

We love to tell our birth stories.

We love to tell the birth stories of our families:

about how it used to be

and compare them to today.

I remember that not long after

we had one of our girls

I remember talking to Sam Shumate

about the hospital.

And he told me how

when he was born

his parents received a bill for his birth

—do you want to guess how much the bill was for?

\$25 I believe.

So, if I'm wrong, Sam,

call me and let me know the right amount.

I even tell my friends,

with some measure of silly pride,

that Arlie was born

in the old maternity wing of Catawba Hospital

during construction

and Huntley was born in the new part.

How many of you have birth stories

that involve Neel Bronnenberg or Bob Peterson?

Nancy Toy, Alison Vierling or Ryan Richardson?

We tell these birth stories with flare,

with drama, with passion.

They are important to us after all,

they are about our children,

our families and ourselves.

They define the beginning of our lives

and often set a tone for the life we intend to fulfill.

As Christians our defining story

is also a birth story;

but not the one with a star and stable.

The resurrection is our defining birth story;
the story of new life;
the birth of a new way
of being God's people
sent out into the world.

For our Jewish brothers and sisters,
their defining birth story,
also does **not** start with the stars,
in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth;
it starts with:
these are the names of the sons of Israel
who came to Egypt with Jacob;
this is Exodus.

The Exodus, as Israel's defining story,
is also a birth story.

Typically, we think of Exodus
as a story of liberation;
a freedom from and freedom for.

And it certainly is that
—but this story is also the story
of the dawning of God's people;
the nation of Israel's beginning.

The Hebrew word for Egypt
is related to the word for labor pain.¹

This is the beginning of their birth
as a people and nation.

The struggle to be free and live,
to lead lives as God's people
and be the promised blessing.

In these first verses of Exodus
we find that it is the prolific nature
of the Hebrew people
that, "induces Pharaoh's hate and desire for domination
when he notices that the Israelites in his land
exceed Egyptians in number and power:

¹ Rachel Marie Stone, *Delivered Through the Waters: The Red Sea, the baptistry and the birth canal*; Christian Century, May 24, 2018 <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/first-person/delivered-through-waters>

[it is] their fertility [that] is threatening.²

The Hebrew people
are doing what God commanded in Genesis,
be fruitful and multiply.

But years have passed
since that divine command.

And we are not sure how many years gone by
between the death of Joseph
and the rise of these Israelites in Goshen.

Some say 215 years and others say 430.

But as time passes,
things are forgotten.

Can you imagine if you forgot
your birth story or those of your children?
What would happen?

Our origin and birth stories
paint a much broader picture of who we are,
even in all our differences,
we are all born in the same way.

Birth stories that unite us.

Imagine if we forgot our nation's birth story.

400 years ago, 1620

there was a ship that set sail,
remember her name?

The Mayflower.

It departed from Plymouth, England
for the New World and finally landed
at what would be Plymouth Rock, Massachusetts.³

Imagine if we had no shared memory
of the meeting of white English settlers
encountering Native peoples?
No remembered history
of that first harsh winter

² ibid

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1620>

and the compassionate aid
of Native Americans in those early settlers' survival.
Some of you
would be without your favorite holiday
if we were to forget that part of the story.
What if we forgot
about the birth of the reformation?
Of that day when Martin Luther
boldly nailed his call of reform
to those wooden doors?
We know the adage,
those who do not remember their past
are doomed to repeat it.

And see, Pharaoh forgot Joseph,
he forgot part of the story.
Joseph the foreigner
who rose to power
in a previous Pharaoh's court.
The Israelite slave, turned-governor-of-the-land
who saved Egypt from famine.
Joseph, whose family was given
the land of Goshen to settle and thrive.
Pharaoh forgot, willfully or not, we are not told,
but his forgetfulness
prompts irrational fears
that will lead to his own demise.

⁸Now a new king arose over Egypt,
who did not know Joseph.
⁹He said to his people,
“Look, the Israelite people
are more numerous and more powerful than we.
¹⁰Come, let us deal shrewdly with them,
or they will increase and,
in the event of war,
join our enemies and fight against us
and escape from the land.”

¹¹Therefore they set taskmasters over them
to oppress them with forced labor.
They built supply cities,
Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh.
¹²But the more they were oppressed,
the more they multiplied and spread,
so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.

¹³The Egyptians became ruthless
in imposing tasks on the Israelites,
¹⁴and made their lives bitter
with hard service in mortar and brick
and in every kind of field labor.
They were ruthless
in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

The Egyptians come to dread or loathe
the foreigners in their land.

We have seen this story played out
in human history too many times.

A political leader

wanting to secure his base

places blame on a whole people
for a myriad of problems.

It was as recent as Germany and the Jews
or today could be welfare moms, Muslims,
anyone we deem different or other.

“One of the chief manifestations of sin,”

David Lose reminds us,

“is our penchant for defining ourselves
over and against others
and in the process

denying others their essential humanity,
their status as beloved children of God.”⁴

In our story today,
it is the ancient Israelites.

⁴ David Lose, The Butterfly Effect, Dear Working Preacher, Sunday August 14, 2011
<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1599>

Pharaoh sees them as a threat,
determines that they could fight against him
and so, he hatches a plan.

