

"The Courage To Stand Straight"

"And there was a woman who had had a spirit of infirmity for 18 years; she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself." Eighteen years! Hard to imagine. How burdensome life must have been... day after day...week after week...month after month...year after year... unable to fully straighten herself.

We do not know from the Gospel story why she was unable to stand straight. Perhaps she was paralyzed or in such pain that it hurt to stand. There is some indication that her contemporaries may have considered her problem the result of demon possession. Perhaps it was a matter of having been bent over for so many years that she had forgotten how to stand straight. We really don't know. What we do know is that she had been bent over for 18 years...nearly two decades...hard to imagine. Or is it?

As I reflect on this morning's Scripture lessons it strikes me that there are many things in life which cause us to feel burdened...bent over if you will...and that when we think of it in this broader sense, perhaps it isn't all that hard to identify with the bent-over woman of Luke's Gospel.

Indeed, at certain times in history entire populations of people become bent over. In our Old Testament lesson from Exodus we find the people of Israel bent over under the burden of political oppression in Egypt. "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt," says God, "and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings...".."And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them."

Yes, there are times when whole groups of people are bent over, burdened by oppression. Certainly one of the clearest examples of a people bent over under the burden of oppression today is that of South Africa where racism is condoned and institutionalized in the system of apartheid. Tragically other examples abound as well. We know all too well that large groups of people suffer oppression, often for very extended periods of time.

In addition to the suffering of groups of people, each of us individually have experienced those things which have burdened us, weighed us down, bent us over. For some this has been physical illness causing us pain and discomfort. Those with long-term illnesses know the emotional

drain which accompanies physical suffering. Others of us may have had the good fortune to be healthy ourselves but have cared for loved ones who were experiencing pain and suffering. Yes, many of us know what it means to be bent over with physical burdens.

Another burden which many of us bear is the burden of grief. There are many losses in life which are accompanied by grief, not the least of which is the experience of the loss of someone to death. To experience that awful empty place inside when a loved one dies is to know what it means to be bent over with grief.

Finally, there are many among us who know well what it feels like to be bent over with psychological pain. The young adult dealing with painful memories of incest and sexual abuse, the woman deeply depressed after years of physical abuse from a spouse, the alcoholic unable to admit his problem and thus unable to begin recovery. Those who have suffered these pains know all too well that such wounds run deep and often take much longer to heal than physical wounds.

The woman in Luk's Gospel had been bent over for 18 years. Hard to imagine? Not really. For in many ways we are a bent over people.

And so it is that today's Scripture speaks to us in a way which names the reality of our lives. But more than simply naming the reality of our lives, the Scriptures speak to us a message of good news...the good news being that God's will for our lives is that we be healed. It is God's will that we be able to stand upright.

Listen again to the Exodus account of God's response to the suffering of the people. Having seen their oppression and heard their cries, God responds..."I have come to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey." "Come," says God to Moses, "I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the people of Israel, out of Egypt."

It was not God's will that the people of Israel should remain enslaved, oppressed by the Egyptians. Rather God desired liberation - healing and wholeness - for the oppressed people of Israel.

Likewise, we find God's healing power at work through Jesus. "Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath," we read in Luke. "And there was a woman who had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years; she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. And when Jesus saw her, he called her and said, 'Woman, you are freed from your infirmity. And Jesus laid his hands upon her, and immediately she was made straight, and she praised God.'"

It was not God's will that the woman should remain forever bent over, bound by a spirit of infirmity. God desired well-being...healing and wholeness...for the woman in the synagog. And so, I believe, it is with us. When we experience oppression in its many forms...when we experience physical pain, the burden of grief, the anguish of psychological or emotional pain...when we are bent over, God would have us stand straight and be made well.

Given that our God is almighty and all-powerful I suppose that God could bring about such healing quite apart from any effort on our part. Were ours a God who determined our actions as does the puppeteer with his or her puppets, then God could simply choose our path for us. What I have come to believe, however, is that ours is a God who allows, perhaps even expects, us to participate in our own healing. Far from being a puppeteer, ours is a God who longs to be in relationship with us, to work and grow with us as we participate in the unfolding of God's divine will. In those places where we are bent over, God invites us to stand up straight - to be a participant in the process of being liberated...of being made well.

It isn't easy. It takes tremendous courage to lift one's eyes from the ground, to face squarely whatever pain or oppression has kept us bent over, and then risk standing up straight.

When I think of whole peoples courageously standing up straight - participating in their own liberation - I cannot help but think of the people of the Philippines. Filipinos just recently marked the third anniversary of the people's uprising which led to the ouster of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos. It was on that day, three years ago, that thousands of people literally placed their bodies between the military forces still loyal to Marcos and those who had occupied a key military camp in Manila. Those of us in the U.S. on that day had the advantage of watching the events unfold on television with the benefit of news commentators informing us of what was happening in various parts of the city...what U.S. officials were saying...following the movements of the Marcos family as they abandoned the Presidential Palace and boarded the U.S. plane which would take them to Hawaii.

