

August 27, 2017 – Annunciation Episcopal Church - 12th Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. Elizabeth Molitors

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

Exodus 1:17

When my daughter was little, one of our favorite books to read together was called 10 Minutes till Bedtime. The “plot” of the book - if you can really call it a plot - is pretty much fully explained in the title. This is a story about what happens to a little boy as he prepares to go to bed.

But, just as his father announces that it’s 10 minutes until bedtime, the boy’s pet hamster, who’s peering out the front picture window, makes an announcement as well. “They’re coming!” shouts the hamster. And then arrives an entire caravan of hamster-sized buses, taxis, station wagons, and RVs, filled with dozens of hamster families, carrying all sorts of toys and equipment: tiny beach umbrellas and lounge chairs, soccer balls and tennis racquets and golf clubs. One little critter has a camera in hand, while another carries a boombox. The hamster visitors are there to transform the boy’s bedtime rituals into their own exciting - albeit very brief - vacation adventure.

As I said, there’s not much of a plot line here, but for all that, it’s a very absorbing book. The richness of this story comes from the tiniest - the most easily overlooked - details. Although there are virtually no words in the book, my daughter and I would easily spend several minutes looking at every page, following the boy and his hamster visitors as they moved from sharing a snack, to reading a book together, and then relaxing in the tub (which, for the little hamsters, was like an Olympic-sized pool).

Now, I bring up this story not only because I love children's books – even though my child is now all grown up – but because the way that my kid and I pored over this picture book might be taken as a lesson in how to read scripture. Focused on the small detail, the characters we usually look right by....that's often where the powerful story resides. And so, with that in mind, we turn to today's Old Testament passage from Exodus.

As a child, I learned this story as the story of Moses in the bullrushes, the point of which was presented as the miracle, or at least the great unlikelihood, that Moses would have survived his trip down the Nile, and would have been rescued by the Pharaoh's daughter. But who set that series of circumstances in motion? If this first chapter of Exodus had been created as a picture book, I'd want us to turn back a few pages, and scour the corners and edges of the pictures to find the little details - the seemingly inconsequential characters - that, literally, set the Moses story into action. And - look! - there they are. The midwives.

The king of Egypt - the Pharaoh (a successor to the Pharaoh who, in last week's reading, made Joseph his right-hand guy in dealing with the famine)...this new Pharaoh fears the growing numbers and power of the enslaved Israelite people, and so orders the midwives who attend to the Israelite women giving birth to kill off all of the male children. "But," the scripture says, "the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live." Who could have imagined that the whole grand sweeping story of the deliverance of the Hebrew nation out of bondage into freedom under the leadership of Moses began with a small defiant act by two bit-part characters. On their own, the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, couldn't turn the tide of the destructive power of

Egypt and its King, but they did what it was they could do. They took a chance - quite possibly a dangerous one - and said 'no' to the death sentence ordered by Pharaoh in favor of life.

And so here we see, contained in this smallest sliver of a story, the fullness of the message of the Kingdom of God:

- that small acts, even those carried out by people lacking power and prestige, can make a critical difference;
- that every day we have set before us circumstances and situations that ask us to choose between life and death, love and indifference, hope and despair, and in making the choices that accord with God's will, we often fly in the face of common wisdom and popular opinion;
- and that no matter who we are, we have, with God's help, all the will and all the strength and all the determination we require to say 'Yes' to life, and love, and hope.

For the midwives, their choice to say 'Yes' to life didn't guarantee success for Moses or any of the other children whose lives they spared, and it didn't necessarily come without a cost. Their 'Yes' meant flinging themselves out into the universe and trusting that the God who had put it on their hearts to know what was the right thing to do, had also given them enough – enough of the gifts and the will that would be sufficient to do the work that they'd been called to do.

So often, when we recall the lives of the most prominent biblical characters - people like Moses - we remember them in terms of their huge, sweeping, larger-than-life accomplishments. Moses standing up to Pharaoh, leading the Hebrew

people through the parted walls of the Red Sea, encountering God atop the mountain and carrying down the carved stone tablets. And while these big stories are, of course, important, I think, though, that their magnitude and grandeur may cause us to forget that life is lived - and therein God dwells - one small thing, one risky thing, one life-giving thing at a time.

