

2019 12 08 Advent II: Peace, Shiprah & Puah
Children's Time and Sermon, introducing 'Bearing Light: Women in Scripture'
Isaiah 11:1-9, Exodus 1, Matt 3:1-6

Children's Time

I will tell two stories. The first story is about my friend Mike. Mike was very sick one day. And then Mike got better, and he came home from hospital. And he is fully recovered.

Isn't that a nice story? But it was very short wasn't it? So I am going to tell you another story.

It is called Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Does anyone know this story?

Once upon a time three bears lived in a house in the woods. Mummy Bear, Daddy Bear, and Baby Bear. They were very happy. And then one day, they came home from a walk in the woods and something had happened in their sitting room. 'Someone's been sitting in my chair!' said Daddy Bear. 'Someone's been sitting in my chair' said Mummy Bear. And Baby Bear said 'Someone has been sitting in my chair! And they broke it!'

And then they had a look in their kitchen, where three bowls were sitting on the table. 'Someone's been eating my porridge!' said Daddy Bear. 'Someone's been eating my porridge!' said Mummy Bear. 'And someone's been eating my porridge, and they have eaten it all up' said Baby Bear.

And finally they looked at their bedrooms. And guess what happened - there was nobody there. And they never found out what happened. And that is the end of the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears.

Is that right?

Or is there someone missing from the story?

What happened in the story that I forgot to tell you about?

When we forget to tell the whole story it doesn't make as much sense, does it?

One of the things that we are talking about are some of the ways that Bible stories forget some of the characters, especially women. So it is our job, as Christians, to remember to ask two questions

- 1) Who is missing from the story?
- 2) How can we listen to hear them?

Do you remember the first story I told you about my friend Mike? He was ill, and then he got better. Who was missing from that story?

People who made food

The people who made medicines

Doctors in hospital

The people who prayed for him and stayed in touch with him

Members of his family who checked that he was okay

When you tell the story with all of those people, it makes a lot more sense doesn't it!

So let's say a prayer together. God, please help all of us to listen carefully when we hear stories. Help us to see where people are missing and to find ways to tell the story to include everyone, the way that you include everyone in your community. Thank you for loving all of us and inviting us to be in your family. Amen.

Sermon

Sandi Toksvig [tells a story](#) about her university anthropology lecturer. She says: "I remember her holding up a picture of a bone with 28 incisions carved in it. "This is often considered to be man's first attempt at a calendar" she explained, waiting as we dutifully wrote this down. "My question to you is this – what man needs to mark 28 days? I would suggest to you that this is woman's first attempt at a calendar."

Sandi talks about how this simple suggestion was a dramatic moment for her understanding of human history. It was the sudden revealing of the countless generations of women who had been inventing, innovating, and creating all along.

Have you ever heard something that opened up a whole world of possibility? Maybe you were able to see yourself, or people like you, in a time period or social situation which seemed off limits. After the service, come and tell me about your experience.

I relate somewhat to that experience of suddenly seeing what was there all along. I have had patient teachers. Women who have chosen to share their wisdom, insight and experience with me, and taught me how to listen. I have tried to learn how to listen for those opportunities to gain perspective.

My experience of suddenly seeing what was there all along comes mostly through Bible Study. I learned many of these stories as a child. Maturity has been re-learning them, hearing them again without the preconceptions or the simple meanings or the smooth edges. It has required me to listen to good scholarship and the insights of those who have been ignored.

Another example comes through a man named Peterson Toscano, a queer Bible scholar and actor. In his performance-lecture [Transfigurations](#) he takes another look at the well known story of Joseph and his Coat of Many Colours. Did you know that the phrase that they translate for the coat only appears in one other place in the Bible? Toscano points out that the footnote in both places says 'the exact meaning of the Hebrew term is unclear'. But in the second instance, the Bible text itself specifically identifies this as 'the kind of garment that the virgin daughters of

the king wore'. So Toscano asks, isn't it possible to read the first story of Joseph instead as Joseph and the Princess Dress? And doesn't that put another tragically recognizable layer of meaning onto the violence that Joseph's brothers do to him?

