

## ORDINARY PEOPLE:

### HULDAH

II Kings 22:8-20

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, July 8, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a summer sermon series entitled “Ordinary People.”*

---

*The high priest Hilkiyah said to Shaphan the secretary, ‘I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD.’ When Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan, he read it. Then Shaphan the secretary came to the King, and reported to the King, ‘Your servants have emptied out the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of the workers who have oversight of the house of the LORD.’ Shaphan the secretary informed the King, ‘The priest Hilkiyah has given me a book.’ Shaphan then read it aloud to the King.*

*When the King heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes. Then the King commanded the priest Hilkiyah, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Achbor son of Micaiah, Shaphan the secretary, and the King’s servant Asaiah, saying, ‘Go, inquire of the LORD for me, for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our ancestors did not obey the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us.’*

*So the priest Hilkiyah, Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan, and Asaiah went to the prophetess Huldah the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah, son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe; she resided in Jerusalem in the Second Quarter, where they consulted her. She declared to them, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel:*

*Tell the man who sent you to me, Thus says the LORD, I will indeed bring disaster on this place and on its inhabitants—all the words of the book that the King of Judah has read. Because they have abandoned me and have made offerings to other gods, so that they have provoked me to anger with all the work of their hands, therefore my wrath will be kindled against this place, and it will not be quenched.*

*But as to the King of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, thus shall you say to him, Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel:*

*Regarding the words that you have heard, because your heart was penitent, and you humbled yourself before the LORD, when you heard how I spoke against this place, and against its inhabitants, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and because you have torn your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, says the LORD. Therefore, I will gather you to your ancestors, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace; your eyes shall not see all the disaster that I will bring on this place.’*

*They took the message back to the King.*

*Prayer: Gracious God, we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from your mouth. Make us hungry for this heavenly food, that it may nourish us today in the ways of eternal life; through Jesus Christ, the bread of heaven. Amen.*

## I.

So far in this summer sermon series on ordinary but often obscure people in the Bible, we have covered three people from the Old Testament – Lot’s wife, Paltiel, and Orpah. Each has displayed a deep love that has marked their brief appearance in Scripture:

- In the case of Lot’s wife, the love of two adults daughters about to be destroyed in the city in which they stay behind and toward which she looks back in solidarity with them<sup>1</sup>
- In the case of Paltiel, the love for a wife even as she is taken from him and given to the King<sup>2</sup>
- And in the case of Orpah, the love of the land of her birth in which she chooses to remain.<sup>3</sup>

In these ordinary people we have seen extraordinary love.

In Huldah, the person who is the focus of today’s sermon, we see a different kind of love: love for the pages of a book and the words written on those pages which she attests are God’s Word and which eventually become a part of the Bible we read.

## II.

The backstory is this:

After the people of Israel enter the Promised Land, they are initially led by Kings Saul, David, and Solomon.

- Upon Solomon’s death, potential heirs fight, the overall quality of leadership declines, and the nation divides between the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah.
- Of all the Kings who ruled either North or South, only two are praised in scripture: Hezekiah and Josiah, both of whom rule in the South.

Josiah is only eight years old when he comes to the throne, following brief, disastrous reigns of his father Amon and his grandfather Manasseh.<sup>4</sup>

- In the eighteenth year of Josiah’s reign, when he is now twenty-four, he orders the Temple to be repaired and renovated.
- In the course of making repairs, workers discover a copy of a book of laws that may have been hidden away for safekeeping during the reigns of one of Josiah’s predecessors in whose hands the book could not be trusted.
- The book passes from worker to court secretary, who reads it to the King.
- When Josiah hears the book read aloud, he is greatly distressed. He realizes the book is an indictment of the past religious misdeeds of his people, as well as a promise of judgment that will occur in the present and future.

Unlike many rulers, Josiah immediately dispatches a delegation to seek an oracle from a prophet concerning the text that has been read to him.

- The delegation – which is large and prominent – visits Huldah, a prophet married to Shallum, a keeper of the King’s wardrobe in the court of the King.

---

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 19:12-29.

<sup>2</sup> II Samuel 3:12-16.

<sup>3</sup> Ruth 1:1-18.

<sup>4</sup> II Kings 21.

