

Reflection on Exodus 1:8–21

Rev. Christine Gilbert for the St. Andrew's Uniting Church community

The weather this week tells me a change is in the air. Something is brewing in the elements. The last few days brought a mixture of frigid rain and fractious winds, warm sun and blue skies. On Jetty Road, people carried rain coats over their arms and folded umbrellas one minute, then bundled up and scurried to the shelter of their cars the next. It's getting to be that time of year when the earth makes its slow turn to a new season.

It feels a bit like where we are with the pandemic. The COVID numbers fall in Victoria and we begin to feel as though we might be out-of-the-woods. We enjoy face-to-face meetings and family gatherings even as new measures are placed on us to shock us out of our complacency. Marshals appear in shops, restaurants and places of worship to enforce physical distancing and hand sanitising. News tells of a new epicentre in the world, border restrictions remain in place, and those we know continue to be tested.

English poet David Whyte recently called the time we are in "getting ready to get ready to emerge." Whyte currently lives in the United States where the virus rages on, and yet, he suggests the invitation to get ready to get ready is for all of us, even those who live in places where the outbreak is more or less under control. In his words, "We're ready to go out, but the invitation is actually *to go deeper*; to find the internal road that is always beckoning that will take us on that outer road when the season changes."

In Whyte's poem about this road, he describes two edges of a road that seem to meet on the distant horizon saying:

It's just beyond
yourself,
and
it's
where you
need to be.



**What is this point where the edges connect for you?
Where are you heading? Where do you need to be?**

Each of us must contemplate these questions for ourselves. There is no one-size-fits-all answer, and even our individual responses will most likely change or be refined throughout our lives.

At the same time, human history and every faith holds there are commonalities among us. John Main says the inner journey leads us away from self-centredness into the mystery of God. Others speak of becoming the true, God-created self. The mystics witness to our eventual union with God where all is one, all is love.

While I resonate with each of these, I would add that where I am headed includes a sense a freedom—freedom to be at home in myself, enjoined to the flow of Spirit in creation without fear, giving love that is simple, undemanding and non-contractual.

The Exodus series we begin today tells of this journey from bondage to freedom, from attachments and oppression to liberated love. In today's reading, we see the journey is not one we need to take alone—it is impossible, in fact—and Shiphrah and Puah from the Exodus story introduce us to the image of midwives as those who might assist us along the way.

In her book *Holy Listening*, Margaret Gunther dedicates a whole chapter to the image of midwife to describe the work and nature of spiritual companionship. She uses words like deep, intimate, trusting, mutually respectful, wise, knowledgeable, encouraging, confronting, clarifying and celebrating to describe what a friend for our souls might be like.

Perhaps the image's most significant offering is the realisation that midwives do not do the work of the one in labour—they cannot, of course. Likewise, tending the love within and bringing it to bear in the world is the work each of us must do for ourselves. But wise companions are invaluable.



As my life begins to pick-up pace again, I have spoken with my spiritual companions about how I might maintain the gifts I discovered in solitude even as other expectations press in. The responsibility I've taken for jars of flower cuttings on tables here and at home is a symbol of one

of these gifts. I am wondering: How can I maintain the deep connection with creation I've rediscovered and integrate this connection into the whole of my life?

None of my companions belittle this gift, my wonderings or the symbol of the place settings. During a recent Spiritual Direction session, our entire focus was on these table settings and their deeper meaning including the question: How might they be a representation of who I am at this time? How am I like a jar of cuttings sitting in the midst of others?

When has someone been like a midwife to you? helping you bear love in the world? What was this experience like?

I am inspired by the courage of Shiphrah and Puah since the ruthlessness of the king and his determination to maintain power are made obvious to us. At the same time, the actions of the midwives are not surprising. It is their vocation to draw life into the world so, to some extent, they were simply following their instincts.

In speaking about spiritual guides, Rowan Williams observes:

So the saint isn't someone who makes us think, "That looks hard; there's a heroic achievement of will"—with the inevitable accompanying thought, "That's too hard for me"—but someone who makes us think, "How astonishing! Human lives can be like that, behaviour that can look quite natural"—with perhaps the thought, "How can I find what they have found?"

(from Silence and Honey Cakes)

Williams reminds us that those who might assist us on the Christian journey, in our soul-care, are often not exceptional on the surface of things. They do not seem tired and burdened with effort. They do not spotlight their accomplishments. In fact, what they are on about appears quite ordinary and might be easily overlooked—like the hidden work of Shiphrah and Puah. And yet, because of their great love for God and their deep trust and faith, all they do shines with a quiet, palpable grace that leaves us wishing for the same.

Who comes to mind when you ask, "How can I find what they have found?" Where do you see opportunities for more intentional companionship with such a person at this time?

Author of our lives:

you draw us forth from our mother's womb
and set us free upon this land
made beautiful and abundant
by your daily, loving care.

As we journey through life,
may we know we are never alone.

You are with us
in the constancy of creation,
the love of friends
the timely word,
the silence that enfolds us.

Reveal to us those whom you send
to be our companions,
to midwife and encourage us
as we tend and bear
the new life seeded within.

(moments of silence)

May we have the courage
and determination needed
to make the pilgrimage before us.

Amen