Say Her Name: “The Wise Woman of Abel Beth Maacah”

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

II Samuel 20:1-3, 14-22 (Year W) ~ October 16, 2022

Holy God, open our hearts to your Word this day. Amen.

Today is the second of six Sundays in which we at St. Columba’s have modified our liturgy and choice of Biblical readings as we pilot what’s called “Year W: A Womanist Liturgy Rooted in Racial Justice.” I’d like to give some context.

The customary practice of the Episcopal Church – with the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and most mainline Protestant denominations – is to follow the “Revised Common Lectionary:” a three year cycle of readings that we hear read and interpret each week. On any given Sunday in Year A, B, or C the church prescribes that we will hear, for example, the parable of the Good Samaritan, and will match the Gospel with a reading from the Hebrew scriptures, the Epistles, and a Psalm – all of which may have some discernible common thread. This serves to hold the preacher accountable so she or he can’t duck out of the readings that make her uncomfortable. Most importantly, it means that all across Christendom we’re sharing a common story on any given day.

This is good. But there’s a catch. As we repeat the cycle year after year, A, B, and C, we hear only those texts and leave out the rest. Many centuries ago, good people of God determined the canon of texts which would and would not be included in the Bible. In more recent years, a handful of people determined which portions of the Bible would be included in the lectionary and thus constitute our spiritual diet. What got included? What got omitted? Who got included? Who got omitted? Who made those choices? And with what theological or cultural lenses and biases? I don’t know exactly who all the editors were, but I am going to guess they looked a lot like me.

Year W was compiled as a way to bring forth some of the stories we don’t hear. In September, we departed from the common lectionary to celebrate a season of creation, drawing upon texts that reveal the holiness of God’s creation. Year W offers a womanist perspective. Womanist theology, which dates to the mid-1980’s, is a methodological approach to theology which centers the experience and perspectives of Black women, particularly African-American women.

This is not about political correctness; neither is it about being anti-racist. This is about the Kingdom of God – the Beloved Community we are called to embody – “thy kingdom come, on earth, as it is in heaven.” I’ll say more about this in a moment.

A picture comes to mind from my recent sabbatical. I wanted to learn more about my ancestors. Through the years I’ve heard a lot of stories about a lot of colorful characters. Prompted perhaps by having grandchildren of my own, I’ve been wondering what my grandparents, my ancestors before them, passed on to me. What messages did I receive, spoken or unspoken, about who I am, what it means to be part of this family – the gifts, burdens, curses or blessings were bequeathed to me? How have their lives shaped my life, the choices I’ve made?

I realized I’d only heard about select characters – and most all of them men. What if, at least in the dreams of my imagination, I could discover a great trunk in the attic filled with journals and letters, from different eras and bloodlines, that revealed the lives and stories not told, now buried, forgotten – of cruelty, abandonment, desperation; of miscarriage, abortion, affairs, abuse, addiction or disease – anything that might have been deemed taboo.

And how do I shift this dream so that I am standing not on the inside, not with the editors who selected the stories, but from without, as one not seen, as one who was feared, forgotten, despised, or victimized? We’re all children of God. The very meaning and definition of the Beloved Community, of the Kingdom of God, is that we’re all there, we’re all here – seen, known, loved. For until that is so, it is not yet the Kingdom of God.

Who are your people? Who do you come from? What messages shaped you? It is a gift of privilege and good fortune that I can trace my lines way back. For some, the only known story begins with arrival in this new country. Previous generations are lost for those who were enslaved, torn from their family against their will, or fled persecution.

As in our families, the church locates us within a family narrative. Indeed this is part of the power of the Judeo Christian faith; to know ourselves as descendants of Adam and Eve, with Abraham and Sarah as our ancestors; to envision ourselves in the disciples’ stories of healing, or witness, of feeding, of trial and blessing.

Last Sunday we heard about Biblical ancestors who experienced brutality at the hands of others. A few of you responded; Joshua and I received some emails, had some conversations. Responses varied. But a few people said – and I paraphrase – “you saw me; the church saw me; you acknowledged the pain I experience and your part in minimizing that pain, covering it up, perpetuating a structure that consistently returns to the normative narrative and forces the victims to find their own way. It is not enough, but it is a start.”

This work is hard and this work is holy. This is about doing our individual and collective shadow work – to see, hear, receive the stories of one another. Ultimately, and only by the grace of God, it is to reconcile, integrate, become whole, as one body. Our mission to live God’s love means to align ourselves with God’s call to reconcile God’s people, to draw the circle ever wider, to be reconciled one to one another, and to God. Before reconciliation, there must be truth – victims and perpetrators sharing their truth, their experience.

So with all that, let’s meet one of our ancestors, a sister in the beloved community. She is known as “the wise woman of Abel-Beth-Maacah (“Ah-bell Bett Mah-ah-cah”). Say her name: “The wise woman of Abel-Beth-Maacah.”

We meet her at the end of the Second Book of Samuel. The First and Second Books of Samuel read as narrative history and recount the reign of David as king over Israel. At first the model of faithfulness, heroism and wise leadership, David’s life ends with a tragic twist as he betrays God and his people. In today’s reading he is trying desperately to hold the kingdom together as a plot to overthrow him is launched from within his own ranks – by a “worthless man” named Sheba of the tribe of Benjamin. David turns to his wise and powerful right-hand General Joab. Knowing that Sheba and his insurrectionist troops are preparing within, Joab gathers his army for battle.

Perched on a rising tell – or mound – the city of Abel Beth Maachah is at the northernmost part of the kingdom, where Israel borders Lebanon. Archaeological remains reveal it has been a strategic – and contested – border town since the Bronze and Iron ages.

As General Joab’s soldiers tear into the walls, a wise woman called from the city, “All of you! Listen! Tell Joab to come to me.” He came – in his armored finery. “Listen to the words of your slave-woman.” “I am,” said he. An extraordinary picture: the general, the slave-woman, the ranks of bristling troops standing by. She says, “I am among the most peaceful and faithful of Israel. Wisdom has long been sought and found in this place. – a source of life and home of the Most High God. And you would destroy a mother and a city?” Says Joab, “Show me a better way.” “I will. I will give you the head of the traitor Sheba, and you will leave us.” Joab sounds the trumpet. War is averted. Joab returns to Jerusalem and David clings to his kingdom a little longer.

For the source of the expression, “speaking truth to power” we need look no further. This is “the wise woman of Abel Beth Maacah.” Hers is wisdom born of hardship, wisdom passed from woman to woman to survive and thrive on contested land; wisdom of women who tend to the substance of life as the men march off time and again to the follies of war. This wise woman stands with dignity, guts, cunning. Her wisdom born of necessity wasn’t pretty; she had to compromise, sacrifice Sheba for the safety of the city.

She is my ancestor; she is our ancestor; she is our people; her story is our story. She has the courage to grasp and speak the truth in the critical moments in our lives. Let us pray we may stand within the circle of her light. Say her name: “The wise woman of Abel-Beth-Maacah (“Ah-bell Bett Mah-ah-cah”). Amen.