**PWS&D Sunday 2024 Sermon**

*Written by the Rev. Dr. Sarah Travis*

**Scriptures**

Exodus 1:15-21

Romans 8:18-27

**Sermon**

Every December we reimagine the nativity story –

Bringing it to life in pageants and with songs.

There is a set cast of characters –

Mary, Joseph, baby, donkey.

Angels, shepherds. Livestock.

Sometimes the magi are included, somewhat prematurely, in the scene.

There is one character, however, that is never included. Never mentioned.

In fact, we don’t even know for sure that she existed.

But surely, in a little town like Bethlehem, there would have been a midwife.

When Mary’s labour began, it is easy to imagine that Joseph’s first action would have been to seek help.

And who would he have been looking for except the women in the village –

the ones who knew about birthing,

the ones who would know how to bring comfort into the piercing pains and darkest night.

We’ll never know if she was there or not,

but if she was, she witnessed the beginning of something new, unforeseen, impossible.

She witnessed the incarnation of God –

the God-with-us of Jesus Christ.

Midwives always bear witness to new life.

They do other things – like tend to the needs and comfort of the birthing person –

they look for signs of trouble and know when to call for help,

they educate and resource young families about how to feed and care for their new child.

Midwives participate in the work of bringing new life but they don’t do the work.

It is the birthing person who does the work of labouring.

The midwife is a skilled presence who calms and minimizes the discomforts and dangers.

Childbirth, after all, is dangerous – in any era.

And in every era, women have been accompanied by midwives.

Shiphrah and Puah are midwives,

working under the shadow of Israel’s oppression in Egypt.

They would have done the same things that midwives have always done –

using tradition and the technologies of the day to tend new life as it emerges.

They did this in an intolerable environment,

made impossible by a vicious king who was threatened by the rapid growth of the Hebrew population.

To reduce the threat, he commands that all baby boys be killed.

Front and Centre are the midwives – they are the ones who attend the births.

They are the ones that know who has a boy and who has girl;

they are the ones tasked with deciding and acting.

These midwives find themselves in a horrible position.

But they are not without choices.

They are women who fear God –

this does not mean they are afraid of God,

rather they are women who have a healthy and obedient relationship with the covenant God.

These are women of faith.

And they must weigh their allegiances and limitations –

will they be faithful to the God of Israel or to Pharoah?

And do they have any choice?

These women, however, true to their calling,

and true to their faith

refuse to take part in genocide.

They resist the orders they have been given

to throw the baby boys in the Nile –

they are canny and smart –

telling the King that the Hebrew women

are so quick in labour that the midwives can’t get there in time.

So little lives are allowed to continue.

Midwives bear witness to life as it emerges even in the midst of tragedy.

They are necessary for the safety and well-being of parents and child.

Not all birth stories are happy stories.

Even today, with our advanced medical technologies,

the lives of both babies and mothers can be in danger.

This is especially true in places where medical care is less available.

The presence of midwives, skilled helpers and village maternal health committees,

make a significantly positive difference in maternal and child mortality rates.

In Malawi, safe motherhood committees support the health of communities

by raising awareness about the resources that are available before, during and after birth.

One of their goals is to encourage locals to attend professional health clinics,

where they can be cared for by trained attendants.

Village safe motherhood committees, which are an aspect of PWS&D’s maternal, newborn and child health programming,

teach people in the Mulanje catchment area about what services are available to them

before, during and after birth.

Women are encouraged to attend checkups and deliver at a local health facility,

and they may even receive a fine if they do not attend.

These committees encourage male participation, so that dads may be involved in the care of the child and the mother,

and so that men encourage and do not hinder pregnant women as they access health services.

The influence of village safe mother committees means many pregnant women have been saved from preventable deaths—an impact felt for generations,

As more children can grow up with the loving presence of their mother.

For example, in Bwanali village, the work of the committee has resulted in there being no maternal deaths for over a decade, in a country where the average maternal death rate is almost fifty times that of Canada.

Reflecting on the difference they are making,

this group of dedicated advocates shares that without their involvement,

“There would be a lot of home deliveries and possible maternal deaths,

women and children would not be receiving essential health services like vaccinations and antenatal care. The results would be disastrous.”

As it partners with local organizations in Malawi, PWS&D is acting as a midwife –

supporting, encouraging and celebrating the emergence of new life.

Through its partner agencies, PWS&D bears witness to the ways that God is moving in the world to bring about change, growth and resurrection.

Like the midwives in the Exodus Story,

we are called to be faithful to a covenant God.

For us, it is the God of the Universe made known in Jesus Christ to whom we are obedient –

and we renounce the powers of evil and oppression in the world –

and like those midwives, we choose to participate for good rather than ill.

We choose those things that are compassionate, sustainable and just.

And like midwives, we tend and protect those delicate spaces where good news is just beginning to flourish.

Remember, the midwife does not produce new life.

In the realm of creation, it is the Spirit of the Living God who creates new life.

We are invited to do our small part in tending new life wherever it springs up –

in faithfulness to a God who is always faithful.

In partnership with communities around the world,

we gather and listen to the groaning of creation –

something is happening here!

Life itself emerges from the grave – new life springs up all around us!

Thanks be to God for what God is doing through PWS&D and its partners.

Thanks be to God for opportunities to bear witness to new life,

to tend it, and nurture it.

To silently, and reverently give thanks for this precious life which is a gift beyond measure.

To loudly proclaim the miracle that life continues even amid the fear and loneliness.

To sit and wait, gently, with those who are struggling for hope or freedom or safety.

To watch, with eyes wide open, as the morning dawns

and earth opens its mouth and cries out the birth of a new day.

So be still and listen to the groaning of creation.

Listen to the voice of the Spirit calming and urging.

Listen for the cries of new life as God revives the earth.

To God be all the Glory. Amen.