

Midwife's tale: Exodus 1:8—2:10; Matthew 16:13-20

The Hebrew midwives were poised to receive the future that God had promised.

by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#) in the [July 31, 2002](#) issue

The “midwife’s tale” told in Exodus begins on an ominous note. There arose a new king over Egypt, we are told, one who did not know Joseph. That is to say, not only did the king not know Joseph, he did not know the God who had sent Joseph to Egypt so that Joseph might preserve his brothers through famine and keep alive a remnant of God’s people on earth. Now that remnant had multiplied and their numbers were threatening those who wielded power in Egypt. So the order came to make the Israelites’ lives “bitter with hard service.” Yet, curiously, the more the Israelites were oppressed, “the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad.”

Enter the Hebrew midwives, the players poised to receive the future that God had promised. They were summoned and ordered to end each new male life before a breath could be drawn. “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.” By keeping the opposition’s numbers down, the king thought, he could preserve his power. But the king did not know Joseph, nor the God who preserves a remnant. The midwives, on the other hand, feared God alone. To put it another way, the midwives Shiphrah and Puah knew they were players in a drama that was bigger than they were. So they played their part as God’s people, and let many babies live. Then the king said, “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile . . .”

“Now a man from the house of Levi went and took to wife a daughter of Levi,” the story goes on. “The woman conceived, and bore a son.” But under the king’s sentence of death, this child was doomed to die in the waters of the Nile. Until, that is, his mother saw something of God, something goodly in his face. Then she hid this babe among the reeds along the Nile, where he was found by Pharaoh’s daughter. In Moses the midwives’ small saving act was then magnified by God’s mighty hand.

The rest of the tale we know. Moses stuttered God's truth to Pharaoh's power. But power had and still has no ear for truth, so God spoke to Egypt's powerful in the language of power, and the first-born in Egypt died. Then the late-born of Egypt—in fierce pursuit of God's people—drowned in the Red Sea.

A remnant of the Israelis was preserved and the people wandered in the wilderness. Then Moses went up a hill and returned with God's word written upon stone tablets. "The content of the law," said John Calvin millennia later, "is God himself . . . 'God's face in a manner shone forth therein.'" The law was given not only to outline human existence by a revealed set of dos and don'ts, but also to turn the people Godward in every movement and moment of their lives. "The end of the law," as Calvin said, "is that we should love God."

Over the centuries, human beings consistently broke and neglected God's law, then struggled with the results of despair and misery. In Augustine's words, human beings who had been made for God were restlessly wrong without God. When the law was abandoned, they could not turn their lives rightly toward the One for whom they were made.

These men and women are a mirror for us in their stories of high intentions and horrible disobedience. Whether we are trying to obey the commandments and achieve righteousness on our own, or turning toward other gods, we walk in darkness. And in this wilderness of our own making, we cry out for a word that—like the divine Presence in the wilderness—will dwell with us in the flesh.

Where do we learn of the Word that is grace and truth? For this midwife's tale, we turn to Matthew 16, where the midwives are men who "have journeyed blind" with a new prophet. "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks his companions. And Peter responds with a new word and a new birth. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." God's word has been revealed in flesh and blood.

Like Helen Keller when she realizes "that 'w-a-t-e-r' meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand," Peter connects God's word with the person of Jesus Christ. Says Keller of her moment, "The living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!" So said the disciples of Jesus Christ when the remnant of believers gathered around him.

There is a part still to be played by those of us who believe in his name. We have not seen him with our eyes, but we have beheld the light his life shines upon our

darkness. We have taken comfort in his nearness and courage from his suffering. We have been upheld by his grace, forgiven by his mercy and given a mighty hope in his resurrection. Through him we have been turned Godward.

We are to bear witness, to receive him as midwives receive a life long-awaited. We receive him not for ourselves alone, but so that another might be given life. Our part is to act as those summoned by God's grace to confess him as the Christ of God.

Suddenly the birth is our birth, and Christ the midwife is pulling us out of darkness into his marvelous light, giving us power to become the rock on which Christ's church may be built.