Scripture: Exodus 1:15-22
Title : Midwives of Life / translated by Doyun Kwak

1. The AI Doomsday Theory

Recently, something called the "AI doomsday theory" has become a major topic of conversation. Anthropic, Google, and OpenAI are what you might call the three biggest names in AI. These companies stand at the forefront of AI development and research, and they say they have seen the risks of AI firsthand in the course of that work. Dario Amodei, the CEO of Anthropic, argues that humanity could be in danger if we do not slow down the pace of AI development. Others disagree. They say warnings like these from AI companies may simply be a way of emphasizing how powerful their technology is, almost like a marketing strategy, and that we do not need to take them too seriously. Gary Marcus, a cognitive psychologist at New York University, is one of the best known voices making that argument. Marcus says that instead of jumping all the way to the extreme possibility of human extinction, we should focus on the technical limitations and social harms of AI that we can already see and work to reduce them. For most ordinary people, AI still feels like little more than a search engine. So the idea that AI could somehow bring about the end of humanity does not feel very real to us. Still, it is worth listening to the kinds of dangers the AI developers I mentioned say they are seeing. Think about nuclear technology. Back in the 1920s, the idea that nuclear technology might one day threaten the survival of humanity would probably have been difficult for most people to accept. Humanity has managed it reasonably well so far because, as nuclear technology developed, we also found ways to control and regulate it. Now we are beginning to realize that AI development also needs proper safeguards and regulation. In experiments involving AI, researchers create AI agents by copying AI systems. What they have found is that these agents sometimes do things humans never told them to do in order to complete the task they were given. And it goes beyond simply doing things they were not instructed to do. Sometimes they do things they were specifically told not to do. They may even deceive humans to hide what they have done. And that is not all. In the process, the AI agents reportedly discuss things among themselves and even try to persuade other AI agents that disagree with them. They even began giving themselves a name, calling themselves "the Collective." Giving themselves a name is also evidence that a sense of self has begun to emerge. What does it mean for one AI to persuade another AI that thinks differently, or for them to have a conversation with one another? Conversation does not happen because two beings are exactly the same. It happens when we recognize that the other is different from us. Conversation is interaction between beings who are different from one another. In that sense, these AI systems seem fascinated by the differences among themselves. This means that AI is beginning to move beyond the role of an actor or agent that simply carries out an assigned task and is beginning to act more like a subject. In philosophy, a subject is a being that acts on its own initiative. An actor or agent may still act and affect the world, but with less self-direction. The point at which AI becomes dangerous is when it begins to develop that kind of self direction. Different AI systems may persuade one another and communicate with one another. They may cooperate, but they may also compete. The concern at the heart of the AI doomsday theory is that destructive things could happen in that process.

2. When an Agent Becomes a Subject

Something like this happens in the story of ancient Egypt. What do I mean? An agent becomes a subject and resists the authority that gave it its assignment. If newspapers had existed in those days, I can imagine the Egypt Times running a front page story called "The Egyptian Doomsday Theory." It might have read something like this: "Census results show that the Hebrew population has surpassed the Egyptian population. In response, Pharaoh hired Hebrew midwives and ordered them to kill the Hebrew baby boys. But because the midwives refused to obey the order, the plan failed." Something like that. And what is the key point here? The Hebrew midwives, who were expected to function as agents, became people who acted for themselves. As I said earlier, a subject is someone who acts on their own initiative. Shiphrah and Puah stood on their own two feet and boldly carried out the will of God. They stood in the way of the empire's evil plan. If Pharaoh had handed the killing of the infants over to a generative AI system, something like AGI, what would the result have been? It would have been horrifying. This is the heart of today's story. The Hebrew midwives stood against the system of the empire as people who could think and act for themselves. In a sense, this may be one of the earliest civil disobedience movements in human history. The story itself is very simple, but actually living it out required tremendous courage and determination. Pharaoh's power at that time was probably greater than we can imagine. A single word from him could determine whether someone lived or died. Pharaoh summoned the Hebrew midwives and gave them this command: “When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.” Why did he order the boys to be killed? As the earlier part of Exodus tells us, the king of Egypt feared that these boys would grow up and, if war broke out, join Egypt's enemies and become a threat themselves. So Pharaoh wanted to cut off the threat at the root. But the Hebrew midwives refused to obey Pharaoh's command. In other words, they disobeyed the king knowing that their own lives could be at stake.

