

TUMC Sermon 2 February 2020

Phoebe, the bright one

Paul's Epistle to the Romans. Samuel Taylor Coleridge called it "the most profound work in existence."¹ Martin Luther, called it "the true masterpiece of the New Testament and the very purest Gospel."² John Calvin said that it was a doorway "to all the most hidden treasures of Scripture."

It has been called Paul's great masterwork, the summing up of all his thought. It has stimulated some of the most powerful reform movements in Christian history. It is a rich, dense, and complex work of theology. But, once upon a time, almost two thousand years ago, it was a letter, carried by a woman named Phoebe.³

Over the past two months, we have been hearing stories of women in the Bible in our sermon series "Bearing Light." Today, I would like to reflect on the story of Phoebe who I think is a fitting addition to our group of women, not least because her name literally means "the bright one" in Greek.

This is what the Bible tells us about Phoebe. Paul says in Chapter 16 of Romans:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well. (Romans 16:1-2)

That's all we have. One sentence. So, you may be worrying that this is going to be a very short sermon. Fear not. This one sentence is actually loaded with clues to who Phoebe was.⁴ Let's see what we can learn.

Scholars estimate that Paul wrote his epistle to the Romans in the winter of the year 56-57 in Corinth. Paul had spent years founding communities of Jesus followers through Asia Minor and was now turning his attention west; he wanted to bring the gospel to Spain where, among other difficulties, he would have to use Latin rather than Greek to communicate. To do this, he had to establish a base in Rome, and it is probably for this reason that he wrote to the community of Christians there.

Phoebe was from the Greek town of Cenchraie, about 8 km away from Corinth. Corinth was then a thriving city-state and important center of trade thanks to the fact that it controlled the narrow isthmus between the Peloponnesian peninsula and the mainland of Greece, and Cenchraie was one of two ports that gave Corinth the crucial access to the sea. Cenchraei was a small, prosperous community situated around a deep-water harbour where ships would arrive from Athens, Ionia, Cyprus, and the Levant. Archeologists tell us that the docks were ringed by many warehouses and a long promenade that we can imagine was filled with the clamour of ships being loaded and unloaded, and the chatter of merchants and travelers from throughout the Roman Empire.

Clustered around the waterfront were the temples to various Greek deities, including Asklepios, Poseidon, Dionysos, and Pan. On the most prominent spot stood a huge temple to Aphrodite where her followers could make ritual sacrifices to ask for protection at sea. In Roman religious life, many deities were worshiped and new ones were tacked on all the time; as the Roman Empire expanded, deities from conquered peoples were simply added to the pantheon. On the other side of the harbour was a temple to the Egyptian deity Isis who was also associated with the protection of seafarers. Early in March each year, her followers would parade through town, colourfully dressed as animals and mythic figures, to launch a sacred ship as an offering.⁵

In the midst of this, a small Christian house church had been founded, and by Phoebe's day, it was already vigorously spreading the gospel message throughout the dozens of towns in the region.

What Paul has written about Phoebe is what we would think of as a letter of introduction and he uses the same language that would be used in diplomatic correspondence to introduce an official representative. This passage contains the “clearest cluster” of words of recommendation that occur in any of Paul's letters.⁶

Paul uses three terms to describe Phoebe: first he calls her “our sister.” This means he not only considers her *his* sister, which is significant enough, but he is making the point that she should be considered the sister of all those who follow Jesus. This is should not be taken lightly.

Over the past weeks, we've contemplated the faithfulness and sacrifice of Tamar and Ruth in stories that emphasize the immense importance placed on the preservation of the family in their culture. The family is the key unit of social organization with deeply rooted bonds of loyalty and responsibility between its members. Among the early Christians, some became followers of Jesus together with all their household, but others had to sever ties with their families of birth, and in doing so, they gave up that all-important source of identity, belonging, and security. Their community of faith became for them a new, chosen family, and in this new family, they had the obligation to treat each other with the same love and care they would have treated biological brothers and sisters. So, when Paul asks the Romans to treat Phoebe as a sister, this is a deeply meaningful responsibility.

Secondly, Paul calls Phoebe a deacon. Deacons in the early church had many roles that included preaching, teaching and showing hospitality to strangers; for example, deacons were sent to help Christians who were in prison. But the most accurate meaning here is “emissary” because one of their most important roles was serving as liaisons from one group of Christians to another.

