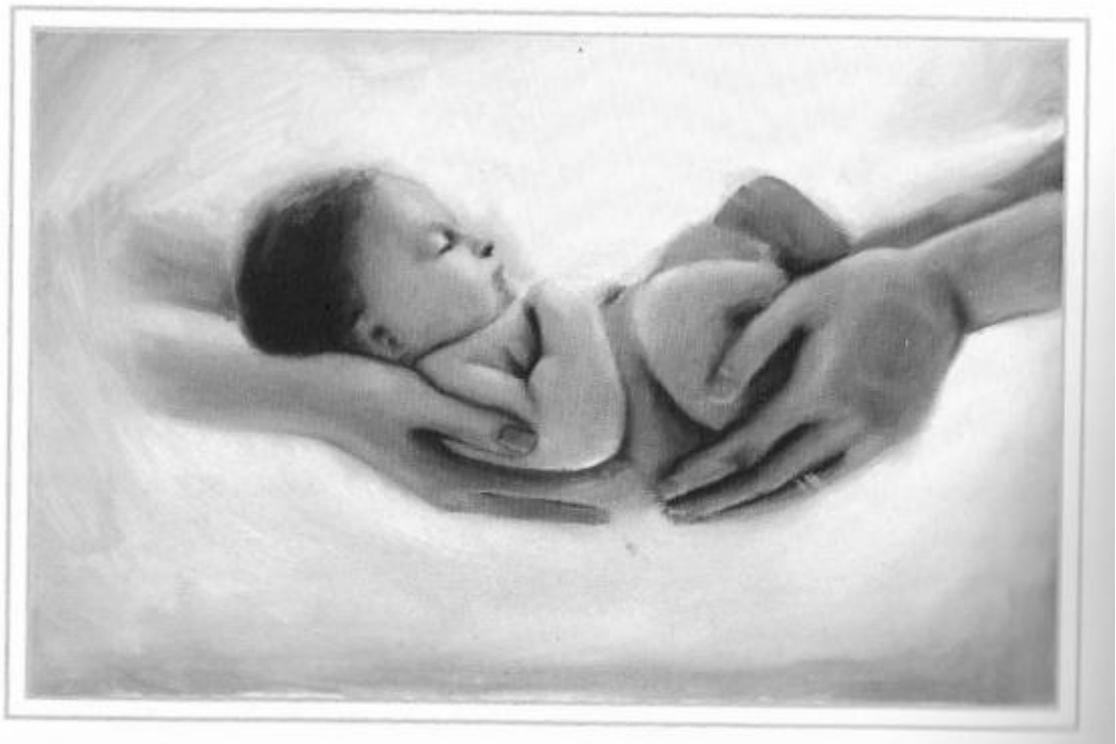


St Mary's Kidlington
15 February 2026 10am



Open Space Service
Shiphrah & Puah -
The Hebrew Midwives

The service begins with the playing of the BBC drama 'Call the Midwife' theme tune

Setting the scene

Babies have been born for ever, and for ever will be.

Mothers have borne them for ever and will continue to bear them.

The experience will be the same for all of them, but not the same for any of them.

Some will bear their children in poverty and some in affluence.

Some will bring their children into a safe world and some into a dangerous world.

But what will make the biggest difference is who they have beside them.

An experienced, skilful and understanding companion – a midwife – is what every mother needs.

Welcome and Introduction

Welcome to the second of our Open Space services this year which are focusing on women characters in the Bible; women characters especially who often are overlooked in our weekly lectionary or, if they do appear, only in the shadows. Last month we focused on the figure of Eve in the 2nd chapter of Genesis. We considered the contrasting symbolism she embodies – both as the object of God's love and the dream of Adam's ("here at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh") but at the same time often carrying the burden of blame for the fall of humankind as the one who ate the forbidden fruit

We rejoiced, however, that without the disobedience of humankind in the garden, we would not know the surpassing joy of divine grace and mercy. Appropriately, we celebrated the Eucharist around a beautiful visual installation of the tree of life (albeit with the serpent cunningly camouflaged around its stem) in a flower-filled garden of Eden watered by the four rivers mentioned in the Genesis 2 story, reminding us that Christ has opened the way into paradise for us once again.

This month we are invited to focus on two individuals, named Shiphrah and Puah, collectively known as the Hebrew midwives who appear in the first chapter of Exodus.

It may well be that you have not come across these characters before but, unlike Eve, there is no ambivalence here with regard to obedience. These two women act courageously and heroically, openly disobeying the Pharaoh to protect God's chosen people, for which, we are explicitly told, they are well rewarded by God.

In this service which is a Service of the Word (no communion) we will, from this passage, explore themes of the invisibility of women; what is the particular role of a midwife and what skills are required and how these are applicable more widely to all of us in the service of God, as well as honouring the particular example of Shiphrah & Puah's courage and ingenuity in standing up for what is right.

Opening prayer

Hymn:

**Here and now we're bound together:
held in one divine embrace.
Help us see, in one another,
difference as a gift of grace.
As each passing generation
worships you in fresh new ways,
join our songs with all creation,
lift our voice to sing your praise.**

**Lord, affirm our shared vocation:
may we bring your plans to birth,
build your church on sure foundations,
fit to serve a troubled earth.
Growing, praying, sharing, learning,
deep in wisdom, broad in scope,
love-revealing, truth-discerning,
living out the gospel hope.**

**In your work of transformation
you are making all things new.
Stir our hearts' imagination,
call us now to work with you.
Send us out to share your mission;
show us each our part to play.
as we live the Great Commission,
joyful in your world today.**

Words © Rev Ally Barrett/Jubilate

Bible reading: Exodus 1:15-end

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. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, 'Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.'