Without listening to these insights, we risk missing what was present all along. So I am excited about our new preaching series, which will take us through Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany: **'Bearing Light: Women in Scripture.'** It is a bit of a running joke on preaching team that, by some quirk of scheduling, I often end up introducing each new preaching series. Speaking first means setting things up for those who will follow, introducing the theme without going too much into the details that other preachers will follow up on, and giving a sense of why we felt the church was called to explore the theme.

In this case I speak from my own experience of profound liberation, of my sight being cleared and my spirit inspired as scripture texts and Christian theology have been critically and lovingly explored by women and trans people. There is an invitation here to imaginative and creative relationship, a relationship that is life-giving. I hope that this preaching series will deepen these elements in our community and help us to invite others into life-giving relationship with our sacred stories, and with the sacred stories that each of us bear.

The many texts that make up the Scriptures, the cultures and individuals who produced them, selected them, and translated them are patriarchal. What does that mean, patriarchal? It means tending towards rule by men. It means men being understood as the standard model of what it means to be human. A Patriarchal society functions through younger men respecting and obeying older men, women obeying men, and children obeying everyone. Patriarchy centres the concerns and anxieties of men - even as it severely restricts the possibilities of the male gender. Patriarchy sets high standards for what it means to be a man, and failure to hold up your assigned gender role is grounds for punishment or mockery.

Patriarchal texts describe God as male, as a king, and as a father. God is male because that is the default state of being, and humans are male because they are made in God's image - and women are a secondary creation, made to accompany. Let me be clear! This is not the only way to read these texts. It is how patriarchy reads these texts, and how these texts can uphold patriarchy. Two things to note about this:

- 1) It is a bi-directional relationship - patriarchy finds things to support its claims in the text, and in return it elevates the text above the experiences and testimony of anyone who would disagree.
- 2) Patriarchy is not essential to the text - take patriarchy away and the text can be in conversation with something else.

For example, when women are the primary translators, readers, and interpreters, they draw different lessons out of these same texts. But patriarchy conspires to make that less possible by saying that women don't need an education to have babies, or that preaching and teaching are restricted to men.

It would be funny if it wasn't so devious. It is against this patriarchal pressure that over the last several generations, women and people of other genders have been pushing back, taking space, interpreting and sharing their tools and insights for interpretation. And they are up against it.

Someone once asked, 'What's wrong with being a patriarch'?
And I replied, 'Well Dad...'

I don't think I can do justice to that question in this time, nor justice to the scholarly work of generations of women. One resource that I drew upon was the Student Christian Movement's [Feminist Devotional](#), which was created by a collective of women in Ottawa. They write about seeking and seeing the persistent feminine images in scripture and tradition:

"The Christian tradition has too often rendered women as passive figures, denying them personhood and authority in faith communities. Strong female characters in the scriptures have been 'skipped-over', or left as secondary characters in our Biblical teachings. [...] Where femininity and womanhood are so often connected to negative ideas, such as hyper-sensitivity, sexual temptation, manipulation, and physical weakness, the character of Wisdom speaks of a special partnership with God—a place standing right beside God.

Wisdom, shown as a feminine force of co-creation, gives us a glimpse of the fundamental creativity which resides in all people. In a history where women were considered possessions, not equal partners, passages such as this affirm womanhood in the Christian scriptures. The feminine creative force is a "master worker", a knowledgeable, skilled and capable partner in God's creative action. She stands beside God, delighting God and being delighted by the world they are creating."

When we sing 'oh come thou Wisdom from on high / And order all things far & nigh / To us the path of knowledge show / And cause us in thy ways to go', this is the image we are drawing upon. And we hear the prophet speak of the nature of the one who is to come:

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11: 1-2)

This is the spirit that we are hearing about, present in Creation since the very beginning. So Scripture does hold powerful feminine figures like Wisdom (and Shekinah, and even Creation). But what about actual women and girls?