The people in the streets of Manila that night had no such knowledge. All they knew was that some sort of coup was underway and that the military personnel inside the camp were no longer loyal to Marcos. By placing their bodies - thousands of them - around the camp, they were doing their part to liberate their country from the increasingly oppressive

rule of President Marcos. Had those people not been there it is anyone's guess as to what kind of battle would have taken place between the military personnel inside and outside the camp...that is to say, no guarantee whether the Marcos loyalists would have prevailed.

Because the people stood as they did, surrounding the camp, that battle never took place. As they stood there that day and that night, however, they had absolutely no guarantee as to whether they would be successful in participating in the ouster of Marcos or whether they would become so many casualties in a military battle.

The events of that night did not liberate the Philippines. The poverty in that country is as bad today, if not worse, than it was three years ago. Political oppression and human rights abuses are still a major concern. But you know, something powerful happens in a country where people who have been bent over begin to stand up straight. One by one at first...then in the thousands...then in the millions. The yoke of oppression fashioned by the Spanish and then U.S. colonizers in the Philippines has begun to crack. The struggle for liberation, for just economic policies, for true land reform...this struggle will be long and difficult. But once people have lifted their eyes from the ground...once they have felt the hand of Jesus and heard his voice telling them that they can be free, there is no turning back.

The courageous actions of those people on the streets of Manila just three years ago grew out of a growing conviction on the part of the Filipino people that they will someday truly be free and a sovereign nation. And the courage displayed that day continues to fuel the struggle for liberation which continues there today.

Such political struggles are complex. We can think of situations all over the globe...Central America...South Africa...the Middle East...where people are rising up. The positions taken, the methods used and ideologies espoused confuse us and we wonder about rights and wrongs. And it is good that it causes us to wonder. I get nervous when someone figures they have all the answers, and those answers are simple. Life isn't simple. And neither are the political struggles of peoples.

What the Scriptures make clear, however, is that whenever and wherever a people are oppressed, God wishes for them liberation - for healing and wholeness. And what our life experience makes clear, is that to participate in the liberation takes great courage. The people standing outside of Camp Crane in Manila three years ago last night knew something about courage.

But we need not participate in a revolution to respond to God's will that we stand up straight. Neither need we face armed military personnel to find ourselves in situations which require courage.

Those of us who have experienced deep grief - particularly if that grief is over the death of someone very dear to us, a spouse or a parent perhaps - those who experience such grief know how much courage it takes to face the pain. We'll do anything to ease that awful ache inside - even to the point of pretending that the pain isn't there - pushing the feelings away - trying to go on as if things are the same as always.

It takes courage to face our grief, feel the pain, weep the tears, sit with that aching loneliness. But those who have found that courage know that it is by taking that path, and only by taking that path, that healing takes place. God wishes for us healing. God offers us healing. But we are called upon to participate - to take part in the process of becoming well.

Off the burdens which cause us to become bent over, psychological pain is perhaps the most difficult to face -- particularly when that pain is the result of experiences which others are uncomfortable talking about. In many families alcoholism is the cause of great pain, both for the person with the disease and for those affected by it. And yet, alcoholism is still one of the best kept secrets of many families today.

Likewise, sexual abuse and physical violence - causing incredible mental anguish and emotional pain - are seldom talked about - even within a family, let alone with others.

A large factor I believe in why we find this burden so very difficult is that so often we face this pain in isolation. The young girl, molested by her grandfather, is afraid to tell anyone, even her parents and thus grows up with psychological scars, made all the more painful because no one knows about her experiences. The married woman misses church one week rather than making up stories about how her eye became bruised. Her sense of shame that her husband beats her is so great that she stays home alone rather than reach out to other people.

The courage required to stand up straight in such situations is great. The first step toward healing is being able to share your burden with another - to tell them of the abuse and to take strength from knowing that while you will need much courage to begin to heal, you need not walk that path alone.

"And there was a woman who had a spirit of infirmity for 18 years; she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. And when Jesus saw her, he called her and said, 'Woman you are freed from your infirmity.'"

And Jesus laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she praised God."

To be whole people...to participate in our healing takes courage. The word of hope in the Gospel today is that God wants for us to be well... that healing is possible. The word of challenge is that we are invited to participate in our liberation. The word of grace is that we are not alone.

Know that you are not alone. Participate in your healing. Take courage. Praise God. Amen.

Mark 7:24-30

An outsider came to Jesus. Her nationality and her gender made her unacceptable, but she had heard of Jesus, and she came to him. He had entered a house, and would not have any one know it. And yet she had heard of him, and she came to him, and she asked him to heal her child.

