The book of Exodus holds one of the most treasured stories in both Jewish and Christian tradition. We all know it: the Hebrew baby drawn from the water and raised in Pharaoh's courts who grows up to be the liberator of his people. The story of Moses and the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt is epic, so epic, that even Hollywood has visited it, both as animation in The Prince of Egypt and as Charlton Heston playing Moses in the classic, The Ten Commandments.

What those movies often leave out, however, and what we, even as Christians, often forget today, are the events that set the stage for Moses. And our passage this morning is a story from Exodus that predates even the birth of Moses.

There's a saying that “behind every good man is a good woman.” I frankly find that rather insulting, as if women can only be behind men. But the truth is, behind and even before the hero that is Moses, there were several great women.

These days, the names Puah & Shiphrah aren’t all that well-known. And most of us before this morning probably wouldn’t have even known that they were biblical characters. They are the lesser known women of the Bible, the often forgot.

But the Hebrew people, the ones who made it out of Egypt, the ones who wandered in the desert and finally settled in the land of milk and honey, they did not forget these midwives.

Rather, the story of their disobedience to Pharaoh and their decision to choose life over death were told over and over again to generations of young Hebrew children, shared in their oral tradition, until one day, a scribe wrote it all down to be remembered and preserved forever. And when they wrote it down, they remembered to include even the names of the midwives. The name of the pharaoh, that king of Egypt who oppressed and enslaved them, however, they can’t seem to remember his name. But Puah and Shiphrah, they are remembered by name.

The story of these two midwives is one of my favorites in the biblical canon. It’s just a few, short verses, some would say a preamble to the great story of Moses. But it’s such a simple yet powerful story.

Midwives in Israel were usually barren women, women who didn’t and couldn’t have their own children (Roberta Hestenes). And in this ancient, patriarchal society, which might still ring oddly familiar even today, women were marginalized but could find worth and status in their ability to give birth to sons.

Puah and Shiphrah as midwives, barren women, had nothing to leverage for power or voice in this context. They were essentially objects brought in to deliver babies and excused when the birth was over.

But here we have these two, less-than-ordinary women, facing off with the most powerful man in their world. And they do so, not in some dramatic, spectacular event, but by simply using the one thing they know how to do: deliver babies.
Emily Sylvester in a beautiful sermon entitled “The Midwives” says, “Puah and Shiphrah made God’s presence tangible in their world... They had a vocation, a calling. They’d witnessed the mystery of life and death, [and] taken the oath of their calling, to in all ways serve life...” So when Pharaoh ordered them to essentially commit genocide and to kill every new born Hebrew boy, they deliberately disobeyed.

They could’ve said they were too weak, too ordinary to make a difference. They could’ve used the excuse that it wasn’t their policy, but that they were just following orders. They could’ve even justified their actions with the fear that their own lives would be taken from them if they didn’t execute these babies.

But for these midwives, God was more real to them than the Pharaoh that stood before them. And they chose to side with a God who entreats us to choose life over a tyrant who commands us to choose death.

Perhaps that was why they had decided to become midwives in the first place, to be the ones to bring forth life. They knew how cruel and oppressive this world could be, that these boys might grow up to be slaves to Egypt, but each time they held new life in their hands, each time they witnessed a new birth, their hope and their belief in life was renewed. So these two women, too stubborn to give up on life, too compassionate to take a life, kept delivering babies and changed the course of history one crying baby at a time.

We wouldn’t ordinarily call these women “privileged”. In fact, to the rest of their society, they were the opposite of privileged, lacking status, power, or even anyone to speak on their behalf. But through the madness and fear of a king, they found themselves in a unique albeit tentative position of power. And they used that opportunity to make a difference, a small part that would later change the world and set the stage for the liberation of an entire people from an oppressive and tyrannical regime.

One commentator writes, “They are the first to assist in the birth of the Israelite nation,” (D. O’Donnel Setel). They were midwives not just to individual babies, but to an entire people.

Amazing things are possible if we just take what we’ve been given and find ways to use it for the betterment of this world.

Just like these midwives, we are called to take what we know and what we’ve been given and to use that to make this world just a little better.

Paul says to the Romans, “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher in teaching; the exhorter in exhortation; the giver, in generosity, the leader, in diligence, the compassionate, in cheerfulness.” Each one of us is uniquely gifted and placed in this world to bring about transformation.

Whatever privileges you were born with; whatever gifts you were given; whatever you know how to do: be it delivering babies or delivering pizzas, God calls us to use that.

