

Your Silence Will Not Protect You
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I'd like to begin this Women's History Month service by telling you a story about a man. There are actually two stories I want to tell this morning, and explore some linkages between them. The first is the little known story of Jephtha's daughter that appears in Judges 11 in the Hebrew Bible. This is a story that has not let me go for quite some time. I'm not going to tell you every detail of Jephtha's story because it's not his story I'm interested in today, it's his daughter's. But I have to tell you a little about him as their stories are woefully connected.

Jephtha was a warrior, and a mercenary. For various reasons he was unhappy with his lot in life because he felt he'd been done wrong by his family. Jephtha was, literally, a bastard, and therefore he's not gotten his share of the fame and fortune he felt was his due. So he bargained with God. He said: if you'll let me win this battle, which will deliver to me territory that is rightfully mine, then I promise you I will sacrifice to you the first thing that comes to meet me at my door, when I return from battle.

Well, Jephtha wins his battle and he returns home and, instead of a goat or sheep (the usual sacrificial victims), meeting him at his front door, who should greet him with "timbrels and dancing" but his only child, a daughter. I suspect, judging by this ritualistic way in which she was prepared to meet him, that just such a greeting was expected when a man came back from battle. The goats and sheep likely couldn't care less that he was back, and might even be out grazing.

Well, Jephtha is "laid low". "Oh my daughter", he says, moaning, "oh no". And then like any good narcissist, or maybe just a man with a great big load of unconscious

guilt, he says: “Look what *you’ve* done to *me*” And he tells her about his bargain with the Lord.

One might expect the daughter to be a bit dismayed. But she is a woman of her people. She knows that when a man makes a bargain with his God it must be kept. So she makes her own bargain. She says, Okay you have to keep your promise to God, but just let me go off into the mountains for two months with my women friends, and then I’ll come back and you can sacrifice me.

So her father says yes, and she goes happily off to the mountains for two months to hang out with her women friends, comes back, and is killed by her father.

End of story.

But of course there is a gaping hole in the story, a huge emptiness. Something is missing. What were those women doing in the mountains for two months? That’s a long time to bewail one’s virginity. Sources explain the two months by saying that to die childless for a woman of those times was a horrible fate. Thus the long mourning.

Other sources speculate that this is a story about how mourning began as a profession. You probably know that in many cultures there are professional mourners who express grief for the whole community. In fact the story doesn’t end quite where I left it. There is one more sentence. It became a custom after that for the women of Israel to spend four days of the year lamenting the daughter of Jephtha the Gileadite.

There is much the imagination can fill in here. And that’s true of so many Biblical stories. That is what the tradition of Midrash and legend are for. Nevertheless this story has long stood as a symbol, for me, of women’s place in written history: Invisible,

nameless, and never fully characterized. Feminist theology and women's studies speak of this often: The empty spaces in the telling of history, the silence in so many stories when it comes to women's lives.

Jeptha's daughter has no name.

She appears to have no mother to stand up for her.

She appears to be a total martyr and people pleaser, with no anger or rage.

And we don't learn a thing about the particulars of these women's lives, their rituals, and customs which exist apart from the men's lives.

For decades now there has been much work done to fill in the blank spaces. And now we have women's history month as a way to redress the past, and to make sure women don't slip back into invisibility and silence. This is so important for the psyches of little girls and grown women as well. When I was growing up I was told to just find myself in the stories of men. *And, no, God is not really a man. And, anyway, when we say man, we mean you too. And, of course you can be anything you want to be when you grow up.*

But every sign and symbol around me contradicted that. When I learned history it was mostly the story of men's lives, with a few women sprinkled in here and there. Women didn't appear to have contributed much of anything, to have written anything, or invented anything. God was not only a man but so were all the people speaking for him in the pulpit. And, I might be able to be anything I want when I grow up but most women's primary role seemed to be as mothers, even if they worked. My French aunt could make the most amazing velvety lamb stew and succulent cream puffs, but if a man did it he got a TV show.

My paternal grandmother who went only through the 8th grade and lost her husband when she was 28, worked all her life. She got her GED, went through business school, and eventually had an office in the Merchandise Mart in Chicago working for an insurance company. She wore suits and she was strong. But she was full of a fear that even a child could recognize. Fear that she would be seen as less than feminine, and ashamed in the face of her two sons' fear of her strength.

Her solution for this dilemma was always to arrive on visits with six or eight huge boxes full of cookies. They did not give off a fresh homey scent (they were from her local Chicago bakery) but perhaps they were supposed to evoke one in order to disguise her powerful aura and remind people that yes, she was a woman.