I am deeply indebted throughout this sermon to the work of [Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*](#), which was recommended to Preaching team by Pastor Michele, and I'd like to quote a short selection. She writes:

“There are, depending on how one counts, 111 or so named female characters in the Hebrew Bible. There are hundreds more who are unnamed. Then there are the largely unacknowledged women who make up the peoples of Israel and the nations with whom they are in contact. The number of women and girls submerged under the story lines of the text are beyond counting. Those were the women who interested me: the daughters of the ancestral stories whose fathers were said to live hundreds of years. Were they nearly immortal as well? The women of Israel behind the scenes of each text and story. The women of Canaan targeted for extermination in Joshua's campaign. The royal women of Israel and Judah, many of whose names are preserved in the text. The women of the empires that dominated Israel at one point or another: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia. Who were these women? What were their names? What stories would they tell? What do they have to teach us, we who read Israel's Scriptures as our own?”

I was tempted to see how many of those 111 names we could remember together. But I will settle a quick glance at the table of contents of the Bible:

Amos, Daniel, Ezekiel, Ezra
Habakkuk, Haggai, Hosea, Isaiah
Jeremiah, Job, Joel, Jonah, Joshua
Kings- not Queens - Kings
Malachi, Micah, Nahum
Nehemiah, Obadiah, Samuel, Samuel, Zechariah, Zephaniah.
(And that's skipping Song of Solomon.)

Ready to try the New Testament?

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Timothy, Timothy, Titus, Philemon, James, Peter, Peter, John John John, Jude.

Women named in the Bible's contents page: Esther and Ruth. That's it, unless we look in the Apocrypha, where we also get Judith, Susanna, and the longer version of Esther.

So there is a representation problem here! A serious absence of named women, and those present are often depicted in relation to men. Patriarchy didn't see the importance of recording their names. Patriarchy was threatened by noteworthy deeds not done by men. So what can be done now? These women have no names, no identities in the text other than how they relate to men?

Wilda Gafney draws upon her experiences as a Black woman interpretation of scripture in both Jewish and Christian spaces. She writes about the *sanctified imagination* as an African

American preaching technique, “deeply rooted in a biblical piety that respects the Scriptures as the word of God and takes them seriously and authoritatively.” And from that stance, “The sanctified imagination is the fertile creative space where the preacher-interpreter enters the text, particularly the spaces in the text, and fills them out with missing details, back stories, detailed descriptions of the scene and characters”

From her work in Jewish sacred literature she writes of *midrash*, to seek, to exegete, interpreting “not only the text before the reader, but also the text behind and beyond the text and the text between the lines of the text. In rabbinic thinking, each letter and the spaces between the letters are available for interpretive work.”

As someone of European descent, especially in Advent I remember the ancient and very sweet tradition, that when Mary was in labour, women appeared mysteriously to be her midwives. Now tell me honestly, did a man or a woman first tell that story? Women have always known these texts, and have understood things that the patriarchy has not cared to see.

So with this perspective, we can take the Bible in hand, and see not omissions, but opportunities. Not suppression, but serendipity. Not erasure, but invitation.

I knew the story of the Exodus. I knew about Moses facing down Pharaoh and his magicians, and I knew about his brother, Aaron. I didn't know that their sister was called Miriam. I knew the story about how children were saved from genocide by wily midwives. I didn't know that they had names. Somehow I had read that scripture and not noticed the names.

Until opening worship at the Christian Peacemaker Teams training in October 2009. What better way than to begin with the story of the first recorded act of civil disobedience in history?

And I learned two names. Shiprah and Puah. I already knew Moses. The story of Moses had hidden for me these two women. This is not Moses' story. It is a separate story. This tale of two clever and brave midwives stands complete as they use Pharaoh's own racist and sexist ignorance to block him from his evil plan. This is the deep history that is too easily forgotten by just focusing on the male hero and the male villain.

Whose hands placed Moses in the water, whose drew him out, who fed him and did what was necessary? Before his birth, who were these two women, Shiprah and Puah, whose campaign of nonviolent resistance made it possible for both his birth - and his co-option into Egyptian royalty.