He decides that first
he will try secretly
to take care of the problem.

Calling aside two midwives to his court,
he instructs them
to watch as the Hebrew women give birth
and to kill the baby boys.

¹⁵The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives,
one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah,

¹⁶“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.”

Now this might seem like a good plan.

Pharaoh fears these baby boys
who will grow up to be men
and could threaten his power.

Little does he know...right?

And because he sees no threat
from Hebrew girls or women
—it will precisely *be women*
who thwarts his power.

It is women, with the power of birth
who move to make sure
the savior of Israel is born into safety.

It is Shiphrah and Puah
who save these babies
and pave the way for Jochebed, Moses' mother
and Miriam, Moses' sister,
to save him.

It is Pharaoh's own daughter
who takes pity on a Hebrew baby boy
floating in an ark—just like his ancestor Noah—

floating on the greatest river in all of Egypt
and landing safely
into Pharaoh's household.

¹⁷But the midwives feared God;
they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them,
but they let the boys live.

¹⁸So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives
and said to them, "Why have you done this,
and allowed the boys to live?"

¹⁹The midwives said to Pharaoh,
"Because the Hebrew women
are not like the Egyptian women;
for they are vigorous and give birth
before the midwife comes to them."

These women stood in defiance to the king,
no small act,
fearing God
more than they feared Pharaoh.
Shiphrah and Puah tell the Pharaoh
that the Hebrew women give birth vigorously
which is play on words—*they are full of life*
they tell the king of Egypt.

Where you want to this people to die,
we are telling you they are bursting with life.⁵
In fact, God rewards
the courage and resilience of these women
with families, with birth!
What a beginning to this nation's story.
It is abundance and resilience
that will set the tone
that God intends for this people.

⁵ Cameron B.R. Howard, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2169

And so, Shiphrah and Puah
are not just
individual midwives for Hebrew women,
they are the midwives
to the nation of Israel,
helping a nation be birthed
from their bondage into freedom.⁶

So, put yourself in this great birth story for a moment.

This Exodus story
is told again and again
around the familial table.
It was penned for the community
during a time of captivity and destruction
—a time when Israel
was scattered, broken, grieving.
A whole community
unsure of its survival.
A whole community
that feels as though
it is facing its final hours.
A whole community
tired and worn down.

Are you with me?
Do you feel that anxiety?
Do you feel that fear?
Do you feel that uncertainty?
They did.
We do.
The church does.
The school system does.
Small business owners do.
Your family does.

⁶ Rachel Marie Stone, *Delivered Through the Waters: The Red Sea, the baptistry and the birth canal*; Christian Century, May 24, 2018 <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/first-person/delivered-through-waters>

And yet, can abundance and resilience
be born in us?

What is God asking to be born in us
so that we have both freedom from
and freedom for?

What might God be orchestrating
through this destruction
so that a nation
might be a blessing to all people?

Who will the midwives?

The stories we tell of our birth
are the stories that shape us,
they define the beginning of our lives
and often set a tone
for the life we intend to fulfill.

I'm so glad
to share this morning's worship
Katheryn McGinnis.
For Katheryn is on the cusp of new birth.
She is about to be born
into her first *called* role
as pastor, as shepherd,
as leader, as preacher.
I've invited Katheryn to proclaim
what God's abundance and resilience look like for/to her:

Katheryn McGinnis:
I've been doing a lot of interviews lately.
What they don't tell you
Or perhaps I just didn't listen
Is that when you search for and accept a call,
you meet with a lot of committees
And you have a lot of interviews.

In one of these interviews,
a committee member asked me
How I felt about starting ministry now
When the world feels to be in turmoil
And ministry is now online and changing
And the future is so uncertain.

I understood the question,
No doubt these are not ideal circumstances to finally become ordained,
begin a career in ministry
And receive a call to pastor a church.

But when I heard that question
A part of me turned to Ruth.
Ruth, an enslaved Israelite
Whom the king falls in love with and marries.
Ruth has a chance to stand up for people
The enslaved Israelites
And get the king, her husband, to let them go.

She is afraid to do so,
But her beloved uncle tells her
Perhaps you were born for such a time as this.

Now I don't mean that I was born for this very moment
To save ministry from the perils of current world
No
I think it means,
For me,
That perhaps the scariest, or hardest, or most uncertain time
To begin a call to ministry
Is the very time your birth is needed the most.

This is the church I've grown up in.
You all have seen my literal birth
To my baptism.
You've supported me through college
And my YAV year in the Philippines
And these past 3 years of seminary.

And you're with me now,
As I prepare to be birthed from this sacred place
To a life following the call God has placed upon me.

At a church conference,
While we were talking about the current state of the church
And the challenges it is facing
Someone said:
The church isn't dying.
She's giving birth.
The birthing process is not easy.
It comes with pains and fear and doubt
But it brings life.
It brings salvation.
It brings liberation.

The Israelites were birthed by the brave midwives
I have been birthed by this congregation
And will be birthed once more in these sacred halls
to go out and serve.

And perhaps the church,
all of us,
this very moment
Are being birthed
For such a time as this.

Thanks be to God
Amen.