She was a Greek, and a woman. Her status in her own community is not told, but as a woman and a Gentile, she was ritually unclean in Jesus' community. And yet she came to him, asking him to include her, and her daughter, in the new community of those who received the gracious goodness of God. She came, and asked Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter.

Several things do not happen here.

Mark does not tell us that the disciples objected to her coming. Those disciples who so often objected, to the children, to the unbelievers, to the crowds, to Jesus' conversations with women in public. Mark does not tell us that the disciples objected to her coming (although Matthew does).

And Mark does not tell us that the religious leaders objected to her coming. Those who are portrayed in the gospels as being so zealous for correct living according to the law of God. Mark does not tell us that they objected (nor does Matthew).

Something more peculiar happened when Jesus went to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

Jesus, the one who included everyone. Jesus, the one who ate with Jewish tax collectors, and talked with a heretic woman, and rescued the raped woman. Jesus, who travelled with women, and relied on women's financial support. Jesus, who healed people on the sabbath against the law. Jesus, who along with many other rabbis spoke urgently about God's passion for people rather than for ritual.

This same Jesus, not the disciples, not the scribes and the Pharisees, but Jesus, refused to include the woman and her child in the new community of the beloved of God.

Let the children first be fed, he said. For it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.

And there is something even more peculiar about this story.

The woman argues with Jesus. The unclean, unacceptable Gentile woman argues with Jesus, the Jewish rabbi, saying, "Yes, but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." There is enough at the messianic banquet to feed not only the insiders, but the outsiders as well. We may indeed all eat the same food, at the same table.

The gracious goodness of the God you preach, Jesus, is abundant enough to satisfy not only the Jews but also the gentiles. The power of the presence of the God you teach, Jesus, liberates not only the children of Israel, but also my child, female and Greek though she may be.

So she argues with Jesus.

And he agrees.

He changes his mind, changes his position, alters his narrow view. He listened to her when she said, yes, but. He paid heed to an argumentative, insistent, angry, urgent mother, an unclean outsider, a Greek woman.

"And he said to her, 'For this saying you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.'"

And she went home, and found the child lying in bed, and the demon gone.

Those of us who listen to this text today are in a peculiar position. We are both insiders and outsiders, oppressors and oppressed. We are women, which makes us marginal. And yet we are clergy, or studying to be clergy, or active in the life of a congregation, or seeking to find meaning within the church, which makes us people moving toward, working toward the inside, the center. Some of us are women of color, which pushes us further to the margin; some of us are white, which moves us closer to the center. Some are men, which, no matter what your color, moves you toward the center of power. Some are Hispanic, or third world women, moving you further outward. Some of us are lesbian women, which in some churches removes us from the circle; some of us have disabilities, which shoves us further out. Some of us are

single mothers, divorce, survivors of physical and sexual abuse. Some of us are married, with or without children, and have lived relatively conventional lives. And all of us are a combination of these and other characteristics.

Jesus was a man, which made him a relative insider in the ranking of his society. But he was from Galilee, the ridiculed back country. And he consistently challenged both the religious and political authorities of his time, without the appropriate education and degrees. He was both respected and rejected, both inside and outside.

And his answer to the woman's request sounds just like a harried D.S., or conference minister. Let my people first be fed, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. You push too hard, you ask too much, you don't play the game by the rules. Can't you see I must take care of my own, before I worry about all you others out there, all the unclean, the problem people.

Jesus himself needed to hear the words of the Other, the stranger, the unclean, in order to respond fully and wholly. He who was both inside and outside his own community, yet needed to hear the strident, urgent words of this nameless woman in order to see more clearly and understand more fully.

Those of us here this day listen to this story with many different ears. We hear the nameless women's words, and Jesus' words, from many different ages and places in the family of women.

She speaks to us as an outsider, to us, who are both

insiders and outsiders, oppressed and oppressing, who in varying ways wish also to be included in the messianic banquet. And Jesus' initial words sound too painfully familiar, too much like what I read in the local paper as the University of Maine struggles with inclusive language and the letters to the editor and op ed articles are filled with ridicule and scorn.

We push ourselves and our denominations over ways women are treated like dogs, unfit to receive the bread reserved to men. In one Catholic diocese in this country, our feet are not even fit to be washed on Maundy Thursday, because we are not men. And Jesus' words and deeds are cited to support such outrage.

We fight among ourselves and with others over the control of women's bodies. We labor in our parishes and schools and workplaces to change language and attitudes and actions, to preach wholeness to our daughters and sons as well as to our bosses and husbands and coworkers and sisters. We follow in the footsteps of this nameless woman, arguing for, working for the dispossessed of the globe, the oppressed in this nation and other nations.