Third, Paul says Phoebe is a “benefactor” who helped many including himself. In other translations of the Bible, she is described as “helper” but in fact neither “benefactor” nor “helper” really captures Paul’s meaning.

The Greek word Paul uses is *prostatis* which is more correctly translated as “patron.” The Latin equivalent would have been *patronus*, which may make you think of Harry Potter. You’ll know the *patronus* is a protector, defender, and guide. In Greco-Roman society, it is a highly specific and technical term that goes well beyond describing someone who donates money; the patron and the client were two people who were in a voluntarily and reciprocal relationship with clearly defined social roles. The patron was someone with higher social status, who gave support and made social connections for the client. The client reciprocated by giving respect, and sometimes political support, to the patron. Paul doesn’t use the word patron anywhere else in his writing; this makes sense because early Christians were striving for a non-hierarchical community. So, this makes the fact that he calls Phoebe a patron particularly significant as it suggests that he and many others are socially dependent on her. The fact that Paul emphasizes her leadership and asks the Christians in Rome to give her every help suggests that he may even have intended for her to play a key role there in organizing his plans for Spain.

Perhaps you have noticed that Phoebe is not described in connection with any man; she’s not “wife of”, “sister of”, or “mother of,” as so many other women in the Bible are described. So, it seems that she is a woman of independent means, probably older, probably a widow, and someone who holds authority and influence in her community. As a patron, I imagine she safeguards the welfare of many people in her extended household and her community of fellow believers. She is called upon to care for the needy, provide leadership, and offer guidance. She has many weighty responsibilities.

And then one day, Paul asks even more of her: he chooses her to be his emissary.

What would taking Paul’s letter to Rome have meant for Phoebe? Given that she lived in a sea port, it is likely she would have gone by ship which would have taken under two weeks.⁷ As a woman of means, she probably traveled with servants. Still, Paul was asking her to put her body at the mercy of the waves and her welfare in the hands of strangers. She would have faced the prospect of storms, shipwreck, bandits and bedbugs, cold, hunger, and exhaustion.⁸ I think she must have been a woman of courage.

Rome itself must have been daunting. It was then the heart of one of the mightiest empires in the ancient world, stretching from Britain in the northwest to Egypt in the southeast. The Romans had accomplished feats from engineering marvelous aqueducts, drains, and bridges to establishing civil law and efficient administration. They had a complex, multicultural society. But it was an empire based on force and conquest, the subjugation of conquered peoples and ready use of brutal violence. Nero’s court seethed with intrigue, corruption, debauchery, and murder. And Christians in Rome had already experienced exile and would face terrible persecution in the years to come.

At the time of Phoebe's trip, there were probably five house churches in Rome. Phoebe would have needed much persistence, resourcefulness, and sensitivity to first locate each of these groups and then communicate her mission to them. She'd have to wait for all the members to assemble, and perhaps at each house, they might have also hired a scribe to copy out the letter. So, this process might have taken several days or weeks.

At this time, only about 5% of the population would have been able to read, so the letter would have been read out. The tone, emphasis, and gestures of the presentation would have been carefully planned in advance so that the meaning of the message was correctly transmitted. If Phoebe didn't read the letter herself, she would certainly have been expected to coach the person doing the reading, to help them understand Paul's intentions. And afterwards, she would have had to answer questions about this very dense, complex text.⁹ So, Phoebe was really the first authoritative interpreter of the Epistle to the Romans.

I try to imagine what this experience would have been like for Phoebe. What questions do the Roman Christians have for her? Do they find these words comforting, challenging, or puzzling? How does she answer their questions? Unfortunately, we don't know.

That one sentence is all the Bible tells us about Phoebe. We don't know what became of her after she delivered her message. Did she organize Paul's mission to Spain? Did she face persecution and danger? We don't know.

For hundreds of years after, early church fathers such as Origen and Chrysostom continued to honour her in their commentaries. Theodoret, the fifth century theologian, says about Phoebe that "in every land and sea she is celebrated. For not only do the Romans and Greeks know her, but even all the barbarians."¹⁰

One further clue comes from a grave stone that archeologists have discovered in Jerusalem, for a woman deacon who lived about three hundred years after Phoebe. The inscription pays tribute to this woman by calling her "a second Phoebe."¹¹ These are tantalizing hints that Phoebe continued to be an inspiration and example to generations of Christians after her.