- Huldah is the only female prophet to appear in the Books of Samuel and Kings, and the fact that she is female in a traditionally male role draws no mention.
  - This silence may reflect that for a brief moment in the history of the people of Israel, Huldah serves as one who is judged not on the basis of the identity of her gender or “the color of her skin,” but on “the content of her character,”<sup>5</sup> on her prophetic ability to speak and interpret a word from the Lord.
  - While her husband focuses on outer accoutrements of the King’s attire, Huldah focuses on his inner character as he makes decisions and rules the people of Judah.

Huldah confirms to King Josiah the message read in his presence:

- That his people had broken their covenant with God in the past
- That God will respond with consequences in the present and future
- And yet that because Josiah himself has heard this word and repented, he will die in peace and be personally spared witnessing the divine consequences as they are carried out.<sup>6</sup>

When Huldah confirms that the words that have been read to the King are indeed the Word of the Lord, she becomes the first person in the Bible to declare a written text to be the Word of God.<sup>7</sup> She thus begins a process called *canonization*, in which over centuries certain writings emerge from within the people of Israel and later the church, are accepted as authoritative, and eventually are brought together as the Bible that then rests in our pews, sits on our nightstands and infuses the hymns we sing, the prayers we say, the sermons we deliver or receive in worship.<sup>8</sup>

Even though there is little or no hope in what Huldah tells Josiah concerning what will happen, over the next eight years, Josiah institutes reforms that rid the land of artifacts of idolatry and that centralize worship in Jerusalem. Josiah also re-institutes Passover.<sup>9</sup>

After his death, it is said of Josiah:

*...there was no King like him,  
Who turned to the Lord with all his heart,  
With all his soul,  
And with all his might...*<sup>10</sup>

Josiah proved to be a leader who *did* the right thing, *because* it was the right thing, not because he feared consequences or expected reward, political or divine. And Huldah is a religious leader who is willing to *say* what needs to be *said* to someone who has the power to *do* what needs to be *done*. Huldah comes to us as one

---

<sup>5</sup> These words come from Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream Speech” at the March on Washington, August 28, 1963.

<sup>6</sup> Huldah’s prophecy proves to be only partially. Josiah is spared witnesses the consequences his people suffer, primarily being carried off into captivity and exile, but instead dies at the hands of the Egyptian Pharaoh (II Kings 23:28-20).

<sup>7</sup> See William Phipps, “A Woman Was the First To Declare Scripture Holy,” *Bible Review* 6:2 (April 1990), available at <https://www.baslibrary.org/bible-review/6/2/5>.

<sup>8</sup> Phyllis Trible, “Authority of the Bible,” in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version With The Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 2348-2354.

<sup>9</sup> II Kings 23.

<sup>10</sup> II Kings 23:29.

who *loves* the texts of scripture, which she boldly and wisely interprets for her day in the presence of the King. It is to that love – and that willingness to interpret – that I want to devote the remainder of this sermon.

### III.

When I was ordained in 1980, Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner was an enormously popular writer. In one of his books, he describes the frustration that people have reading the Bible, the book that Huldah and others have bequeathed to us:

It not only looks awfully dull, but some of it is [Buechner writes]. The prophets are wildly repetitious and almost never know when to stop. There are all the *begats*. There are passages that even Moses must have nodded [off] over... There are the lists of kings, dietary laws, tribes, and tribal territories.... There is the sense you have that you know what the Bible is going to say before it says it....

There are still more reasons [Buechner continues]. The barbarities, for instance. The often fanatical nationalism. The passages where the God of Israel is depicted as interested in other nations only to the degree that he can use them to whip Israel into line. God hardening Pharaoh's heart and then clobbering him for hard-heartedness....

Or even Jesus of Nazareth, the same Jesus who in one place uses a Samaritan of all people — a member of a hated tribe — as the example of a man who truly loves his neighbor, and in another place is quoted as telling a Canaanite woman who came to him for help that it was not fair for him to throw the children's food to the dogs.

Buechner concludes:

Let them who try to start out at Genesis and work their way conscientiously to Revelation beware.<sup>11</sup>

\*\*

When I began my ministry, I knew all this to be true about the Bible. But I also knew that from being exposed to it at an early age by Presbyterian clergy and then from African American preachers I heard at the Montreat Youth Conference as a teenager, that I fell in love with the book, like one falls in love with an intriguing but illusive lover.

Even though my primary responsibility in my first call was youth ministry, we had great volunteer Sunday School teachers and I was able to teach adults during that hour. I found then what proved to be true later as well: If I offered a course on a book of the Bible the room was packed, and people stayed through the end of the course. If I offered a course on a topic: faith and politics, science and religion, religion and psychology, enrollment was about half and then dwindled as the course went on.