And yet we draw our own lines of exclusion. We set our own limits on who may be included in the messianic banquet, even those of us on the margins, those outside the circle. Yes, everyone is welcome, but not the Biblical Witness Fellowship or the Good News People. Yes, gay and lesbian people are welcome, but don't make it difficult for the closeted people by being so noisy and starting a witch hunt. Yes, I support other women, but they'd better be good enough for the job or else they will hurt the rest of us. Of course our bulletin should be in large type,

professional, as serious. Is she one of us . . . a feminist, a Methodist, a mother, a survivor . . . or is she one of them . . . and we can each fill in our own blanks.

The unnamed woman is long dead, and her daughter is long dead. And yet they speak to us who gather for this conference on women and preaching, women and the word. They argue with us, stridently, angrily, urgently.

She challenges us, just as she did that rabbi from Nazareth. She forces us back on ourselves, to examine the limits we set on ourselves and on others, to look at the ways we refuse to listen to the demands of others for a place at the messianic banquet.

And she gives us an example of the power of urgent, angry, insistent argument. She gives me courage for those faculty meetings when it just seems too much to raise the subject again. For those sermons when it would be so much easier just to preach a gentle, friendly message. For those decisions which would be simpler if I did not have to listen to her voice.

Yes, she said. Yes, of course, . . . but . . .

And in the power of that insistent strength lies the courage to move once again.

This Gentile woman, the outsider, the unclean one, came to Jesus, asking that her child be healed. She argued with him, refusing to accept rejection. And she went home, and found the child lying in bed, and the demon gone. So may it be, for all of us. Amen.

"A Difference of Opinions"

29 March 1989

Jeremiah 31:21-22

Mark 3:19b-35

Centuries have gone by, but in certain respects, times haven't changed much. Everywhere else Jesus could do miracles. So great a crowd followed him around the countryside that the disciples had to have a boat ready for a quick escape, lest Jesus be crushed by those desperate people who pushed and shoved and elbowed their way through the crowd to touch him. Everywhere else Jesus could do miracles, but not back home. For strangers, miracles came easily, but for family and friends - the people he grew up with, the people he loved, the people whose griefs and disappointments he knew as well as he knew his own - for them it was a different story. They knew him back when. They knew his father. Maybe they even had raise an eyebrow when his mother appeared to be a little too pregnant given the circumstances. They sat on his benches, slept in beds that he made. They borrowed boards from his shop to carry their loved ones to their graves. They yoked their oxen to one of his plows. They knew him back when, and they were hard to impress. "So this is little Jesus, carpenter turned medicine-man. Too bad for the family that he got religion and turned into a fanatic."

Everywhere else Jesus could do miracles, but not back home. There was too much suspicion, misunderstanding and embarrassment in the air. Jesus was back, but he wasn't the same. He had changed. His family knew it even before they had laid eyes on him. Something had happened to him, and whatever it was, they didn't like it. He was challenging the values and traditions in which he had been raised. He was asking too many questions and speaking as if he knew all the answers. He came back into town with a seedy looking bunch of friends and a reputation that preceded him by days. Out there in front of all the neighbors, he was making a scene, arguing with important people, local leaders, even scribes who had come all the way from Jerusalem. He was over-excited. He was beside himself. If they could just get him home, they could calm him down and get him back to normal.

What was it about Jesus that set them off? What was the difference of opinion that had the family running for a straight-jacket and the scribes calling Jesus names? Was it that he had cured on the Sabbath? Was it that he had defied the authorities? Was it that he disrupted the status quo by touching lepers and numbering tax-collectors among his friends? Was it that he failed to act pious and holy enough? Or was it simply that he refused to be the same and let them remain as they were? It was small wonder that the family was nervous. At some level, everybody knew that things would start to change when once came to town? Everybody knew that, once he opened his mouth, things were never going to be the same in Nazareth again.

Nazareth or Boston, things are never the same for long. If you are alive, things change by definition. A child is born; a child grows. Slowly but surely, she confronts the awful awareness of her separateness. After a certain point comes the realization that she can no longer dictate the terms on which she will accept the world. There are limits. By the time she is two she has run up against the persistent fact that what she wants and what others want frequently is different. Making that discovery more than explains why two is a difficult age for all concerned.

And it doesn't stop at age two. It happens a few weeks after the first time we fall in love. It

happens sometimes even before the honeymoon is over. It happens when the children go off to school, or when retirement brings us back home. The old balance is shaken and we confront again the awful awareness of just how different we are. Though we may love passionately, we can never merge into another. We are different. No matter how small the differences are, they remain significant. In one way or another we have to keep making that discovery over and over as long as we live.