It sounds almost too easy in a way. We get to be exactly who we were designed to be and the world will simply become a better place... hmmm. Well, the animals seem to do it all the time. Those pets out there in that tent on the church lawn, they make our lives, and maybe even the world, better simply by their loving presence.
And the bees do what they were created to do: pollinate this earth, and the birds and the whales and the lions, all doing what they’re supposed to do. It would seem easy enough to get this world on course to a better tomorrow if we could all just follow suit.

While it is just that easy, it is also just that hard. We live in a broken and complicated world where we have strayed far from what God intended for us. As humans, we often make this world an inhospitable womb, not only for ourselves and humankind, but for the beasts of field and the fish of the sea with whom we share this planet.

And like pharaoh, we often act out of fear, holding on desperately to our status and to our way of life which we’ve become accustomed to, even if it means other people, the earth and its creatures are exploited for our own comforts. In the midst of our brokenness, it is difficult to even conceive of another, different way.

But Sylvester says, God is in labour to give birth to a new world. And God can’t do it alone. He needs our help. God needs us to be her midwives so that a new creation can be born.

Let me say that again: God needs us to be her midwives so that a new creation can be born.

And any woman who’s given birth will tell you, labor is no easy process. In fact, it can often take a while. There can be complications that come along, and it almost never goes exactly as you’ve planned. Giving birth to a new world, a new creation, is just as difficult. And, unfortunately, people with great power and privilege don’t always make it any easier. Pharaoh was the most powerful man in his day, and the pharaohs of today continue to subjugate and oppress people for their own benefit.

Walter Brueggemann reminds us that this story of the midwives, “speaks from and for the powerless who are victims of state power … There are, in our own day, “little people” who, as a threat or an inconvenience for established power, are eliminated in wars and invasions, or are simply denied the right to live. In different parts of the world, different people play the role of ‘Hebrew’.”

There is an organization based in Arizona called "No Mas Muertes" or "No More Deaths." Arizona has some of the harshest and strictest immigration laws, and also some of the highest number of Mexican migrants crossing their borders.

These migrants, seeking a better life in the United States come into this country filled with hope, but once they get into Arizona, they’re faced with an expanse of harsh desert with no water for miles. By 2004, thousands had already died trying to cross the Sonoran desert in the heat of summer. Seeing that people were literally losing their lives, two religious groups joined together and decided to do something about it. They took what they already had an abundance of from their homes and in their grocery stores: potable water and food, and began leaving it out in the desert in hopes that it might save even one life.

The powers that be, the government, ruled that this act of humanitarian aid was illegal, that food and water should not be distributed and ultimately, that because these people were crossing the border illegally, that their lives were dispensable. Whatever our views may be on immigration, human life is more sacred than any policy, and giving drink to the thirsty and food to the hungry is precisely what Jesus called us to do.
This is just one example of how people have chosen to respond to that call, simply by using what they already had and where they already lived. Around the country and around the world, even here in the Twin Cities, individuals & communities are finding ways to respond to that call and to face unjust policies that demean, degrade or take human life.

We are each called to be midwives that usher in life and change, even in the midst of great hardship and difficulty.

We are midwives who choose to stand with the oppressed and marginalized, even if it means disobeying the powers and principalities that rule this world.

We are midwives who look into the eyes of those who are considered expendable, and see a life worth saving.

In the words of bell hooks, a black feminist, “Even in the face of powerful structures of domination, it remains possible for each of us [both] members of oppressed or exploited groups as well as those who may have race, class and sex privilege]... to define and determine alternative standards.”

Those alternative standards for us as people of faith are set when we refuse to be conformed to the ways of this world, but are transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may discern God’s will. Paul tells us to be non-conformists, to thoughtfully engage, and to recognize God’s real presence in our lives.

When God is more real to us than the powers we see before us, we are better able to choose God’s way of love, life, peace and justice, even when earthly laws or rules might try to undermine that way.

One way Christians believe that God becomes real to us is in community. We need others in our lives, a community of faithful people to accompany us in our faith journey to help remind us of God’s presence in this world.

Roberta Hestenes notes that even when the midwives had to meet the challenge of evil, they had a companion, a friend, a colleague who stood alongside them. Shiphrah had Puah, and Puah and Shiphrah. We, too, need the company of others as we commit to follow in their bold footsteps.

We are called to a difficult and arduous task. But we go not alone. For together, standing side by side, we work as midwives of change ushering in a new world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.