Huldah: The Prophet Wears a Dress!

2 Kings 22:8-20

Sermon Series: Not the Leader You Expected

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 Thirty years ago, as I graduated from what was then Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, I was advised that if I sought ordination, I would need to go someplace else: American Baptist Churches of PA/DE, of which you are a part, were not open to ordaining women. The Philadelphia Baptist Association, of which I am a part, was only slightly better.

 With that wisdom I returned home to Upstate NY, to Tabernacle Baptist Church in Utica, to the Oneida Association, where I was ordained, in spite of one woman present at my ordination council who thought ordaining women was ill advised. I returned to Philadelphia, accepting the call to pastor the Mayfair Conwell Memorial Baptist church, a small congregation in northeast Philly, their only ever female pastor in a region where only three other ordained women then served, only one of them as the “senior” pastor. I was an oddity, an anomaly. At clergy meetings, I felt like a woman in the men’s locker room. I was known in the regional office as “that woman”. People would come just to check out the woman preacher and leave saying things like, “Wow! Not bad for a woman!” Or “I didn’t think women could do that.”

 In my next church there were men who wouldn’t talk to me about finances because they assumed I wouldn’t understand. And women who would seek out my male colleague, “just because”. Deb was called to a dying congregation the United Church of Christ thought it would close. Why not give it to a woman, they thought? It was going under anyway. But God had a different idea. Deb grew that church in such numbers that they embarked on a building expansion project of over a million dollars!

 Women have always been leaders in the church; yet many congregations, including this one, have never called a woman pastor. You have had the opportunity to experience two very different styles of leadership in Deb and myself and we have found you, as a whole, very supportive. And yet I wonder, if the Pastoral Search Committee were to present the name of a woman candidate, if not a few of you would be dismayed, privately, perhaps, or whispering to just a few: “I really don’t want a woman as a pastor. That’s just not what God intends for them to do.”

 We are worshiping around the theme of leadership: specifically focusing on the unexpected leaders whom God has called out through the ages to lead God’s people and to do God’s will. Last week Deb reminded you of the story of Gideon, a scaredy-cat called to be a fighter! Next week we’ll think about Jonah, then Moses, the Samaritan Woman, Rahab and finally Jesus. None of these folks fits the criteria for leadership potential we would outline today! (Even Jesus!) None of them stacks up to be the most qualified, the most prepared, the best possible fit to serve God and God’s people. But there they are, each one hearing and responding to God’s call, not one of them perfect or even ideal but ultimately willing and faithful, sometimes in spite of themselves. In this season when we are choosing potential Presidential leaders, in this season when our Pastoral Search Committee is interviewing potential pastoral candidates, we want YOU to think and pray about leadership: for our country, our congregation, for each other as we consider who and how God calls to lead people into life.

 There was perhaps no better example of an unlikely leader than the one we find in our scripture today. In an era of strict patriarchy, in a time when women’s names were intentionally left out of recorded histories, including the Bible, the inclusion and affirmation of the story of Huldah the prophetess is a significant statement about the importance of her leadership. The story of Huldah is found in 2 Kings and again in Chronicles 34. Josiah is king and he decides that with his leadership they shall repair the Temple that has been destroyed. Although he was very young, (he was given the throne at age 6!) he was a good leader; we are told he “did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in all the way of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left.” (2 Kings 22: 2) It was in the rebuilding that the high priest reports the finding of “the book of law in the house of the Lord” (2 Kings 22:8), which is taken to Josiah and read aloud in his presence. When he heard it, Josiah “tore his clothes”, realizing that things had gone terribly wrong. He commands his men to take the newly found book to someone who knew what it meant, to someone who could interpret its meaning, to “inquire of the Lord for me, for the people, and for all Judah.” (2 Kings 22: 13) Josiah knew they had to find out the underlying meaning and implications—for himself as leader, for the people and for the nation. He sought “the Lord” and in doing so, he found God in the prophetess Huldah.

 Huldah! The men went, we are told, *directly to Huldah*! They could have gone to Jeremiah, who was prophesying during this same time period, or to a male priest, but they went to Huldah, a prophetess in her own right, who brings them the word of God and tells them of the impending disaster that will come because the people have worshiped other gods instead of Yahweh. *It is a woman* who conveys God’s wrath; it is a *woman* who offers hope to Josiah; it was a *woman* who authenticated this missing book as the word of God; it is a *woman* who had the recognized authority to interpret, to speak on behalf of God. Huldah, like the prophetess’ Deborah and Miriam, and later in the New Testament, like Philip the Evangelist’s four daughters who had the gift of prophecy (*Acts 21:8 & 9*), and Phoebe who is called a deacon (*Romans 16: 1-2*), and Junia who was considered an apostle (*Romans 16:7*), *Huldah* is the one who is recognized as the authority and the voice of the Divine. And because of this, Josiah listened; he read the book to his people. He made a new covenant with God and the people joined in and they reformed their religious life; they were faithful once again.

Huldah was an unlikely leader so long ago because of her gender, and yet the king and his people sought her wisdom, respected her authority and responded to her message. What about you? What role does gender play in your acceptance of a leader? How would you feel about a woman President of the United States or a *permanent* female pastor? If God can, and does, use both women and men as the biblical text clearly shows, then what *stops you or what excites you* about that reality?! Can you name and be grateful for the myriad of women who have nurtured your life and faith? Can you trust God to find the right leader for us, regardless of gender?

I am grateful that in the 30 years of my ministry, more and more women are being called to pulpits; more and more women are prominent leaders in our communities. And more and more female leaders are strong, viable candidates for political office. If God calls, who are we to reject?! May our hearts and minds be open as we seek new leadership for our church, our country, our world.