The most profound theological message of Paul's Epistle to the Romans is the good news that we are saved through the grace of God, not through our own merits or good works. And another key message that pervades all of Paul's letters is that the Holy Spirit is a real and vital presence in the lives of believers.

"Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit," (Romans 16:11 RSV) he says.
Aglow with the Spirit!

Imagine what that would have felt like to this first or second generation of Christians, listening to this message. Their God is not like the Roman deities who have to be continually appeased through complex rituals and sacrifices; the One God offers

salvation freely to everyone who has faith. (Romans 1:16) Their God, who had once spoken from mountain tops and burning bushes, through prophets and priests, now lived *and glowed* within each one of them.

In the passage we heard today, Paul names nine gifts of the Spirit¹²: prophesy, service, teaching, encouragement, generosity, leadership, and showing mercy. In describing Phoebe as sister, emissary, and patron, Paul has identified her as someone who displays two of these gifts: leadership and generosity. He is saying that Phoebe's gifts are given by God and that her life gives proof of the work of God's Spirit in the world.

One my favorite parts of this letter comes after the introduction of Phoebe, when Paul sends his personal greetings to the believers. He says:

Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my relative Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you. (Romans 16:3-16)

I love that this passage feels so affectionate, so concrete. Can't you just picture these people as they hear their names and those of their companions? Scholars tell us that these names suggest this was a diverse group of believers, women and men, free and slave, Jews and Gentiles, and people from many different regions of the empire. It reminds us that, although the Epistle to the Romans is a tremendous work of theology with a universal message about salvation, it was also first and foremost a personal message to a very specific group of people--people who laughed, loved, struggled and suffered. Paul urges them to get along despite their differences, and to recognize their unity in Christ Jesus.¹³

In our own day, the church is fraught with many painful divisions as sincere people on all sides wrestle with questions of how to best understand and follow Jesus. We struggle with meaning and interpretation, how to apply the words written thousands of years ago to our own complicated and very *different* world.

Reflecting on Phoebe's role in transmitting this epistle has made me to think about the nature of Scripture. I have been reading the work of Karen Armstrong, once a Catholic nun and now a respected historian of comparative religion. She has studied not only the history of Christianity but also Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism and Hinduism. I especially appreciate the way she finds important commonalities among these diverse traditions. In her most recent book *The Lost Art of Scripture*,¹⁴ she describes the holy writings of all the great faiths as an art form that is fundamentally oral. She argues that scripture is meant to be performed and interpreted anew each time it is shared. It is meant to be listened to, repeated, memorized, and inwardly digested. It is a living thing. Each interpreter brings the weight of their own cares and concerns, their learning and their experience, to breathe life into the words and make them relevant to each new context and to each audience.

So Phoebe, this woman of courage, generosity, and faithfulness, whom Paul trusted to carry his letter and be its first interpreter. What special wisdom would she have brought to Paul's words? She was a woman, deacon, and patron; perhaps she was a sister, daughter, mother, wife, and widow. How would her life experiences have shaped her interpretation? And today, let us consider whose voices *we* need to hear to interpret the scripture afresh for us.

At a lecture I attended recently, Armstrong was asked, that if it were true that Scripture was a performative art, what made it any different than poetry, story, or song. She said the difference lay in one simple fact. The Scripture of all the great faiths do one important thing: they send us out. To bring justice, show mercy, heal the world. They are not just about cultivating one's own spiritual life; Scripture points to action.

I would like to end by bringing you back to the beginning of our story and leaving you with an image of a first century woman of faith *and action*. She is boarding a ship in a noisy provincial port headed for the heart of the Roman Empire. A monumental temple to Aphrodite looms on one side, a temple to Isis on the other. But the letter Phoebe carries proclaims the One God who *will not* be neatly folded into the Empire's pantheon.

Phoebe can't tell whether she and her message will survive the journey nor how they will be received if they do arrive. Her message is just a tiny flame.

In Rome, the frail parchment will be passed from one house church to the next. In four hundred years, the mighty Roman empire will fall into ruin but the words of this letter will live on. For over a millennium, the text will be kept alive by generations of scribes labouring over their desks in remote northern monasteries. In fourteen hundred years, there will be a remarkable technological revolution; a German goldsmith in Mainz named Johannes Gutenberg will cast tiny pieces of metal in the shape of letters of the alphabet; his system of movable type will allow Paul's words to be printed quickly and inexpensively. This technology will spread like brushfire, and ordinary believers throughout Europe will begin to read and interpret the text for themselves. One day,

Paul's letter will be translated into languages that Phoebe has never even heard of and it will be studied in lands far beyond what she thinks of as the ends of the earth.