People are different. They have different needs, different opinions, different interests and abilities, different likes and dislikes. Failing to acknowledge differences among its members is what gets families or churches, or for that matter, any institution into trouble more quickly than almost anything else. The similarity between families and churches is not coincidental. The gospel makes strangers into family. Before the story of the Nazareth homecoming is over, Jesus made us all family, replacing all hierarchies and roles and factions with the ties of kinship. Not the priests or scribes or Pharisees, but "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother," he said. Conformity was not the price of kinship in his family. Difference did not necessarily result in division. Difference could result in mutuality and support the common good. Unity did not require uniformity. Jesus did not expect people to be the same. He went out of his way to avoid it and before he was done he had opened up the promises of Israel to the world. He made a community out of tax collectors and fisherman and Zealots and prostitutes. He crossed lines that gave the neighbors the jimwillies to make a family of those who belonged together because they loved God.

Jesus recognized that people are different and those differences can be gifts. Sometimes families act as if differences are deadly. Sometimes churches act as if differences are sinful. Just as in Nazareth, when the stakes are high enough, we reach for whatever metaphorical straight-jacket we have at our disposal. We wrap our labels around Jesus, if we get the chance, in order to plunder his house. We wrap our labels around Jesus in our attempt to find meaning and forgiveness and love without having to run the risk of changing our assumptions, our minds, our hearts.

What did not work in Nazareth, however, stands no better chance of working in Boston or any other town. God calls us to a wholeness that celebrates difference. God expects us to change, to grow up. The family that God calls us to be is not the mythical happy family in which there are never any differences of opinion, any disagreements, any conflicts of interest. For a family in which there are never any disagreements is a family in which love has stopped growing. It is a family which stunts its members by ignoring their honest differences in order to manipulate a false sense of sameness, whatever the cost. Ultimately, the price paid for sameness is higher than anyone would imagine. It creates more pain than it prevents because it closes off the rich possibilities for life and love.

The cost of sameness can be indeed incredibly high. Bernie Siegel is an oncologist and an author of a popular book called *Love, Medicine and Miracles*. Over the years of his practice, Dr. Siegel has seen malignancies repeatedly occur in conjunction with untenable stress or loss, or inescapable conflict. Cancer seems to be the disease of "nice" people. Time and again, he found that his patients were people who could not claim their differences and legitimate needs. People need wholeness. They cannot deny growth or change forever without paying a price. When psychological or emotional or spiritual growth is chronically blocked, the result, too frequently, seems to be the malignant growth of the cancer. Certainly, Dr. Siegel's theory is not the only explanation of why people get sick. As a former cancer patient myself, I have an extremely low tolerance for blame-the-victim theories, but I think that Bernie Siegel has seen enough correlation to

raise a red flag. A false sense of sameness can be lethal to the body as well as the spirit. How you live your life may indeed determine just how much life there is to live.

The world is full of half-truths, and of all of them, one of the most insidious is the message that we get to a point in life after which we no longer have much choice about how we live it. We are stuck with our circumstances. Things are the way they are and they cannot be changed. This message is seductive, because there comes a point in life when anyone with eyes half-opened to the events rushing by, realizes that indeed choices have been made, choices which for better or worse have altered the future of our yesterdays. We have set our patterns. We have peopled our families with friends and relatives and children. Surveying our whereabouts, we realize all the things that we will never do, all the things that we will never be.

Anyone who has stood there cannot help but wonder if there ever were any real choices to be made, or if somehow we just followed the path of least resistance, letting our lives be determined by the most ridiculous of flukes. Were there real choices or were we not strong enough to choose against family pressure, social pressure, the pressures of what it means to be a man or a woman? The sins of our fathers and mothers, not to mention our own failures, have a way of haunting us, of determining the shape of our lives. It seems incredible that there could have been real choices when we grow restless. We become strangers to these roles and expectations of ours. We become victims of our own habits and routines. And the message from all around us is that this is the way that life is. Make the best of it. Settle down and get on with the business of living.

The words of Jeremiah bear a different message. They are strange and marvellous words. "The Lord has created a new thing." He speaks these words to the people of Jerusalem who had been driven from their war-ravaged land. Jeremiah speaks the promises of God to a down-and-out people who are truly strangers in a strange land, hoping beyond hope for a long ago time, restless for a home, almost beyond memory. There was no reason why their dismal state of affairs should have changed. They had not become more holy or just or honest. There was good reason to believe that all the choices had been made for them, by the mistakes of a people long since dead and gone. They were stuck in this land of exile. Might as well settle down and make the best of a bad situation. There was no reason to expect otherwise, but God was about to make a new beginning for them. God would restore the people to their home. God would make a new thing on the earth. God would step in and change this sad ending to the story of an insignificant people, ground up in the bureaucracies of great nations at war. A new beginning, a fresh start, a clean slate - truly the stuff of which miracles are made.