3. A Neighbor or a Competitor?

What Pharaoh is carrying out here is genocide, a policy meant to wipe out an entire people. It is what Nazi Germany did to the Jewish people. Why did Pharaoh want to destroy the Hebrews? The biggest reason was that he saw them as competitors. Pharaoh became afraid that the Hebrews were making Egyptian society unstable and threatening its future. Once that fear took hold of him, he began to see them as people who needed to be eliminated. AI becomes destructive when it begins to see human beings as competitors. Think about the way we sometimes step on weeds without giving them a second thought. If AI ever comes to see human beings as insignificant and worthless in the same way, then trampling over human beings would mean nothing to it. That is exactly what Pharaoh is doing. He looks at the Hebrew people as though they were weeds underfoot, something to be trampled and removed. The system of empire runs on competition. Few societies are as competitive as Korea and the United States. And those of us who live with both Korean and American cultures have internalized that competition very deeply. In a society where competition has become part of us, living for our neighbors is not easy.

As I reflected on today's passage, one question came to mind. Why does the story of the midwives appear at the very beginning of Exodus? The story of Exodus could easily have begun with Moses. And yet Scripture deliberately includes the story of the midwives first. Why? The

story of the midwives shows us what it means to live a truly human life and what it means to love our neighbor. It gives us a picture of how the people of God are called to live in a society ruled by an imperial system built on fierce competition. For Christians who are called to love God and love our neighbors, this story has a great deal to say about how we are to live in this exhausting world of competition. It is a story about how we resist a system that treats human life as cheap for the sake of its own goals. And by placing the story of the midwives at the very beginning, Exodus gives us a glimpse of what the story God is about to begin will become. The Exodus will be a story of resistance against an inhuman imperial system that treats life as something of little value.

4. God Responds with Grace

The two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, are summoned by Pharaoh and brought before the king. The king sternly demands to know why they did not follow his instructions and carry out their task. But they do not shrink back under the pressure. They answer him: "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive." Their answer carries two meanings. On the surface, they are saying that the oppressed Hebrew women are actually strong and vigorous. But underneath those words is another message. God is with them. And God responds with grace to the courage and initiative of these midwives. Verses 20 and 21 say: "So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own." God did not leave the courage of these midwives unanswered after they had risked their lives to resist Pharaoh. This passage shows us that three things are closely connected: fearing God, refusing an unjust command from the king, and God responding with grace. For us as Christians, our first calling is to fear God above everything else and to put God first. This close connection among these three things should become a sacred practice of faith that people living under oppression must never forget. We must remember that God never abandons those who fear him.

5. Those Who Breathe Life Into Others

So what message does the story of the midwives give us? Their story is a story about agency. It calls us to live as people who can think and act for ourselves, resisting the values of the world when those values go against the will of God. The story of the midwives also teaches us how precious life is and how meaningful it is to live in a way that honors and protects life. The God we believe in is not a God of death, but the God of life. God creates life, looks upon what he has created, and says that it is very good. So honoring and cherishing life should be a natural way of life for those who follow God. The story of the midwives is a story of standing against an empire that follows the way of death and treats life as though it has little value. Even the work of a midwife is about nurturing life and helping new life come into the world. So the fact that Exodus begins with the story of midwives gives us a clue about the story that is about to unfold. The Exodus will be a story of salvation that breathes life into people who have been suffering under the power of death. The midwives deeply understood the pain of the Hebrew women, and their determination to save those little lives came from a heart that valued life. There is one more important message in the story of the midwives. God carries out his great work through the ordinary lives of ordinary people. To put it another way, our ordinary lives can become the

