

## Standing Together, Seeing Further

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### Numbers 27:1-7 NRSVUE Version

*Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward. Zelophehad was son of Hopher son of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh, of the clans of Manasseh, son of Joseph. The names of his daughters were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, saying, "Our father died in the wilderness; he was not among the congregation of those who gathered themselves together against the LORD in the congregation of Korah but died for his own sin, and he had no sons. Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father's brothers."*

*Moses brought their case before the LORD. And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father's brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them."*

Now typically for Mother's Day, one might choose a reading from the Bible about some of the incredible mothers whose complex stories are told in scripture — starting from Eve, through Ruth, Hannah, Elizabeth, Mary and many others besides.

And yet the story of the women we heard today drew me in because it offers a more expansive view of what it means to be a mother. The sisters *are* spiritual mothers to us in the sense that their story has the potential to profoundly shape us.

Furthermore, their story appears five times in Scripture. But guess where the story doesn't appear? In the Revised Common Lectionary.

It's important, so I wanted to explore it with you. These women have after all passed down to us through thousands of years a gift of wisdom, courage and **solidarity** that defines the best of what our mothers might want for us. They do so, not alone, but within a community, and it is within supportive communities of solidarity that motherhood can really thrive.

And it all begins in the wilderness.

## **Wilderness**

We know something about wilderness here. We know something about woods and pathways, and the way the land and water give food. We know something about a river that stretches to the horizon, that separates one land from another.

The story we just heard from the Book of Numbers takes place in the wilderness at the edge of another river some 3400 years ago, the Jordan River. The Israelites have come to the end of their forty years of wandering after being freed from enslavement in Egypt. Almost every one of those who left Egypt has died. Moses remains, but will soon be replaced by Joshua. This is a new generation. Call it GenEX-odus if you will!

They are preparing to invade the land of Canaan on the other side of the Jordan River; the land promised long ago to Abraham. The fact that they are on the point of invasion is something I want you to keep in the back of your mind.

## **The Women Stand in Solidarity**

And as the Israelite men sit together, already dividing up the land they will take by force, five young women walk into their midst: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah.

Picture them standing shoulder to shoulder before the all-male leadership and the entire community. These young, unmarried women walk into a space where women do not speak, where women have no place. And yet they find the courage to stand and make their claim, to stand in *solidarity* with each other, but also with all those who demand to be seen, to be counted, to belong.

It was a moment like no other, so memorable that their names were recorded and remembered for generations. Because they *were* seen. Compassion *was* extended to them, and justice. Their demand was granted by a community that was willing to be transformed.

## **The Tension**

Now it would be easy to stop there, to celebrate their courage and victory. And it is that. But it is also so much more. Because the land the sisters are asking for a share in is not empty. It is a land that already holds lives, stories, and people. And those people, the Others, the Canaanites, had ancestors in this promised land long before the Israelite's ancestor Abraham even arrived. When he first arrives, scripture records only the words "*and there were Canaanites in the land.*" (Gen 12:6) There is no record of a

battle. There is no conflict. The only conclusion we can draw is that the Canaanites welcomed the stranger Abraham.

And yet, this new generation does not, apparently, consider the possibility of co-existence as they prepare for battle.

So here is the **tension**: the sisters stand up against patriarchy. They challenge a system that excludes them. And at the same time, if they take the land they demand, they become complicit in a military colonial enterprise, a system that will lead to the deaths and dispossession of others.

Their courage is real. But their vision is limited.

They can see the Jordan river. But they cannot yet see beyond it. The Israelites — women and men — cannot see or imagine the people who live across the river, whose lives are bound up in that land.

### **Our Context / Who is God?**

How harshly can we judge them? They are embedded in a community that has been on the outside, a people who do not yet question war, who justify invasion by telling themselves God is on their side. It is what conquerors have always done. When Europeans came to this land, they believed that too. Religion has far too often been used to justify conquest.

And this matters now, when bombs are falling in so many places in the world and life feels fragile here too. We need to ask ourselves: who is God to us, and what truths shape how far we can see?

