Huldah the Prophet

2 Kings 22:14-23:3

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Tarana Burke, herself a survivor of sexual violence, worked with so many young women survivors that she got angry. She turned that anger into what became the Me, Too, movement, drawing attention to the pervasiveness of sexual harassment, abuse, and violence in our society. She saw an injustice and put her anger to work correcting it.

Rachael Denhollander, an elite US gymnast, decided to break the silence about Dr. Larry Nasser and his serial abuse of young gymnasts in his care. She was angry that dozens of young women like her were being abused, and no one in the gymnastics world seemed to want to do anything. She talked to the press and began the movement to have him held accountable. She saw an injustice and put her anger to work correcting it.

Bree Newsome was devastated by the killings at Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston, S. Carolina, in 2015. She and others saw that the Confederate Battle Flag, an important symbol to the murderer and a symbol of the horrors of slavery to every African American, was still flying over the South Carolina Capitol Building. She and others decided to do something about it, so she scaled the flagpole and ripped down the flag, all the while reciting to herself the Lord’s Prayer and Psalm 27. The flag was replaced, but eventually was permanently removed by the governor. She saw an injustice and put her anger to work to correct it.

These women are all descendants of Huldah the Prophet, as are Malala Yousefsai, Greta Thunberg and so many others. When the representatives of the King came to Huldah, she was so angry she refused to even refer to him as the King! “Tell the man who sent you,” she said to his representatives. She knew the law they had just “discovered,” and she had spoken about it for years, as had Jeremiah and other prophets like them. She had been saying that the kind of greed, abuse of the poor, worship of idols, and destruction of the kind of society God had chosen her people to create was wrong, unjust, awful. She’d been saying it for some time. No one listened. Until all of a sudden, a set of old scrolls are found and a King who was receptive to the word of God got interested in what this might mean. Actually, got afraid of what the consequences of the behavior of the people around him, past rulers, and the powerful of the land might be if God was angry. I wonder if he chose to go to Huldah instead of Jeremiah, who had a reputation as a kind of irritable prophet, because maybe King Josiah thought a woman would be kinder? Or maybe more likely to be intimidated into making a kinder, gentler, prophecy?

He was wrong. Huldah was not afraid to speak truth to power. She was not afraid to boldly say that there would indeed be consequences for the behaviors of past and present. The people had forgotten their history, their ethical and sacred center, which surely made God angry and sad. She was clear that Josiah behaved differently, a new kind of King who seemed to care, and so she supported the work he wanted to do. But she was also clear that the kind of erosion from the inside that had been going on for years had seriously weakened the nation. She was right, and after Josiah’s time and despite his efforts to fix it all, Babylon conquered Israel and the people went into exile. Huldah knew that God’s ways needed to be followed for the people to be strong. She said this boldly. She saw injustice and put her anger to work to address it.

This is the second to last in the series of sermons I have been preaching this summer about women in the Bible, and I have come to an angry woman. Actually, other women have been angry, like Hagar, but Huldah is a really good example of a type of woman that is often denigrated, even in our time and place. The anger of women seems to threaten a lot of people, including all sorts of media people. Still there are those who think women should be passive, quiet, patient, grateful for whatever they get without expecting more, and both women and men sometimes have that attitude. Yet the scriptures are full of women who show us a different way of interacting with the world, in a time and place where that was much harder than it is today. I watch what is going on in Afghanistan, where the Taliban would like to take their culture back to what it was like in ancient times and put women “in their place.” Yes, they say, we will support women’s rights. Then they qualify it by saying “we will support women’s rights ***under Islamic law***.” Just to be clear, most Muslims in this country and much of the rest of the Islamic world would not recognize the Taliban version of Islamic law, as they harken back to the first millennia and add their own interpretation of that to make it very hard for women. Many, many angry women are looking at the injustice of their current and future situation in Afghanistan, and I pray for their strength daily.

Anger that lashes out in violence and hate does not serve God or other people. But anger that can be put to work to address injustice can serve, in the model of Huldah, to change a society for the better. Huldah was angry on God’s behalf because the wealthy and powerful amassed property at the expense of the poor. Because religious leaders participated in excusing any kind of abusive behavior. Because Israel forgot they had been slaves in Egypt and enslaved and abused foreigners in their midst. Because they made a mockery of the commandments about worshipping only God, honoring family, refraining from killing and adultery and theft. She refused to sugar-coat her words to make nice with the King’s emissaries. She told it like it was.

Sometimes we need to say hard things to each other. Sometimes we need to hear hard things from those who understand God in powerful ways. Let us stay open to both of those realities, being like Josiah with Huldah, or Huldah with Josiah. Let us not be afraid. Amen.