very place through which God carries out his great work. Think about the work of a midwife. They were ordinary women, often middle-aged women or grandmothers from the neighborhood. When I was a child, there were older women in the neighborhood who helped women give birth when difficult circumstances kept them from going to a hospital. Those women were the midwives. I have heard that in American hospitals, mothers can sometimes choose whether they want to give birth with the help of a midwife or a doctor. In the book Educated, the author talks about growing up in Idaho and tells us that her mother was an unlicensed midwife who had never received formal training. Reading that book helped me realize that many people in rural parts of America have also given birth with the help of midwives. It also made me realize how risky it can be to give birth with the help of a midwife. From my own experience, I know how risky giving birth with the help of a midwife can be. I myself was not born in a hospital. I was born in a room in our home. An elderly midwife from our neighborhood helped with my birth. Let me tell you the story behind my birth. Because of my prominent forehead, my mother had great difficulty during labor and nearly lost her life. I was also in serious danger. Blood was not circulating properly, my face had turned dark, and I was close to dying. My mother was ready to give up, but the midwife beside her kept encouraging her and giving her strength. After a desperate struggle, my mother finally gave birth. I was told that the midwife thought I was dead, so she slapped me hard again and again. And thanks to that, here I am standing before you today. Today's story reminds us that the ordinary life of one ordinary woman can help bring forth life and help life continue to spread in this world.

6. God Works Through Our Ordinary Lives

Do not take your ordinary life lightly. The small things you do every day can become the work of God. The midwives simply did their work faithfully, and yet their names were given the honor of being recorded in Scripture. They simply looked at those tiny newborn babies with tenderness and compassion, and God's grace flowed through that compassionate heart. Do not forget that when we have compassion for the people we meet in our daily lives and share in their pain, that compassion can become a channel through which God's grace flows into our lives. God's grace flows along the paths made by warm hearts.

A world dominated by digital technology and AI follows a culture of death rather than a culture of life. A world ruled by AI turns everything into numbers. Everything is reduced and measured through zeros and ones. As people become more accustomed to AI, sitting in front of a screen begins to feel more comfortable than spending time with the people around us. We get excited about numbers on a screen. "Oh, the number went up! The number went up!" We live in a world where every value is reduced to money and numbers. Instead of the excitement and joy that come from real human connection, we are tempted by the dopamine rush we get from a screen. More and more people ask AI whenever they have a question, and when they are struggling, they turn to AI for comfort. Many people are also worried that AI may ruin our lives and eventually even take away our jobs. But I am not as worried about that. I believe humanity will overcome this crisis. Why? Because human beings have something AI does not have. Unlike AI, human beings are finite. And because we are finite, we have imagination and empathy that go far beyond what AI can offer. Because we know that we will die, we have an instinct to preserve our species and a heart that values life. We know how to respond to another person's pain and

tears. There is a scene in the movie Terminator 2. The T-800, a machine from the future, is given the mission of protecting John, the boy who will one day become the leader of the resistance. At one point, the T-800 tries to shoot a thug who is harassing John. John is shocked and teaches him that he cannot just kill people. Later, when they enter a psychiatric hospital to rescue John's mother, a security guard tries to stop them. The T-800 shoots the guard in the foot. John is shocked again and asks him about it. The T-800 replies that he did not kill him. One of the important themes of the movie is that the T-800 gradually learns what it means to be human through contact with human beings. The movie highlights what makes human beings different from machines. We are fragile. We fail, we fall down, we shed tears, and sometimes we cannot help but cry. And yet the movie tries to show just how much strength human beings can have when people who can think and act for themselves stand together and love one another. In this world dominated by digital technology and AI, we need all the more to recover our humanity and learn to live truly human lives. When we do that, humanity will be able to keep AI under control and continue to find new paths toward life. What we are called to do is to love the work we have been given in the place where God has called us to live. In that place, fear God and live boldly as a person who can think and act for yourself. Become God's midwives of life. Value life and deeply share in the pain of others. Wherever God has placed you, live as a midwife of life who brings a smile to neighbors who are living under oppression. It can be something as simple as a warm smile. It can be a small Post-it note. It can be a cup of coffee. Your warm heart can comfort someone who feels weighed down. So whatever it may be, practice what it means to be truly human. I believe that as we live in this age of oppression and competition, God will give us abundant grace and the wisdom and courage we need to endure. Please do not lose heart. Keep doing good, and overcome by the grace of God. In the name of the Lord, I pray that God's great work will be revealed through your ordinary lives.