But that is not all! The new thing of which Jeremiah speaks is very new, even to us modern folks who find it in an old Old Testament. You heard it right. "The Lord has made a new thing: A woman protects a man." Even today this is a curious piece of news. Among the generations of scholars who have looked at this text, there is quite a difference of opinions about what it means. No one seems to know quite what to make of this new thing. It is remarkable. It is different. It doesn't fit into anyone's scheme of things. Understandably, the generations who have read and reread this verse have puzzled over the meaning of the Hebrew verb "sabab" - "to protect." Does it mean to protect, to surround or something entirely different? Scholars have agonized over the meaning of the metaphor and have arrived at widely divergent translations. Over the years, most have seen it as an image of safety in the restored Israel. People would be so safe that even a woman could protect a man! Imagine that! Others would translate the text to read something not so new, "A woman will encircle a man with devotion." More radical scholars argue that the new thing is a woman turned into a man.

The Lord has created a new thing indeed! So new, so marvellous that it does not seem fair to explain it, for fear that I might explain it away. Few sentences in Scripture hold on so tightly to the mystery of revelation. Instead, I bring you these words: "A woman protects, surrounds, encircles a man." The literal meaning of the words is obvious enough. What word of prophecy does Jeremiah speak to you? Is it a word that threatens, provokes, comforts, inspires, bewilders?

To me, these words of Jeremiah are marvellous words as I struggle to make peace with the limits of my life. The prophecy challenges the ease with which I grow complacent with these limits. It suggests that there is an alternative to simply making the best of all of our bad situations. The words of Jeremiah are witness to something creative and startling. Things do not have to stay as they are. There are such things as choices, second chances, new beginnings, because God continues creating. The most marvellous part of Jeremiah's prophecy is that God is still making new, surprising and marvellous things happen. God brings light from darkness, hope out of disaster, life out of death, love out of fear. It is never too late for any of us to look for those new things, to hear God's call to wholeness, to find the new doors which God is opening, to break free of whatever patterns have trapped us and become more alive and hopeful. While we cannot undo the past, we are free to choose how we live this day and what we will hope for tomorrow. And that is quite a gift.

Like it or not, things are always changing. It is the nature of this life of ours lived in time. To try to hold onto the familiar because it seems safe is futile, for there is no way to wall out the pain that change might bring. All that is possible is to close the door to tomorrow's promise, to close the door on God.

You have only to look around to know that our God is a God who delights in difference, in variety, in change. A new creature is afoot in the land, the bearer of unimaginable possibilities. God has done something quite unheard of. God has reversed the basic expectations of what it is to be a man or a woman in this world. God has broken down dividing line and opened up to us the full possibilities of being human, of becoming ourselves, of celebrating our differences. We need not be trapped by our roles and routines, unless we want to be. "For the Lord has created a new thing on the earth: 'A woman protects a man.'"

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Old Testament: Exodus 1:7-22
 Epistle : Ephesians 2:4-7
 Gospel : John 3:14-17

DEATH to Life:

To serve as an introduction this afternoon, to those of you who don't know me, I want to tell you that I'm one of those people for whom THE BABY BOOMER edition of TRIVIAL PURSUIT was invented. I grew up in the sixties! AH! THE SIXTIES! A Time when we still had heroines and heros. People like Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, The Kennedys, Rosa Parks, William Solan Coffin, Coretta Scott and Martin Luther King, Jr., Timothy Leheary, Golda Meir and Dr. Benjamin Spock. It was also the time when TV soap operas were just coming into their hay-day. I can remember running home from Woosher Junior High School to see who Barebous Collins was going to bite next on DARK SHADOWS, and when Dr. Steve Hardy was the Heart Throb of G.H. and Jessy Brewer had had only one husband.

So it seems only natural to me that as I grew up I would also fall in love with the Heroines and Heros of Scripture. I was almost destined to it. In my more egotistical moments I compare myself to biblical characters, and in my more divinely inspired moments, I see the lives of biblical heroines and heros reflected in the lives of people today.

And I can give you a quick example of those egotistical moments. When Judy Kohatsu called and said that the committee thought that it was about time for me to preach at Women and the Word, I felt like Moses! I said, OH, no! You don't want me! You want one of those Aaron types, like Kathryn Johnson, Sharon Link or Val Roberts. Now they can really preach!" But, like Moses, the lot fell to me despite my protesting. And now as I stand before you on this afternoon, knowing the it's post lunch nap-time on a rainy day, I'm a bit fearful of the outcome. And knowing that I am known to be a long winded preacher, I feel like Esther before the King, saying, "Well, if I perish, I perish."