Let's open our *sanctified imaginations* and picture Shiprah. Is she old, middle aged, or young? Does she walk with a cane, or a cautious limp, or a wide stride? I know that she has strong hands, but with skin loose and liver-spotted or smooth and firm. When she is in Pharaoh's presence, does she stand, sit, or kneel? Does she look him in the eyes, hands clasped on her

cane, lips pursed in thought? Or does she stand there, arms crossed, unimpressed head tilted slightly to one side, biding her time before she can get back to work?

Shiprah's name means beautiful. It's possibly connected to the word 'Sapphire'. Can we picture her beauty? Can we see the many ways she is beautiful?

And what about Puah? Does she have a head of short-cropped hair, shoulder-length tresses, or tied up in no-nonsense braids? Does she laugh easily, cry easily? Does she listen carefully or speak quickly? Puah's name means something like 'girl child'. Is her name a fond affectation from her remembered youth or is she still learning her craft, perhaps apprenticed to her mother or auntie, or a woman of another tribe?

Why are these two called into the presence of Pharaoh to explain why his plan has failed? Do they know one another already? Have they worked together for years or are they new acquaintances from different areas, each representing dozens or hundreds of midwives?

Does Shiprah stand close beside Puah for mutual comfort and support? Do they stand apart from one another, so that Pharaoh has to look between them, trying to catch them in a lie?

Can we imagine how the two of them spoke, how they made their plans? Can we imagine the words going out to the midwives across the land. Fear not. God will not let this happen. Children will continue to be born, and through those children God will bring about our salvation. How else, in a time of violence and fear, would they have had the courage to defy Pharaoh?

There is so much richness and possibility in these brief story notes, so much capacity for human experience and presence. I think about the utter courage of Mary and Joseph, to bring their baby into a world of violence. And I think about people today, trying to decide how to bring life into an uncertain world of climate change and ugly deeds. Can we find some courage in these stories? These women literally bring life into the world and protect it fiercely.

It would be so easy to pass over these stories if we just see them as filler, as a precursor to the real event, to what God was really doing through Moses. All we would need to do is accept that the story of the Exodus is the story of Moses leading a faceless mass of 'the people'. Which people?

Did you hear the beginning of the Book of Exodus?

"These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. The total number of people born to Jacob was seventy."

With Joseph, we know twelve of them. Who are the other fifty-eight? Who are all the people?

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. (Matt 3:1-6)

Who are all the people? Jerusalem and all Judea. How many women's stories are hidden in those phrase 'all the people'?

These are the quiet spaces where we are invited to sit with God and let her breathe out warm possibility. Who are the faces you imagine when you think of the Children of Israel in Egypt, or the citizens who came out into the wilderness to see John, or when you picture the first communities of Christ-followers. Who is telling stories, who is planning meals, who is sitting quietly, who is praying loudly?

Who were these women who came to John by the Jordan, seeking to remember what their ancestors knew of the wild and winsome God who could not be contained within the Temple's ranked courtyards? How did these women look as they entered the waters of baptism, being re-immersed in the ancient story of the people of Israel, seeking to re-enter the waters and pass through, like babies coming into the sunlight, like refugees reaching land, like a nation passing through the sea.

How many of them remained behind for a while to swap stories, hold children whose mothers or sisters had just arrived, offer advice and care and towels?

Our theme is **Bearing Light: Women in Scripture**. It is Advent, so that light is the light of the world, it is the animating and universal presence of Christ which brings life and liberation. And this light is also that which reveals the truth of what has been happening all along. God's word is a lamp to show the path - and it also shines backwards onto the arms and face of the one who carries it. Who has carried this light to us, helping us to know who we are? Who has been bearing the light all these long centuries?

Let us hear their names and their stories, and enter the grace of the *sanctified imagination* to hold open possibility, so that we too can become bearers of light, bearers of God's presence, like Shiprah, Puah, Miriam, and Mary, changing the world.