And there were all the other, much more subtle, ways in which women's roles were defined. Men seemed to need to be made to feel in charge, or else they felt threatened. I remember once arriving at the dinner table and saying, as I slid into my chair: "the Mom wears the pants in this family!" I had a habit of wandering around the house narrating our lives in the third person, but I also liked to throw around phrases from books I was reading. That was one of them.

My father started to huff and to puff and before he could blow the house down I got my wits about me and explained, as casually as I could under such windy conditions: "I just read that in my book" My father got a shaky grin and turned to my mother and said with relief: "you never know where they're getting something do you?"

I had a pretty serious childhood depression from about age 9 to 19. But I haven't been depressed for more than a week's time since I was 19, which was the year I found my anger, and my voice. When I look back, there were many concrete reasons to be

depressed: a new school every couple of years, not fitting in at school, and issues within in the home. But I am also certain I was depressed because I felt invisible. And feeling invisible, one also feels empty. And when one feels empty, one wonders about one's own worth and value, and if one even has a self.

Much work has been done on how memories are constructed in recent years, and how they relate to a sense of self. Also in work with Alzheimer's victims, one asks: what is left of this person when they can't even remember who they are? What is a self without memories to hold it together?

Memories are constructed over a span of years. The scientists now know that memories don't live in just one section of the brain. They slowly collect like a vast galaxy of stars being born all over the brain. The oldest memories are the strongest and stay with us the longest because they are made out of so many, literally thousands, of connections that are constructed over time. So if one bunch of cells dies, there are still others which preserve cues, and fragments, and sights and smells, all of which connect up with each other and talk to each other at the speed of light.

New memories are more fragile, they have fewer home fires burning. Experiences, stories, have to be told over and over, you know this from telling stories to children, before they become part of our personal canon, our "Bible".

Imagine if you suddenly lost all your memories, like the protagonist in the movie Memento, or many other movies of late. You would have to reconstruct who you are. You would have to search for clues. You might even have to trust a few people to keep reminding you that the new pieces you've found are real, because you might forget what they are, they are so new, and have no place of lodging. That is how it was as a child, for

my self and many women I know, and others whose books I have read. Without a history, we had no memories. So we had a sense of absence, a sense of loss. But the kicker was we didn't even know, as children, that we had lost our memories. It was an uneasy sense of loss, one that had no name.

We had not, of course, literally lost memories, the culture had. It was the culture's job to help us build them, but the culture failed to do so. We had our personal family stories (and there were many strong women in mine), we had the memories we were building in our present lives, but something was missing. Sometimes as a child I would lie in bed and think, I'm disappearing. I know other women who had the exact same experience. For some it was connected to abuse. For me it was not. My soul was reaching out wanting to find the lights on out there, and nothing was blinking back. I was on my own.

You can see why I relate to the story of Jephtha's daughter and why I expect so many other women do as well.

When many of us took women's studies classes, and learned women's history it was as if we had suddenly risen from a coma. Some of us woke up screaming. To say we were angry would be an understatement. The writing of women out of history was not an innocent mistake, it was deliberate, and that is infuriating. But there was exultation too in seeing the missing story rise seemingly out of nothing. The "two months in the mountains" was all there after all. It had simply been thought too unimportant to either document, or sometimes it was, it just hadn't been important enough to teach about.

What an exciting time. God as it turned out had not always been a man. There had been women writers, and scientists, and artists, and everything else, they were being

brought back in droves, and not just the little trickle I'd heard about growing up. And women had resisted, and women had been leaders. Some of the news was exhilarating and some was sobering. Women had been killed by the millions, over a period of two hundred years in Europe, as witches; a genocide which still doesn't seem to be part of our collective consciousness. I wonder what that did to the psyches of women in the 1500 through 1700's in Europe? What deep memories does that plant in the brains of the survivors? What kind of trauma was passed on to the next generations? What fears did they pass on to their daughters; and they to the next generation, and so on? What forms of subtle resistance?

The filling in of the empty spaces was not just about women's successes, nor was the feminist movement all about trying to compete with men. Feminists were asserting that women's daily lives, and the daily lives of all silenced peoples and workers were just as important a part of history as the big battles of men. This of course is still a hard sell. Big battles, big stories, seem to take root more deeply than the weave of daily life.

I wonder if many of us have a fear that if we do not make a place for ourselves out there in the world, as it is, even if we don't always like how it is, then we will once again sink back into invisibility, as individuals and as a whole group.

To speak of women's history is complicated. I have mainly spoken of my own experience as a white women. In twenty minutes, I had to make some choices I suppose and I chose to speak of what I know. But I can't go on without saying that I do recognize that women of color have had a double burden when it comes to being heard in the larger society, both as women and as people of color.