Reflection: The invisibility of women

I wonder how many of you are familiar with this reading and whether you can recall ever hearing it in church? This text is only offered for one Sunday in the 3 year Sunday lectionary – and even then it is an option rather than required. It's quite possible you may never have heard it before. The same may be true of other passages involving women who will be the focus this year in these Open Space services.

Put another way, these women have been overlooked or even invisible to us despite the amazing chutzpah and courage of their actions which will have saved many lives of young Hebrew boys (including Moses) in the time when they were living in Egypt.

The matter of women being overlooked or invisible is an idea many of us will be familiar with, thanks to the growing interest in gender focussed studies. Some of you might remember the film several years ago called *Hidden Figures* about three African American women whose mathematical acumen was crucial to the American success in launching a rocket into space. Fairly well known too these days is the name of Rosalind Franklin whose work was essential to the discovery of the structure of DNA. There are many more examples which you might like to share with us in a short while. In 2019, a book by Caroline Criado Perez, entitled *Invisible women*, exposed how data used in all kinds of research is data drawn from studies on men not women.

The invisibility of women in the history of the Church is just one other example. The result of that for us is that it has prevented us seeing women as equally bearing the image of God, prevented us from having positive role models of faithful, brave, prophetic women who have been great exemplars of the faith. Perhaps too it has limited the metaphors we use for God, and where we look for inspiration in our lives of faith.

A personal perspective – Jan Jefferys

Hymn:

**There is a line of women,
extending back to Eve,
whose role in shaping history
God only could conceive.
And though through endless ages
their witness was repressed,
God valued and encouraged them
through whom the world was blessed.**

**So sing a song of Sarah,
to laughter she gave birth;
And sing a song of Tamar
who stood for women's worth;
And sing a song of Hannah
who bargained with her Lord;
and sing a song of Mary
who bore and bred God's word.**

**There is a line of women
who took on powerful men,
defying laws and scruples
to let life live again.
And though despite their triumph
their stories stayed untold
God kept their number growing
creative strong and bold.**

**So sing a song of Shiphrah
with Puah at her hand,
engaged to kill male children
they foiled the king's command.
And sing a song of Rahab
who sheltered spies and lied;
and sing a song of Esther
preventing genocide.**

**There is a line of women
who stood by Jesus' side,
who housed him while he ministered
and held him while he died;
and though they claimed he'd risen
their news was deemed suspect
till Jesus stood among them
his womanly elect.**

**So sing a song of Anna
who saw Christ's infant face,
and sing a song of Martha
who gave him food and space.
And sing of all the Marys
who heeded his requests
and now at heaven's banquet
are Jesus' fondest guests.**

© Wild Goose Resource Group, Iona Community

Confession

As we reflect on the courage and devotion of Shiphrah and Puah,
let us call to mind and confess our sins.

We offer to God the fears within us that make us choose
the easy path rather than the right one.

Gracious God, forgive us and heal us.

We offer to God the denial of our own worth, that hinders our
flourishing
and limits what we can offer to others.

Gracious God, forgive us and heal us.

We offer to God the self-centredness that listens to our own desires
and fails to hear the cries of those who need us.

**Gracious God, wise and strong, holy and immortal,
forgive us and heal us.**

May God who cares for you as a midwife tends a mother forgive
you and free you from your sin, and give you peace, now and for
ever. Amen

A personal perspective: My time as a midwife – Philippa Burrell

Bible reading: Acts 11:19-26

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took
place over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and
Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. But
among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming
to Antioch, spoke to the Greeks also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus.
The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became
believers and turned to the Lord. News of this came to the ears of
the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When
he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted
them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; for
he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great
many people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to

Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians.'

Reflection: Can we all be midwives?

Chant:

**Take, O take me as I am;
summon out what I shall be;
set your seal upon my heart
and live in me.**

Prayers of Intercession

Bidding: God of our foremothers

Response: **Receive our prayer**

Responsory

Those who work for change suffer resistance
So make us strong

Those who do new things sometimes feel afraid
So make us brave

Those who challenge the world as it is arouse anger
So grant us inner peace

Those who live joyfully are envied
So make us generous

Those who try to love encounter hate
So make us steadfast in you

The Peace

Notices

Hymn:

**Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you,
pray that I may have the grace
to let you be my servant too.**

**We are pilgrims on a journey
and companions on the road;
we are here to help each other
walk the mile and bear the load.**

**I will hold the Christ-light for you
in the night-time of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
speak the peace you long to hear.**

**I will weep when you are weeping,
when you laugh I'll laugh with you,
I will share your joy and sorrow
till we've seen this journey through.**

**When we sing to God in heaven,
we shall find such harmony,
born of all we've known together
of Christ's love and agony.**

**Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you,
pray that I may have the grace
to let you be my servant too.**

Blessing and Dismissal

The blessing of the God of Shiphrah and Puah
as well as of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses,
the blessing of Jesus, son of Mary,
who was nurtured by many other women,
the blessing of the Holy Spirit who broods over us
as a mother over her children
be with us now and forever. **Amen**

Go into the world in peace.

Go and discern your God-given gifts.

Go and use those gifts in service to a broken world.

Go and develop new gifts that you might serve the better.

May you be strengthened by the God of the women of the Old
Testament

and the God of those who walked with Jesus

and may the Spirit go with you in all your ways.

Let it be so.

*You are invited to stay for coffee which will be served in the
Refectory (through the glass door opposite the main entrance)*

*You are invited to take as you leave a small packet of sunflower
seeds to nurture, accompany and bring to birth – hopefully in due
course to cheer the spirit of whoever sees them.*