Our Scripture lessons for this afternoon bring two other biblical figures, - heroines into our conscious awareness -- Shiprah and Puah. Now there are two names for those of you who are anticipating the arrival of a child soon! I'll bet you'll throw them into the Biblical hopper won't you? The first sounds like the newest model from GM, "take a ride in the new 1989 Shiprah," and Puah sounds like something you would order at a Polynesian restaurant, or as some of my southern friends who heard me talk about this biblical character before thought, the lower economic class, "the poor." But no matter how strange their names sound and no matter how minuscule their reference in scripture, these two women are a vital link in our biblical heritage and in our life long journey of faith that brings us from death to life. For these two women were the midwives of the Hebrew nation while they were in bondage in Egypt. Shiprah and Puah were the ones who brought LIFE out of the dark wombs of their people, the ones who brought new hopes and dreams to the light of day, for their tribe.

And they must have been pretty good at their jobs, for the scriptures tell us that the Pharaoh had become quite concerned about how strong and healthy the Hebrew slaves were growing, and how their numbers were growing. First he tries to have his taskmaster increase the load of work

that each slave is to do and to oppress and afflict them during their labor, but the people of the Hebrew tribe only grow stronger and more determined under this pressure. So he has to come up with a new plan, and he sends for Shiphrah and Puah and he orders them to kill the children of Israel. He tells them that when they come to a Hebrew woman crying out in travail on the birthing stool, if it is a female child they can let it live, but if it is a male child, they must strangle its life before it has a chance to breathe the air, see the light of day.

I often think about the choices those two women must have had floating through their minds as they left Pharaoh's place that day. For to disobey Pharaoh surely would mean their deaths, but to disobey YAHWEH, to disobey God, would not only mean their own spiritual and moral death, it would also mean the death of all God's people as well. (Isn't it amazing how right from the beginning, in the second book of the Bible, first chapter, God is showing us how our individual stories are caught up with the story of the whole people of God!) Shiphrah and Puah put none of God's children to death. Soon the second summons from Pharaoh came and they were asked why they had not done what they had been ordered to do, and I just love the story that they came up with; they played on Pharaoh's prejudices and enlarged ego, his moccasin -- and told him that Hebrew women were not like Egyptian women, they were not as frail and delicate and beautiful, and their men did not pamper them like Egyptian men did and Hebrew women had grown tough and strong from all their slave labor in the fields and so they did not call for any help when they had their children, so Shiphrah and Puah did not have the opportunity to be at any births of Hebrew children, and Pharaoh could not argue with their logic, so he let them go, but ordered all male children to be thrown into the river. But, I like to believe that Shiphrah and Puah were already one step ahead of Pharaoh, they had already learned how to make baskets of reeds and pitch from along side the river, and when a male child was born they would place the child in the basket and float it down river in sure and certain hope that it would be plucked out again. And it seemed that they did this very thing to the child of a woman who was a Levite. Sad, we know little more of her than that -- They helped her cast her son into the river of life, the Nile, and saved him from sure and certain death. And Pharaoh's own daughter plucked him out of the river and gave him life. That child grew up to be the hope of his people, he became the symbol of new freedom, for his name was Moses, the liberator of those who were oppressed, and from the line of Moses there later came the great King DAVID, from the line of David, came the one who was the final fulfillment of all the nations longing, the one who embodied Hope, the one who would take the tribe from spiritual death to abundant life... Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ.

Now this is indeed a powerful story, a story of how out of the threat of death, new life came both in a physical and in a spiritual sense. But it leaves me with at least two questions, or two areas of question, questions that I believe we all need to be asking:

First, who are the taskmasters that afflict God's people today? Who is it that is giving the order to put new life to death?? And how do we act out that order?? I hear that order to kill when I read in the newspaper that once again they have threatened cuts in the public assistance programs of our state and our nation; programs that are the only source of life for the aged and physically handicapped, and those who are homeless and jobless, and these cuts are made so that defense spending

can remain at an all time high level, and defense contractors' taxes can remain low -- defense programs that are designed not only to bring death to the people of God living in other nations but to ours as well, and I know that I accept that order every time that I remain silent after reading those headlines. And I heard the death sentence pronounced loud and clear on the T.V. during Holy Week, as reports about the El Salvadoran election were shown. And it became clear that more people would be needing to flee that nation as refugees, -- and our Government continues to seek new ways to deport refugees back to the countries of their origin, and if we allow it to continue, then we accept the order to drown them in the river of oppression and eventual death!!

I hear the order to kill innocent life when I hear people talk about the need to supply the homeless and the hungry of our cities with a safe warm shelter and a hot meal, but don't want their places of worship cluttered up with baskets of collected can goods, or don't want to be asked all the time to give of their resources to provide shelter, and don't want their town to become a haven for indigent people of the city.

I hear Pharoah's voice ordering death to many of God's most vulnerable children, who die in isolation from family, the society at large and even the church -- because the disease, AIDS, has infected their bodies, --- and it is assumed that their lives have been immoral at best -- and incompatible with God's teachings at worst. -----and it's easier to allow the general public to be infected with the disease, "AFRAIDS," than to vigorously fight the virus HIV and our own fears.