This week in thinking about this topic, I was really engaging in a kind of retrospective. It was at times actually difficult to remember how it once was. And what I ended up wanting to wrestle with was the other side of the silence, which has been explored but perhaps not spoken about as often, and that is how women sometimes were in complicity with it. We did resist, we did fight back, and we did persevere in all cultures, and in all times and sometimes in big ways. But it's in the little daily ways that we make the bargains in our lives that our fate is sometimes sealed. Throughout history it has been not just the fathers, but sometimes the mothers, who have sacrificed their daughters, to their own needs, or ambitions, or simply to maintain a safe place in the order of things.

For many of us the time of imposed silence is over. But now we have to look at our own choices about when to speak. I have in a sense reached my goal in life, as have most of the women I know. That is we have found our voices. We are fairly visible. Sometimes I feel too visible. And I am no longer so angry. "We" do not any longer seem to be angry. Sometimes I worry about this. What happened to our anger? There is still much to be angry about. I used to say my anger was a light clearing a path through my fear and confusion. I have learned not to take it out on others (for the most part), and that was a valuable lesson, but I could still use the light. Not just for myself, and not for "my people" who for years I defined as women. Those were necessary years. But now I have achieved some measure of safety and position and where is my anger for "all people whose rights are denied"? All people are now my people.

I've been asking myself: what, if not that very personal anger will propel me to get just as fired up for others as I did for myself? And in this I am finding some clues in

the story of Esther. I think it speaks to the choice women have between security, and...well, we'll see.

This story gives us a very different picture of a woman in ancient times than the story of Jephtha's daughter. In brief: Esther is a Jewish woman living incognito as a Persian Queen. Her cousin Mordecai comes and tells her she needs to use her influence with the King to intervene for her people who are under threat of annihilation. Esther is living a safe life, a cushy nice life in a palace. And, not only that, no one goes to the King unless they're called and she hasn't been called for a few weeks. So she will be risking her comfortable way of life to do what Mordecai is asking of her, maybe her life itself. But he wants her to know that not speaking out will involve an even greater risk. He says to her: "Think not that in the king's palace, you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For *if you keep silence at such a time as this*, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's house will perish. *And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for just such a time as this?*"

I heard Audre Lorde's voice when I read this. Lorde was a self described: Black, lesbian, warrior, poet. And her most famous line was: "Your silence will not protect you". It *seems as if* Mordecai is saying you can't make yourself invisible, you can't play it safe, you're going to get found out. But then there's the rest of the paragraph. What you do won't seal the fate of your people, he says, we will be okay. But you have to do this to save yourself, and your father's house.

Now, Esther is an orphan, so what does he mean by her father's house? In the tradition of midrash, of filling in the holes in the story, I'll tell you what I think. I think he is not threatening her, or her relatives, as it first may sound. I think the final clincher of a

question “*who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for just such a time as this*” reveals that. I think he is saying there is a saving power out there which will take care of us, no matter what you do. You are not God, we don’t need you, we have our own destiny, our own higher power, but you need to live our your destiny. You are being called out. But the life you are really saving by breaking your silence is your own.

I think the story is telling us: When you are called out you must listen or all will not be well with your soul, or with your story. Our families’ “house” is, in a sense, our story, is the container of our history. What happened to the souls of all the women throughout history who did not speak out in such a time as they were called to do so? What happens to our souls today when we try to stay in the “palace”, try to stay safe, even when our people are at risk?

I think when we try to protect ourselves with silence we actually live in fear. And when we live in fear, we are anything but free. And then it is our own lives which are lost. I think very often women have traded freedom for security. I think this is a bargain many women have made in their lives, and are still making.

Again Audre Lorde said it best: *And when we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed but when we are silent we are still afraid. So it is better to speak remembering we were never meant to survive.*

For me the words “we were never meant to survive” speak to all women. I imagine it speaks to black women whose ancestors murmur in their blood about their near annihilation. And I think the message is carried down in the stories of European women ancestry too, and perhaps of women from any culture whose rights were denied, or who

live under fear of annihilation, as individuals or a group; whose spirits were never meant to survive, but to be confined.

Our silences never protected us. Who are we ready to speak up for now?

For now I wait, within the confines of my quite safe life, and I am listening. I hope you are too. We do not need to wait for a great calamity to befall our people, and today, in this global community, all people are our people. We can act anyway, do what we can. But I believe we need to be listening for any special opportunities. Sometimes I think they are there just about every day, in some small way.

Maybe the message is this: whatever day it, whatever conditions we find ourselves in, *we were put here for just such a time as this.*

Every day we are being called out. How will we respond?