

# HAVING A Midwife Crisis

## Sermon, August 27, 2017

### Texts: Exodus 1:8-20; Romans 12

The word "CRISIS" is defined in the dictionary as (1) a time when a difficult or important decision must be made. *Synonyms: a critical point, turning point, crossroads, watershed, moment of truth, zero hour, point of no return, Rubicon ("crossing the Rubicon" has been a metaphor for an irreversible decision to forge ahead ever since Julius Caesar crossed that border river in 49 BC and invaded Rome, precipitating the Roman Civil War).* "Crisis" is also more loosely defined as (2) a time of intense difficulty, trouble, or danger, as in the synonyms: *emergency, disaster, catastrophe, calamity.* The word itself originates from the Greek word 'krisis' (κρίσις)— which loosely translated means "decisive moment" ... a time to decide (*the verb form is "krino" κρίνω which means "pick out, choose, decide, judge."*) Interestingly, this Greek word κρίσις is also commonly translated in our Bibles as the English word "judgment." So, a Greek word with a core meaning of "decision" is often translated into English as "judgment" because the two words are so closely linked. After all, a judgment is a decision (*just as a quick aside, and this is really a sermon in itself, but there is a difference between being judgmental and making judgments. We are not to be judgmental; however, we ARE to make judgments! We must make decisions. We must discern, e.g., between what is right and wrong, good and evil, and so on. In fact, not to do so can be a moral evil in itself!*) At root, then, a CRISIS is a decision point, a point where one has to make a decision.

Well, we read about a mid-WIFE crisis in our Old Testament reading! The Hebrew midwives reached a point where a decision had to be made. The pun in the title is obviously from the term "*midLIFE crisis*," which can be generically defined as an emotional crisis of identity and self-confidence that occurs in middle age. Jonathan Caldwell quipped that Adam and Eve had the first midlife crisis in history when they realized they were older than sin. Someone else defined midlife crisis as the moment when you realize your children and your clothes are about the same age (*or, in my case, I have clothes that are older than my grown children ... in fact, during Christmas caroling two years ago, I realized the Christmas sweater I was wearing was actually older than our then-new music director!*). The **Urban Dictionary** has an interesting definition: "*Midlife Crisis -- When a person regrets how he has lived his life, and then attempts to 'correct' his mental issue by making decisions which usually tend to hurt himself and those close to him.*" Midlife crises may result from regret over decisions made in previous times of "crisis;" bad choices have a way of accumulating and affecting everything else in the course of one's lifetime. Too often, as the Urban Dictionary implies, those undergoing midlife crises tend to make *more* bad decisions which only compounds their despair while also hurting those close to them. The Germans have a unique term for midlife crisis; it's called "*Torschlusspanik*," which literally means "*shut-door-panic*" ... it's the fear of being on the wrong side of a closing door.

The king of Egypt forced a crisis upon these Hebrew midwives which I'm sure caused a sense of *torschlusspanik*. He commanded the midwives to kill any baby boys born to the Hebrew women. The faithful midwives made a critical choice to resist that command, though they had no guarantee what the outcome would be. However, they decided they wanted to be on what they sincerely believed was God's side of the door, and they quietly determined to disobey this directive. And you know the story; Moses was one of results of their disobedience to the Egyptian king, as you can read in the next chapter. We are told in today's reading, "*God was kind to the midwives ... and because the midwives feared God, He gave them families of their own.*" They WERE on the right side of that closing door; God blessed them for their faithfulness (*the last time we looked at this passage years ago I told you about how it played a role not only in Moses' entry into the world, but also in our Ministry Intern's entry into the world ... no time to go into that now, but I'll footnote it in the manuscript which will be in the narthex next week*).<sup>1</sup> Through the faithfulness exhibited in this "midwife crisis," Moses and others were safely brought into that world. I made the point three years ago and I'll make it now: Our world needs people like those Hebrew midwives, people who, in times of crises, will do what is right in the sight of God, despite powerful influences to do otherwise. That's the right side of the closing door. Are we Hebrew midwives? Are we the people in our neighborhoods or our workplaces or our homes who will personify higher things, higher values, higher allegiances? Does our Christian commitment clearly set us apart on critical issues? Are we people who act on our faith in times of crisis (*literally speaking, all decisions really are crisis points, causing a sense of torschlusspanik ... not that we have to live in a constant state of crisis, but we do have to make decisions!*). Are we people who, as Paul writes in Romans, won't let the world around us squeeze us into its mold?

As mentioned earlier to the children, a thermostat is an instrument that works to determine the temperature of the environment around it. You set the thermostat for what temperature you'd like to have, and it goes to work making sure that the climate around it is **transformed** to that set temperature. A *thermometer*, however, is a device that simply measures the temperature around it. It is an indicator, not a "setter." A thermometer does nothing to determine or moderate or influence or change that climate; it simply is a gauge reflecting or displaying what the climate already is. Too many people today are thermometers, people whose lives are simply a reflection of the climate around them. Do you know thermometer people? Thermometer people are the kind of people that if everybody in an environment is gossiping, well, they will gossip. If everybody around them stretches truth, or is not averse to lying, well, they will stretch the truth or tell a lie. If some people around will take a little money under the table or evade a tax, thermometer people will take a little money under the table or evade a tax. Thermometer people are the kind of people that if others are in the midst of telling off color or demeaning jokes, they will get caught up in it and laugh, and thus encourage off color or demeaning jokes. Thermometers reflect the climate around them. They do nothing to affect or change it.