The small details, the character we usually look right by - these are the things that really move the story forward.

Recently, a colleague posted this statement on social media, written by an unknown source. It said, "My church is composed of people, like me. We make it what it is. It will be friendly, if I am. Its pews will be filled, if I help fill them. It will do great work, if I work. It will make generous gifts to many causes, if I am a generous giver. It will bring other people into its worship and fellowship, if I bring them. It will be a church of loyalty and love, of fearlessness and faith, a church with a noble spirit, if I, who make it what it is, am filled with these traits. Therefore, with the help of God, I shall dedicate myself to the task of being all the things I want my church to be."

The statement is simple, but rich. It points out a fundamental reality of not only churches, but of all committed communities and relationships: that these networks of friendship and love and mutuality are dynamic creations, living things. They are sacraments – outward, visible, tangible expressions of all the qualities and resources, words and actions, that the individuals who make up the community or relationship bring with them. The big things and the little things. It's like a law of physics: actions, words, attitudes, whatever we do, whatever we say, how we act – all of it has an impact.

And while we can't escape that physics-like law, we *can* choose whether or not we want our communities and relationships to reflect the nature and the will of God. Are we aiming for death or life? Indifference or love? Despair or hope? It's up to us.

This morning, we are celebrating with Terry and Bruce Stowell, along with their family and friends, 50 years of marriage. Contained in those 50 years are all sorts of milestones and accomplishments – the kinds of things captured in photos, about which family stories are told and occasions celebrated: births and first steps and graduations and job promotions and new houses and retirements and anniversaries. All the big stuff of life.

But what goes unrecorded, and often passes unnoticed, are all the little things that have really carried the story of Terry and Bruce forward. The choices to be kind, to put the other person first, to be patient as your partner vents about their day. Rejoicing in the other's accomplishments and commiserating with their frustrations. Shouldering a burden fully when the one of you needed a break. Most of those things never make it into a photo album, but they are the things that have given your marriage its life.

It is the same with the church: it's easier to notice and focus on the things that can be counted and catalogued and recorded: building renovations accomplished, programs created, ministries expanded. And while all of that is important and deserves to be recognized and celebrated, the real ministry of the church and the church's people lives in humble details and unnamed characters. MOST ministry - perhaps all ministry - is midwife ministry.

Small acts of choosing - and encouraging others to choose - life and love and hope over fear and indifference and despair. The story of our congregation's midwife-type ministry is told in ways that mostly can't be counted, most of which are not anywhere recorded: hands held, foreheads anointed, prayers prayed, notes of encouragement penned. Bread blessed and shared around the altar, coffee poured and cookies shared around the coffee hour table. Inviting a new person to sit with you, walking across the aisle to pass the peace, making sure that every person feels welcome.

The stories most often highlighted in scripture – the names and events that come most readily to mind – are the biggies: Abraham and Jacob, Joseph and Moses, David and Solomon. But keep in mind that as prominently as these leaders figured in the lives of the ancient Israelites, the stories in Genesis, in Exodus, in Deuteronomy are primarily about how God was loving and working with and through all of God's people. God's love and work continues right here, right now, too - through all of us - and is made manifest in each lunch bag packed and hot meal prepared for PADS, every chalice washed and linen ironed, every light bulb changed or furnace filter replaced, each pot of coffee brewed, each piece of music practiced. One life-giving 'Yes' after another.

If it is the yeses of the past that have brought us here to this time and this place, then it is the yeses of today and tomorrow that will shape our future. What will that be? I don't know. Our task as faithful people is not to determine the 'what' of the future, nor worry about the "how." Our task is to look carefully - paying attention to every page and detail and character that is before us - to see what work

or task or vision God is calling us to, and then we are invited - with the example of the midwives' confidence and trust before us – to say, with great joy, 'Yes.' *Amen.*