Scripture certainly shakes our perspectives . The *Book of Numbers* takes its English name from the military censuses it contains: men are counted for battle. And the book that continues the story, *Joshua*, tells stories of violent conquest in God's name.

But the Hebrew name for this book is different. It is called *In the Wilderness*. And that changes everything.

### **The Wilderness: Making Choices**

In the wilderness, conquest has not *yet* happened. The Israelites have not *yet* begun the invasion. Anything is possible.

The wilderness is a place of discernment, a place to listen, not only to stand up, as the sisters did, but to see more clearly.

Have you ever gazed out at the islands on the St. Lawrence, toward those twisted pines reaching into the sky, standing like sisters on gnarled granite, coexisting, each supporting the other? And have you felt the peace and clarity you seek?

In the wilderness, we remember the God we meet in Jesus: not a conqueror, but one who calls us to love our neighbour, cherish our enemy, see the marginalized, and stand in *solidarity* with the oppressed. How we see God will shape the choices we make.

In the wilderness we have agency, imagination, and a God who calls us not to conquer, but to love and to coexist. A God who calls us to hear better and to see further. A God who calls us to solidarity.

### **Solidarity: How Far Can You See?**

Solidarity is a concept based on our ability to see, not just God, but also others. Truly see. And like those pine trees I mentioned, it has deep roots — in justice, relationship and compassion, in scripture, and in the waters of our baptism. As we discern what God now calls from us in this time, we can draw strength from the visions of solidarity we *already* embrace.

So what does solidarity look like to you today?

To me it looks like *all* our groups and committee meetings where we truly see and support each other. It looks like Orange Shirt Day and Pride parades.

And what does solidarity sound like to you?

To me it sounds like voices of truth that tremble but do not stop. It sounds like music from every nation and every language. It sounds like singing, in plays and tea parties. And sometimes it sounds like voices calling for justice for Palestine or Ukraine, or advocating for Indigenous rights or the unhoused or the rights of people with disabilities. And so much more.

What does solidarity smell like to you?

To me it smells like the scent of land after rainfall, a land wide enough for all. It also smells like our church before a Sunday supper, or a Friday breakfast, or Sunday coffeehouse.

What does solidarity feel like to you?

To me it feels like warm coats and socks shared through our Winter Warmth program. It feels like the security and safety that comes from so many people caring for this space and these services behind the scenes. It feels like an arm around someone's shoulder. And it feels like the way my heart opens when one of you smiles at me.

And finally, what does solidarity taste like?

For me, it tastes like water drawn from a river that refuses to run dry. Food from every culture. It tastes like rice crackers and grape juice on a communion Sunday.

I've not mentioned anywhere near everyone involved here. Please forgive me. It's just a sample. But where can the foundation we've built here take us?

Solidarity teaches us that history is not a foregone conclusion. When we are able to see further, anything is possible. We saw that with the sisters, with Martin Luther King, with Mother Teresa, with the pulling down of the Berlin Wall, with the Pride movement, and the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. We see it in the love of a mother.

It's built on an ancient belief that we are all siblings, and that my freedom depends on yours.

Remember the Israelites in the wilderness, hearing the voices of the sisters from the margins, standing on the edge of the river -- on the edge of choice?

According to historians and archaeologists there is no evidence of conquest of battle in Canaan in that time period. None of the evidence that the Israelites invaded Canaan that should be there, actually exists. Jericho is after all the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. It has been intensely studied and excavated.

Theologians and historians believe that the story of the conquest of Canaan that appears in the book of Joshua was created much later at a time to unite the people against their enemies and to show them their strength. And at the very least, the violence was exaggerated. Now, there's good stuff in *Joshua* too, so don't throw it out! But you choose what to believe. Most likely, the Israelites and the Canaanites — just like in Abraham's time — actually, simply, learned to coexist.

Now it's our turn.

As we discern how we will live in a changing world, may we return to the wilderness and have the courage to stand like the sisters did, those spiritual mothers of ours.

May our vision keep growing. May we refuse to stop at just our own freedom.

May we learn, in this wild and holy world, that solidarity is not small. It is expansive. It is demanding. It is transformative.

And it is the only way to live love in God's sacred world.

Amen.