But Phoebe can't see any of this. She has only the conviction of her faith and a courage equal to the task that has been given her. Aglow with the Spirit, Phoebe goes out into the world, bearing light.

Glory be to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Amen.

Readings

Micah 6: 6-8. RVS

6 “With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?

Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?

7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my first-born for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

8 He has showed you, O man, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Romans 12 New International Version (NIV)

12 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

3 For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. 4 For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, 5 so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. 6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your[a] faith; 7 if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; 8 if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead,[b] do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. 11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. 13 Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position.[c] Do not be conceited.

17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

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1. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Virtue and Liberty, June 15, 1833," *Table Talk*, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1836), p. 237.

2. Luther felt Christians should not only learn the message by heart, word for word, but deal with it every day, as if it were "daily bread" for their souls. He considered it something that could never been read or meditated upon too much or too well.

3. Some scholars believe that Romans 16 was a letter of recommendation for Phoebe to the community at Ephesus, and that it was only later appended to the letter to the Romans. It is possible that Phoebe travelled to Ephesus rather than Rome. Joan Cecelia Campbell, *Phoebe: Patron and Emissary* (Liturgical Press, 2009), pp. 13-18.

4. Helpful sources on Phoebe include the following: Campbell, *Phoebe: Patron and Emissary*; J. David Miller, "What can we say about Phoebe?" *Priscilla Papers* 25, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 16-21; Elizabeth A. McCabe, "A Reexamination of Phoebe as 'Diakonos' and 'Prostatis': Exposing the inaccuracies of English Translations," Society of Biblical Literature website, <https://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?ArticleId=830>; Marg Mowczko, "Phoebe: Deacon of the Church in Cenchrea," parts 1-6, Marg Mowczko website, <https://margmowczko.com/was-phoebe-a-deacon-of-the-church-in-cenchrea-part-1/>.

5. Joseph L. Rife, "Religion and society at Roman Kenchreai," Ch 13 in S.J. Friesen, D.N. Schowalter, and J.C. Walters, eds., *Corinth in Context: Comparative Studies on Religion and Society* (Novum Testamentum suppl. 134; Leiden: Brill 2010), pp. 391-432.

⁶ Peter Head, quoted in Ian Paul, "Phoebe, carrier of Paul's letter to the Roman Christians," *Psephizo*, 1 December 2012, <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/phoebe-carrier-of-pauls-letter-to-the-roman-christians/>

7. Miller, "What can we say about Phoebe?"

8. That being said, it is important also to note that travel would have been safer and easier for Phoebe (and others in the Roman Empire) than virtually anywhere else ever before, thanks to the relative stability of the Pax Romana and the extensive system of Roman roads. Ryan S. Schellenberg, “‘Danger in the wilderness, danger at sea’: Paul and the perils of travel,” Ch VIII in *Travel and Religion in Antiquity*, Philip A. Harland, ed., Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011.

9. Paul, “Phoebe, carrier of Paul’s letter to the Roman Christians.”

¹⁰ Theodoret quoted in Mowczko, “Phoebe” Part 3, <https://margmowczko.com/phoebe-a-deacon-of-the-church-in-cenchrea-part-3/>

11. Mowczko, “Phoebe” Part 2, <https://margmowczko.com/was-phoebe-a-deacon-of-the-church-at-cenchrea-part-2/>.

12. V.K. McCarty, “Phoebe as an example of female ministry exercised in the Early Church,” in *Power and Authority in Eastern Christian Experience* (New York: Theotaokas Press, 2011), pp. 195-209 (<https://www.academia.edu/1132713/>)

¹³ Scot McKnight, quoted in Jana Reiss, “Bible scholar: Paul’s letter to the Romans is what we should read in the Trump era—backward,” <https://religionnews.com/2019/07/25/romans-is-not-about-your-salvation-says-bible-scholar-scot-mcknight/>

¹⁴ Karen Armstrong, *The Lost Art of Scripture: Rescuing the Sacred Texts* (New York, Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019).