



She Who Was Sent to Preach

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
The Feast of St. Mary Magdalene~July 22, 2018*

Judith 9:1, 11-14

Judith prostrated herself, put ashes on her head, and uncovered the sackcloth she was wearing. At the very time when the evening incense was being offered in the house of God in Jerusalem, Judith cried out to the Lord with a loud voice, and said, "O Lord God, your strength does not depend on numbers, nor your might on the powerful. But you are the God of the lowly, helper of the oppressed, upholder of the weak, protector of the forsaken, savior of those without hope. Please, please, God of my father, God of the heritage of Israel, Lord of heaven and earth, Creator of the waters, King of all your creation, hear my prayer! Make my deceitful words bring wound and bruise on those who have planned cruel things against your covenant, and against your sacred house, and against Mount Zion, and against the house your children possess. Let your whole nation and every tribe know and understand that you are God, the God of all power and might, and that there is no other who protects the people of Israel but you alone!"

Psalm 42:1-7

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| 1 | As the deer longs for the water-brooks, *
so longs my soul for you, O God. | 5 | With the voice of praise and thanksgiving, *
among those who keep holy-day. |
| 2 | My soul is athirst for God, athirst for the living God; *
when shall I come to appear before the presence of God? | 6 | Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul? *
and why are you so disquieted within me? |
| 3 | My tears have been my food day and night, *
while all day long they say to me,
"Where now is your God?" | 7 | Put your trust in God; *
for I will yet give thanks to the Holy One,
who is the help of my countenance, and my God. |
| 4 | I pour out my soul when I think on these things: *
how I went with the multitude
and led them into the house of God, | | |

II Corinthians 5:14-18

The love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

John 20:11-18

Mary Magdalene stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and

announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Today, for the first time at St. Peter's, we are celebrating the Feast of Mary Magdalene. Despite the fact that Mary was the first apostle, the one to whom Jesus first appeared after being raised from the dead, she has not until now had an official feast day. The reason is that she stands in a long line of women who have been ignored, demeaned, abused, or worse by the Bible, the church and the world. And that ignoring, demeaning, abusing, and worse continues. Yes, the response to some women's stories has been a little different recently with the powerful #metoo movement, but we still live in a culture that perpetrates violence against women and then questions the woman first: what was she wearing, why was she out so late, why didn't she confront her boss earlier, why can't she take a joke? We still live in a culture that asks women why they didn't speak up earlier and then does not believe us when we do.

The list of Biblical women who have suffered all manner of wrong and evil is far too long to name, but it stretches all the way back to the beginning, to Eve being blamed for the woes of all humanity—despite the fact that Adam presumably chose to take a bite of that apple and that, according to the text itself, Eve's subjugation to Adam was a consequence of humans not living the way God intended, not God's dream. You don't have to go much further in the Bible to find some of the Hebrew prophets maligning women—using sexually violent imagery to batter Israel when it is straying from God. As the Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney points out, it is “out of Egypt have I called you my Son” but “you have polluted the land with your whoring.” It is “how can I give you up O Ephraim”, but “you have the forehead of a whore and you refuse to be ashamed.” The prophet Jeremiah is a prime offender—using the image of a woman who has been “put out” i.e. divorced, calling Israel a whore, to skewer Israel for breaking the Covenant and turning its back on God. But, to argue with him using his own logic, women in his time had no say in divorce, they were simply dismissed—so it is not her fault she has strayed. And yet he is blaming her—an ancient take on the “but why were you out late wearing that?” argument.

And Jeremiah wasn't alone; Isaiah and Ezekiel, Hosea and Nahum do the same thing. Out of one side of their mouths they proclaim Israel and Judah are God's beloved daughters. On the other side of their mouths, when Israel and Judah fall and fail as do all finite and frail human beings and institutions, they suddenly become these brazen whores who deserve to be beaten and raped because that's what you do when you catch your woman cheating on you, in their world view which is not mine, nor is it God's, in spite of what texts like these say—texts rooted in the sanctification of physical and sexual domestic violence. These texts full of violence against women. Bathsheba, who had no say in whether or not David “had” her. Tamar, raped by her half brother then rejected and ostracized as unclean. Jephthah who killed his own daughter to keep a foolish promise and save face. And then there are myriad stories in which women are voiceless—relegated to bit parts, actors in an all male play. It is a rare, rare thing in the Bible to find a woman telling her own story, having any voice at all.

