On a lower shelf in my religion room at school sits one of my favorite books. In bright illustrations and two languages, it tells the story of today’s first reading. There’s something odd about this book — it opens in the wrong direction: wrong for us English speakers, right for readers of Hebrew. That’s part of what fascinates the children, and me.

The other thing I love is its title: *The Brave Women Who Saved Moses*.

In many Bibles, today’s reading from Exodus is captioned “The Birth of Moses.” But without five women — three of them unnamed — Moses would be, shall we say, dead in the water.

First, let’s Call the Midwives: Shiprah and Puah. We don’t know much about them, except their fierceness in following their vocations.

Even in the midst of oppression — perhaps BECAUSE of the oppression they suffer as Hebrews — they are deeply engaged in the life of the next generations.

In the midst of death, they are up to their elbows in life!

Their God, after all, is not the ruler of Egypt, who demands that male children die before they can threaten his throne.

Their God is the Creator of all that has breath, whose purpose for his people — ALL people — is always LIFE.

Living as aliens, members of the underclass, has somehow not made Shiphrah and Puah give up on the future.

Rather, as servants of a death-dealing regime, they have determined to embrace LIFE – not just making things better for the next generation, but making sure there IS a next generation.

In the face of an order to destroy, they peacefully resist, using the tools that oppressed people have always wielded – creativity and chutzpah.

These two aunties tell Pharaoh a story they would never get away with if the ruler had a clue about the ways of women.

[His reaction reminds me of how my daughters used to be able to chase their brother from the room with a single word about “female things.”]

So when Shiphrah and Puah tell Pharaoh, “These women are vigorous and give birth before we can get there!” he as good as leaves the room.
He seems to give up on getting a bunch of women – mothers and midwives, after all – to cooperate in death.

Instead, he demands that all the people participate in their own annihilation. Maybe some did.

But my money says – and my heart agrees – that most of the people rejected the order, conspired with the midwives to save the next generation, and revered the names of Shiphrah and Puah.

So much, in fact, that their names are the only ones preserved in this passage, until we get to the last verse and the naming of that “fine baby” who will star in the rest of the Exodus saga.

Up to that point, no one else gets a name – Not the child’s birth mother, “a Levite woman”; nor her daughter, whose name (Miriam) we’ll wait 13 chapters to learn; not the princess, the one who gives Moses his name; not even the mighty Pharaoh, called only by his royal title.

Although that title gave him ultimate power, that Pharaoh acted out of fear. So anxious that the growing numbers of Hebrews threatened his dynasty, I can almost hear him thundering, “YOU will not replace us!”

His terror made him terrorize them.

First enslaving them, then engineering their annihilation by killing their sons.

Only it didn’t work. It didn’t work because ordinary people didn’t let it work. Before one great man could arise to lead the march through the Red Sea, ordinary people — not just “the brave women who saved Moses,” but thousands of ordinary men and women — had to stand up for life.

I like to think this number included some Egyptians.

True, most in the empire collaborated with the system, enjoying the privileges that made their own life more comfortable. But remember, Jacob’s descendants had lived in Egypt 400 years.¹ Surely in this time, some Hebrews and Egyptians became friends. Surely some shared childhood games and adolescent confidences, Some must have grown up hearing each other’s hopes, dreams, desires. So I like to think that some stood with the oppressed and against the oppressor.

¹ Exo 12:40
It’s tempting for us in this story to identify with the Israelites, the heroes of this passage. But I fear we might be more like the Egyptians, comfortable with our privileges and ignorant of the suffering of others. Yet just as, I think, some Egyptians stood with the oppressed and against the oppressors, so can we. We can resist any system that is not devoted to LIFE.

Generations later, another of Jacob’s descendants faced down the dynasty of death. Jesus has turned his face toward Jerusalem in today’s gospel, knowing what awaits him there at the hands of those who fear losing power. But Jesus doesn’t let their fear—or his own human hesitation—stop him.

He knows who He is—the lord of Life.

And today Peter knows it too: “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God!”

That title, Messiah, had many shades of meaning to Jews living under Roman oppression, but common to all was the image of an ideal king, who would fulfill every hunger for well-being, peace, wisdom, and righteousness. Some would scorn Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of Heaven. But for those who have ears to hear and eyes to see, he is the fruition of Israel’s longing. “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God,” Peter exclaims.

Then—and this is key—it is to Peter—flawed, fickle Peter (just wait till next week’s gospel) that Jesus entrusts the work of the kingdom—to Peter and to all the imperfect disciples, and to their inadequate descendants, and to the flawed, fickle US who make up his church.

Jesus entrusted to us not a polished jewel, a finished product, but a work in progress. He gave us a vocation to defy the dynasty of death wherever it occurs, and work for LIFE for all.

For the Church is not the fulfillment of the kingdom. The Church is its womb.

Inside the womb of the church, the Kingdom of Heaven is growing. Until it reaches maturity, we will nurture what Jesus started.

We who care for that seed are the ordinary people who stand, as Jesus did, as Shiphrah and Puah did, with the poor, the oppressed, the little ones Jesus said would inherit the kingdom.

In Jesus’ name, will we be midwives to Life?

Amen.