



# Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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## Today's readings

### Exodus 1:15-21 ("Shiphra and Puah")

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, '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.' But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, 'Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?' The 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.' So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Amen. (NRSV)

### Psalm 124 ("Thanksgiving for Israel's Deliverance")

If it had not been the Lord who was on our side —let Israel now say—  
if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us,  
then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us;  
then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us;  
then over us would have gone the raging waters.

Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us as prey to their teeth.  
We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers;  
the snare is broken, and we have escaped.

Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. Amen. (NRSV)

## Today's hymns

- 1 *I come with joy, a child of God* (CH:656)
- 2 *The voice of God* (CH:283; tune 96)
- 3 *Love divine, all loves excelling* (CH:519)
- 4 *Let all mortal flesh keep silence* (CH:666)
- 5 *Father Eternal, Ruler of Creation* (CH:261)

# In the Name of the Father and of

**M**idwives are important people, and I should know, marrying one as I did. From my secondhand understanding of the profession, I would say this: to be a midwife is simultaneously to embody a responsibility greater than most people will ever experience together with a privilege greater than most people could ever imagine (being the responsible person when a new life enters into our world).

Yes, a midwife will usher in new life, day by day. She will also usher in massive, massive change. One moment there will be three people in a room: a woman in labour, a healthcare professional, and typically a hapless and bewildered on-looker. The next moment, there will be four people, each wondrously made in the image of God, yet hopefully only one of them screaming the place down. You can call it what you like, new birth is a fabulous miracle.

Midwives are about hard-nosed decision-making and split-second precision. That much is clear. More than this, they are about caring for both a mum and a tiny tot (or, indeed, tots) in transition from womb to room. Above all, midwives are passionate about new life.

Perhaps that's why in the very first chapter of the book of Exodus we find two midwives who will not, on any account, side with death. They have been instructed to conspire with Pharaoh in the murder – the very genocide – of Hebrew infants in an attempt to keep the slave population down in an Egypt that is wary of foreigners who might be growing too strong. But these heroic midwives will not do it. The God-fearing Shiphrah and Puah, we are told, “did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.”

And when they were questioned by the boss, they made up a pack of lies to conceal their noble, deceitful plot: *Oh, these Hebrew women: you've never seen anything like them, delivering before we can get to their houses and straight back to their physical work as though it were second nature. Honest, gov, we have no idea how they do it. No idea at all.*

Through dark and very necessary subversion, the midwives paved the way for Moses not only to survive, but to grow up safely, becoming the great leader of his nation. It was the midwives, then, who in their own tiny but significant way helped usher in the Exodus.

If you read the gospel of Matthew (and really, you should) you find a New Testament text that is shrouded in Old Testament imagery, allusions and parallels. All through the book of Matthew the author is drawing comparisons between old and new, seeking to convince his Jewish Christian readers that Jesus is “the new Moses”, taking the people from physical and spiritual bondage and leading them out to freedom. Just look at Matthew's text and you will find all sorts of similarities between the new Messiah and the old leader of the children of Israel. And that is the author's plain intention.

How sad then that in Advent, this season of preparation, if we go looking for midwives in the opening of Matthew then – unlike the opening of Exodus – we will be disappointed. No help is to be found for a young mum, so heavily pregnant. Or so it seems. But really, we can know nothing here – nothing at all. Just because Matthew finds no place for midwives in his cast list does not necessarily mean they were absent.

If we want to explore this idea, the place to go is not a work of literature, but a work of art painted in what is now Italy away back in the early 14th century.

# the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

Just take a look at this beautiful painting by Giotto. It's clear what's going on. Joseph looks like Joseph (old and feeble). Mary looks like Mary (saintly and dressed in blue). And Jesus looks quite unlike any newborn baby you have ever seen. So far, no great surprises. It's standard artwork from the period. The setting is the manger scene with the compulsory ox and ass there in the background, earning their keep as paid extras. The gospel writers never give them a mention ... though everyone likes to imagine the farm animals had to be there.

But we have other figures too: angels on high, shepherds in their dull brown clothing, and one woman – Mary's midwife perhaps??? – there on the left, handing Jesus back to Mary. She is here – sidelined, it is true, but she is here – for a specific purpose. Soon she will be gone, never to return. But while she is here, like Shiphra and Puah before her, the midwife is there to usher in a new life, even though she herself cannot know what is to come.

For those of you with an eye on the art, this may be a touching image to ponder. For those of you with a razor-sharp eye on what Scripture does and does not say, it may be a biblical abomination. *How dare this painter from 700 years ago mess about with our beloved Christmas story by bringing in a midwife! Neither Luke nor Matthew gives us healthcare professionals, so what right does this upstart artist have to rewrite Jesus' birth???*

If that's your view, it's your choice. As I noted a couple of weeks back in relation to Joseph, I believe that some imagination on the part of an artist can really make us think. But if you want to lose the non-biblical midwife, let's pick up some scissors and remove her. Oh, and while we're at it, we'll need to trim around our friends the ox and ass ... and that comfy-looking red mattress ... and the stable ... and, come to think of it, even Joseph. None of them gets mentioned by Luke or Matthew as having been at Jesus' birth. Snip, snip, snip we go, until at last we are left with Mary and her baby all alone looking into each other's eyes, with all non-biblical figures and features surgically removed.

If that's the picture of Jesus' birth that you want, you're welcome to it. It would certainly be fully scriptural, but it would also be terrifying in the stark reality it portrays. A young mum so far from home with no hospital, no healthcare and no hygiene, no husband on hand, no comfort, and maybe even a shortage of joy. Is that what we wish for Mary: a first century birth tragically like so many 21st century births going on right now for refugees, homeless people, women who have been abused and abandoned? Mothers all alone: that's not art ... it's today's reality in so many parts of the world.

In 2015, Save the Children issued a report entitled *Missing Midwives*. Its foreword, from which I'll quote, is by Frances Day-Stirk, Director of the Royal College of Midwives: *Globally, we know that there is a shortage of midwives, and there is little doubt of the impact this is having on women and babies, their families and communities all over the world. The tens of thousands of women and millions of babies who die every year from childbirth-related causes are evidence of this.*

We close with a question: Mary and Jesus, without midwifery services? It's a terrible thought, but even today it's the way that it is for so many women and babies. But then, that's partly why Jesus came to challenge and change the world, making it a kinder, more loving place where God's justice is seen in action, where it is needed most of all. Amen.

# Praying for others

God who brings new life,  
at this season when we prepare to remember the coming of our Lord and Saviour,  
we recall that his journey was far from easy:  
born so far from home to a family who lived under oppression and poverty,  
he knew hardship from the very day of his birth.

Today we bring to mind those many babies in so many parts of our modern world  
whose arrival is fraught with danger and whose prospects are uncertain.

We bring to you those families who lack midwifery care,  
who struggle to meet the costs of transport, clothing, baby equipment,  
who have no certainty of clean water or sustainable food supplies.

When we stop to consider the gulf of dehumanising poverty which  
encircles the lives of even the youngest in our world,  
we are put to shame by our lack of interest and commitment.

So open our eyes and our minds,  
inspiring us to immediate action.

May we remember Jesus at this time, and those who are so like him.

This we pray in the Name of the Christ child. Amen.



**“Nativity: Birth of Jesus” (c.1304–06)**

*Giotto*

Scrovegni (Arena) Chapel, Padua, Italy  
(public domain)