And the truth is, that while we may want to excuse it with, “well, that is just the way things were back then”, there were plenty of prophets who did not engage in hateful speech, who never tried to pass off their violent fantasies against women as the word of God. Jesus never used that language, perhaps because that's how some folk talked about his mother.

Which brings us to the New Testament—to Junia, Prisca, and other female Apostles whose names were changed to the masculine version in the text so as not to offend the men who ran the empire, not to let the secret out that women were critical to the growth of the churches, to God. Brings us to Mary Magdalene—Apostle, evangelist, close friend of Jesus, faithful to the end, thought by some to be the “beloved disciple” mentioned in John's Gospel. For centuries a great deal of fuss was made about her “sinful” nature. And because she is female, that sin must have had something to do with her femaleness, with sexuality, so Mary was tagged as a prostitute. There is not a shred of evidence that she was a prostitute mind you, but it became common “knowledge”. Even Pope Francis, in announcing that she now has a feast on the Roman calendar, stressed her repentant sinner/prostitute nature. And of course Dan Brown breathlessly concluded that she must have been Jesus' wife—because clearly any intimate relationship with a woman must be sexual.

What we do know about Mary is that she was a wealthy woman from the city of Magdala. She was independent, as in not married. She was one of many women who used her wealth to support Jesus and his movement. It is true that the Bible notes she was “healed of 7 demons” but it is entirely possible that these were the demons many deal with: the demons of depression, fear, low self esteem, doubt, procrastination, bitterness, self-pity. It is a sad reflection on the church that we assumed and assume otherwise. Imagine how different the church's witness to Christ over the centuries might have been if the early male disciples had had the courage to elect Mary as the 12th disciple after Judas' death. She was, by most measures, especially the boundary breaking love of Jesus, the obvious choice.

And you might think that we, the churches, know better now. But do we? In many churches women still have no voice. We in the Episcopal Church are still arguing over whether using female imagery or non gendered language for God is OK, despite the fact that one of the most common words used to describe God's nature in Hebrew Scripture is "wombish" and that Jesus himself used the imagery of a mother hen brooding over her young. It is true that women can now be ordained but we are still not treated as equals. Women are not represented anywhere near proportionally in leadership—our Bishops are overwhelmingly male. It is rare for a woman to lead a large congregation. And, despite the fact that our recent General Convention did give a little bit of space to let women tell their #metoo church stories, from what I can see there is still no widespread movement to hold the male clergy who have verbally and physically abused women clergy and women parishioners truly accountable.

On a more mundane level, I cannot tell you how many times I have been questioned—what are you? How did you get to be Rector of a place like this? And even within this community, a place as progressive as St. Peter's, there are times I am clearly treated differently, dismissed, because I am a woman. I say this not to elicit sympathy, but to name the truth of my experience. We as a congregation, as a denomination, as Christians, as humans, still have a long way to go. And that, I believe, is one of the reasons we must continually be in dialogue with our sacred texts and stories—we must view them with a critical eye that asks whose story is not being told here, and why not? Because how we read God-stories, how we hear our sacred texts, shapes and forms our views and our lives. When I was a nurse midwife I worked with a lot of women experiencing domestic violence—one came in after being particularly brutally beaten, and told me she had been to her priest to ask what she should do, and he told her she should go home and try harder to please her husband, because Scripture gave him charge over her. So the consequences are real.

Using God, using Scripture, to abuse others is directly contrary to the God of love. And we all, all of us, with the grace of God, must work to do better living into the truth that Jesus lived, died, and rose to proclaim. The truth that Mary told—in Christ we are all new Creation, we are all members of one body, equally beloved of God. The truth that Jesus loved and respected the dignity of all people, including women. The truth that our historic and ongoing inability, refusal to see all people; women, transgender, non-binary individuals as equally beloved of God and equipped for ministry of all types diminishes and demeans all of us, the body of Christ.

My prayer on this feast of Mary, fierce, strong, friend of Jesus and evangelist of the Good News, is that we would hear her voice and follow her lead, proclaiming the truth of our experience of the Risen Lord, proclaiming the truth that in the world as God dreams it, there is neither male nor female, but there is justice, peace, and dignity for every blessed, beloved, and valued child of God.