwives engage directly with the Egyptian king?
Shiphrah and Puah who took seriously their vital role in the community,
their trusted relationships,
who were smart and strategic, innovative and creative,
brave to listen to God and their call, side stepping Pharaoh's order, opting for justice, for right-ness.

Hold onto Shiphrah and Puah and let's turn to our Gospel this morning.

There's another kind of birthing, indeed, midwifing, happening in the Gospel passage.

For months we've been moving through Matthew's telling of Jesus' story:

the teaching and healing and feeding.

Today Jesus and his disciples are farther afield, in the ancient city called Caesarea Philippi—
a city known for its diversity of thought and religious practice.

At that time it was a Roman city built around an important spring of water,
with shrines and temples to Pan and other gods,
with buildings figuratively hoisting the flag of domination, the rule of imperial power.

Location matters: It's here, in the midst of all this, that Jesus wonders aloud:

Who do people say that I am?

And more precisely, Peter: Who do YOU say that I am?

Can you imagine the sweat dripping from Peter's brow?

This is Peter who teeters between bold and fearful, insightful and foolish, faithful and unreliable.

Peter, who do YOU say that I am?

And in that moment Peter confesses: You are the Messiah, the son of the Living God.
Peter has nailed it, or so it seems, but, honestly, most truthfully, most of the time, Peter struggles,
he understands and not so much,
he believes and he disbelieves. (*Jen's note: some of the phrases here come from SALT's blog*)

And through it all he does his best to follow Jesus.

With this beautiful, honest, messy, humble, persistent, living faith,
it's on Peter that Jesus builds the church.

Sometimes Peter's confession appears to me formulaic,

and at this time in history, formulaic generally doesn't sit so well with churches like ours.

But when I listen for the quiver in his voice

and read the stories that we know, and the imagine the stories we don't know,

then for me Peter here is all the more inspiring.

In this place where empire reigned supreme,

where power was most often coercive and domination harsh,

Peter is just beginning to understand how truly counter-cultural Jesus is,

and it's this Jesus the Messiah that Peter confesses, that he follows.

I value this question and the setting in which it shows up today,

it reminds me a bit of a university campus like ours.

Who do you say that I am?

Asking the questions feels like the work of midwives,

the work of ones who assist in the process of birth.

Many of us are quick to sidestep around such a direct question.

It feels big, and we worry we might get it wrong.

But here's the thing, friends, it's still a valuable question.

It's still a question with which to wrestle and ponder, to pray on, to sort out with trusted humans.

I don't want us to respond with formulas, no need.

And let's be clear: there are a multiplicity of answers, not one, but many.

Remember how some thought Jesus might be the prophet Elijah or Jeremiah, or maybe John the Baptist?

These ancestors in the community remind us of the role of prophets,

the place of resistance, the need for healing.

The right answer, beloveds, is honest, it's authentic, it's genuine, it's yours.

Who do I say that Jesus is?

A love beyond love. Our savior. God's holy son.

One who ushers in a totally new reign,

who breaks the systems of oppression,

who is killed by the empire,

who frees us from sin and shows us another way.

Grace embodied, Love with skin, God in human flesh.

You know as well as I that “Christianity” has come to be more known for hate, than for love.

that our name, our identity as Jesus-followers can feel co-opted.

It's important, let me say this more strongly, it's vital, that we put words and flesh on what we do believe,

not some company line,

not someone else's truth, but our own:

that we step out for how we are called to love,

that we stand up for this Jesus whose claim is rich and compelling.

Will it feel comfortable? Not at first.

Friends, there's a freedom in naming our truths, in hearing others,

in articulating where we're at right now, knowing it might change, trusting that is okay.

We're part of this movement, the “community of the church,

flawed and meager and courageous and beautiful” all at once.

And changing, changing quickly,

for it's the Living God that Peter confessed, and it's the Living God who claims our hearts.

Fires rage, storms churn,

violence besieges our neighborhoods and nations,

we recall the words of Dr. King and the march 60 years back—we're still marching,

now as much as ever, really, more than ever, is our time to find our voices.

Remember Shiphrah and Puah.

The Holy Spirit is midwifing the church (the whole church, yes, and our congregation, and you and me)

midwifing us into whatever we are becoming.

Calling together the past and the future, asking the questions, inspiring the answers,

granting us courage to embody something new and renewed, and holy,

God-born and necessary,

messy and at once graceful.

Beloved of the Living God:

may you claim your voice and live what you believe.

Our midwifing God is transforming us and our world, and truly, all the time, that is the good news.

Thanks be to God. Amen.