In the early 1990s I started teaching DISCIPLE, a thirty-four week two and a half hour course, seventeen weeks on the Old Testament and seventeen on the New Testament. About ten years ago I realized I had too much to say and not enough time to say it, so I divided the class in two – like Solomon and the baby brought to him<sup>12</sup> – and began offering a year on Old Testament followed by a year on New Testament.

---

<sup>11</sup> Available at <https://thevalueofsparrows.com/2012/09/01/gods-alphabet-b-is-for-bible-by-frederick-buechner/>.

<sup>12</sup> I Kings 3:16-28.

I do many things as a minister and I enjoy nearly all of them. But I have long thought that one of the best things I have to offer you all is this course. I can be more myself – which is not always a good thing! – in the classroom than in the pulpit. You can probably be more yourself sitting around a table in Haverkamp than sitting in a pew in the Sanctuary. I get to know you better. You get to know me better. And you get to know one another.

Most of all you get to read and study the Bible in a guided way that helps you to understand it better, but perhaps more importantly, leads you from time to time to be touched or moved by it and helps it become a part of your life – at home, at work, in military and government service, in parenting and grand parenting, in voting, in organizing, in marching in parades or protests, and in solitude. It can become for you “the balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole.”<sup>13</sup>

In the years I have taught at Westminster, over 350 people have taken at least one of the courses. And if this seems like an obvious lead up to a commercial, it is: This September, I start another round: Old Testament this school year; New Testament, next. Come next week to an informational meeting or ask me questions via phone or email. More than likely, you can do this course more successfully, and in better balance with your work and volunteer and family responsibilities, than you realize.

#### IV.

If Buechner is eloquent articulating the challenges about the Bible to which Huldah made a significant contribution, a long time member of our church provided an equally eloquent witness to the faith out of which the Bible grows and what that faith can provide us and our nation.

Margaret Rice was born in Richmond, Virginia, in 1921. Her father taught Bible at Union Seminary in that city. He died when Margaret was sixteen months, and her was mother expecting her little sister. There was no Social Security or life insurance in those days, but the seminary allowed the family to continue to reside on campus. Her mother became an institution: cooking, taking in boarders, providing help with students who were ill or needed references for papers and sermons. Marge literally grew up on the campus of Union Seminary and down the street at Ginter Park Presbyterian Church.

As a young woman she met Russell Smith, who had grown up as the child of Presbyterian missionaries in the Congo and who as a young adult moved to Washington to work on the Presidential papers at the Library of Congress. They married and joined Westminster in 1956. She died at Goodwin House in 2009; he, in 2012.

When her children were going through her papers, they found an editorial from the *The New York Times* appearing in 1918, three years before Marge’s birth, as our nation was in the midst of World War I and the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy was raging within Protestantism at home. They asked that I read the editorial at their mother’s funeral. Here is a portion of what I read:

Religion may lack many things, but it must be real. It must be a power touching and ennobling life in all its manifold aspects. The unpardonable sin in religion is unreality. This is one of the large lessons of the world war. Conventional religion may have sufficed for conventional times, but the war has taught us that conventional is worse than useless in times like these....

The literature of the war bears abundant witness to the hunger of the man at the front for real religion. He is face to face with naked life. The trenches will not tolerate pretense. He knows little of nice theological definition; he is suspicious about dogma; he has no patience with ecclesiastical controversy, but he clings passionately and tenaciously to religious realities. Sin is not a *theory*, but a stern face. He

---

<sup>13</sup> These are words from the chorus of the African-American Spiritual, “There Is A Balm In Gilead.” Author unknown.

has no *theory* about prayer, but he prays as he never did before. In the death of every comrade he sees an atonement and a redemption. He has rediscovered God as the Alpha and Omega. And the God he has found is not an abstraction throned above the stars, but a living reality in the lives of hard-pressed men; a God who is closer than breathing and nearer than hands and feet.

When Huldah read the words of an old book discovered in a Temple renovation, and when she authenticated those words as being a Word from God, she began a process that would ultimately lead to the formation of the Bible as Holy Scripture and God's Word to us.

For Huldah we can be thankful, and in her wake we can immerse ourselves in the book she authenticated and loved, the book in which God is "not an abstraction throned above the stars, but a living reality...closer than breathing, nearer than hands and feet."

Amen.