And it seems to be a willingness to accept the death sentence which allows teenage pregnancy to remain at an all time high, while people scubble over sex education in our schools, thinking that little or wrong knowledge is better than accurate information.

And I've heard the order to kill be given while sitting around the table at church meetings, when a new member of the group or congregation comes up with an idea of how to respond to God's missional concerns and those all too familiar phrases are spoken "OH, WE TRIED THAT ONCE AND IT DID NOT WORK" and "WE'VE NEVER DONE IT THAT WAY BEFORE," and I always suspect that the same prejudices that threatened Pharaoh threaten the "old guard" in church leadership as well.

And I've seen the order to kill carried out in relationships between people when one member of the relationship wants to set out on a new venture or wants to try out a new way of relating to others and to the world, wants the chance to slow down the river of life in order to view new possibilities, and the other one just cannot let that happen for the fear that the new life coming to the other might mean that they, too, would have to change or might be left out. So they choose death instead, death always comes at a lower risk than life. For one can always die, if they remain strangled in the womb of darkness, but it takes energy and desperate need to breathe fresh air, to travel down the birth canal and to breathe forth into life. Any woman who has given birth to a child can tell you that life comes only at the price of momentary pain.

But the second and the more important area of questions that the story of Shiprah and Puah raises is HOW DO WE CHOOSE LIFE OVER DEATH? HOW DO WE ENDURE, SUFFER, HOPE AND CELEBRATE LIFE?? How do we defy the order to

put life to death? How do we make our actions congruent with the statement that CHRIST has, by his death has brought us life? We do it when we read the headlines in the newspaper and pick up the pen and the paper and write a letter to our Representatives in the Congress and the Senate or to the President himself and say that we will no longer watch our sister struggle with the decision of whether to feed her children's stomachs, to heat their home or to put shoes on their feet, while dollars are spent building the implements of death (and believe me I know for many of you whose congregations are made up of people who work for Raytheon, Digital and G.E., that is a hard a statement to make. It is hard for me as well, because I know that the same dollars that pay my congregation's salary, also pay mine. But I also know that LIFE always costs something.)

We can make it known to our government that if we can make room in America for South American drug dealers who can buy their way into this country, we can also make a place for the refugees who come penniless, leaving all their worldly possessions and loved ones behind, fleeing for their lives, for they love their homelands as much as we love America.

We can come to church on Sunday mornings with a canned good in our hands and when asked to be on the crew to cook a meal for 'Rosies' or pay for a meal at Pine Street when it's our church's turn, we can say YES, I CAN make time for that. Because we know what the prophet Isaiah said is true, God wants the offering of our hearts more than those of ornamentation and ritual.

We can be the ones to encourage the ideas of newcomers in our church, INSTEAD OF BEING THREATENED BY THEIR INVOLVEMENT TO THE POINT OF EXCLUDING THEM, WE CAN BE THE ONES TO SAY, "SURE, LET'S TRY IT THAT WAY, OR MAYBE IT WILL WORK THIS TIME." And we can put our hands to the task as well, we can be the ones who also grab hold of that new individual's dream for new life and new possibilities and pull the dream from the darkness of creation into the light of day. And perhaps more importantly we can be the one to stand by and be supportive even if it doesn't work. If the dream doesn't float and obstacles are found, then we can help with the imagining of an alternative like Shiphrah and Puah, we can make a basket of pitch and river reed and float that dream down river until it can be plucked out and given the opportunity for life.

And in our personal relationships, the hardest sphere of all, we can override the fear of the risk of being left behind, we can move beyond the fear of change, and we can support one another, sometimes that will mean just getting out of the way, other times it will mean bending down scooping the pitch and cutting the reeds and creating the kind of support they need to move along the river of life to new possibilities of growth.

You know when I started this sermon, I told you that in my egotistical moments I see myself in the heroines and heroes of Scripture, well this is not one of those moments. This is one of those divinely inspired moments because when I look out there at your faces, I see the faces of Shiphrah and Puah. I see the faces of those who have the power and the courage to defy the order to put to death the dreams of God's people. I see those who have the ability to bring new life to their tribe!!

You know the heroines and heroes of the sixties might well be gone, but in the eighties and nineties there are new heroines and heroes JUST

WAITING TO COME INTO THEIR OWN, PEOPLE WITH NAMES LIKE..... God willing even Schrader. And I don't know about you, but me, I'm a child of the sixties and I just can't wait for the next episode to see what's going to happen!!

* For indeed, Jesus Christ has died, that our sins might be put to death, and so that our spiritual death might be brought to new life.

May God's peace be with you, you midwives of God's tribe.