I believe God is looking for thermostats, not thermometers; people who will positively affect the climate around them ... and in so doing, make it much more pleasant and live-able for all. Do you know a thermostat person? Do you know someone in whose presence you want to be and do your very best? Do you know someone who just inspires and calls out of you the very highest in values and standards and integrity just by their very presence? Do you know people who fill you with the desire and the determination to do better? Do you know people in whose presence you want to do everything you can, not just enough to get by? People who elevate the climate and the atmosphere of a room just by being there? Do you know someone around whom you would not want to tell a base or demeaning story? Of course you do; you are surrounded by such people, many of you here this morning ARE such people. We all know people who, when we are with them or when we think of them, our spirit is lifted, our mood elevated, our determination to live better and higher and more honorably and more consistently is just fired up! These people have a thermostatic influence on our temperament. Well, our readings provide guidelines on how to be thermostats in a thermometer-filled world, especially in times of crisis. In the little time remaining, I'd like to cite three quick principles from Romans 12:

**Principle 1:** *If we would be thermostats, don't let the world squeeze us into its mold.* Paul says, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you may prove what is the will of God." In short, when faced with a "midwife crisis," do what is right. Choose to be on what you know to be God's side of the door! God doesn't want us to live in conformity with the world, just reflecting our coarse culture like so many thermometers, but to live against the grain of the culture, to keep our heads, to really and truly believe and live out and stand for the things we are taught by God. And by the way ... we'll never know just whose life we may be saving by our faithfulness, including our own.

**Principle 2:** *If we would be thermostats, we must overcome evil with good.* Paul says, "Don't think more highly of yourselves than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you ... bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse, rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Don't be conceited. ... do not repay anyone evil for evil. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Overcome evil with good. The all-too-human tendency is to think, "Well, if somebody wrongs me, I'm going to get them." That's a thermometer reaction; that's reflecting, not improving, the surrounding environment. If we would have a thermostatic effect, we have to do what we can to try and overcome evil with good.

**Principle 3:** *If we would be thermostats, we need to make all our daily tasks intentional acts of worship.* 12:1 -- "Therefore I urge you in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, this is your spiritual act of worship." The word for "liturgy" in the Greek is formed by two words – *laos*, which means people or public and *ergon*, which means work. Liturgy originally meant public work (*more correctly, work for the public*). When someone built roads, entered military service, did charitable work and so on, they were doing "liturgy," public work, work for the good of the public. So when people first heard the Church describe its worship with the word *liturgy*, they knew it meant that Christians worshiped God not just for their own personal, private sakes, but for *the good of the public*. Our mission is to be a liturgical, public minded, positive, thermostatic force for good by making our everyday lives a liturgy, our everyday actions acts of worship. Everything we do, wherever we are, can be an act of worship before God. We are to be consciously and constantly "on the altar" before God ... living sacrifices, as Paul puts it (*as I heard one pastor put it, "The problem with living sacrifices is that they are always trying to crawl off the altar!"*) We are to do our daily tasks with such integrity, grace, determination, and love, that when people see us doing them, they will be encouraged, they will be inspired, they will see something of God through us, and it will certainly affect the temperament of the environment. Even just by just being considerate, extending a little friendship, going out of your way to do just one nice thing, or saying one good word, you can have a thermostatic influence on people, elevating their mood and morale and inspiring them to better living.

Are you being faced with a midwife crisis? Then don't let the world squeeze you into its mold, work to overcome evil with good, and make all your daily tasks acts of worship of the living God ... in short, live thermostatically.

---

<sup>1</sup> In February 1986 I was leading a young adult Bible study on the Ten Commandments at the church I served in Bonn, Germany, and we were studying the commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." I pointed out to the group, "There is one place in all the Bible where God apparently blesses someone for lying, thus apparently creating something of a moral contradiction in light of this commandment. In fact, as recorded in Hebrews 11, this person's lying was seen as a laudable act of faith." I then referred to the story of Rahab in Joshua 2. Rahab, a prostitute in the city of Jericho, came to believe in the God of the Israelites ... and she acted on her faith by hiding two spies from Joshua's army and lying to Jericho soldiers who had come looking for the Israelite spies. You know the story; Rahab went on to become part of the Jewish community, she married a man named Salmon, they became the parents of Boaz who married Ruth, Ruth and Boaz were the grandparents of King David ... thus making Rahab a crucial limb in the family tree of Jesus Himself. The point I was making was that when the commandment says, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor," the key is in that word, "neighbor." For now I'll just say I don't believe there is a moral contradiction in Rahab's story, for there comes a point when someone no longer *deserves* to be treated as a neighbor. If Nazi soldiers came knocking at the door of someone harboring Jews and demand to know if any Jews are there, that person has no moral obligation to tell the truth to such people who intend to carry out atrocious acts against innocents; people committing despicable and evil treachery have removed themselves from the privileged category of "neighbor" and do not deserve to be treated as such. Well, one woman who was new to the Bible study group that evening tentatively raised her hand ... when I called on her she said, "Rev. Clark, you said there is one place in the Bible. I think there is another place in the Bible where God blesses someone for lying." I'm smugly thinking to myself, "OK, who is this ... I'll be gentle, let's look this up." This newcomer to the Bible Study group directed us to our Old Testament reading for this morning, and pointed out that it certainly looks like God blessed the Hebrew midwives for lying to the king of Egypt. I looked at the passage (as we all did in that room), I then looked up at this woman, looked back at my Bible, looked up again and said, "There are TWO places in all the Bible where God apparently blesses someone for lying ..." Four years later, I married that woman.