

Reclaiming our heritage.

I have been concerned about the place and state of women in the church for a number of years; at first i felt alone, frightened and powerless; alone because i knew few other people at that time who seemed to be interested - and so i wondered what was wrong with me - frightened because the issue raised strong feelings in me that i didn't know what to do with; and powerless because there seemed to be nothing that a woman could do anyhow. I still have some of those feelings some of the time. But I have joined the Movement for the Ordination of Women, and later, watac, and these groups have enabled me to make friends with women and men who share these feelings and who hope for change. In these groups, too, I was able to meet with very brave women, women whom i believe are prophets of our time. Hence I have decided to talk with you about women, about the stories of women in our past. There is very exciting work being done today to reclaim the stories of women of our Judeo-Christian heritage, and to enable us to see them as vitally important parts of our heritage.

The stories of remarkable women are scattered throughout our scriptures. We find a word here, a sentence there, a short story elsewhere. But these women and their stories are not part of the central line of salvation history as it has come down to us and as it is told today. The story we hear is a story of male heroes: Abraham, Isaac, Moses, David, great men leading us to Jesus. But in this patriarchal history, fragments exist to tell us something of the women who were there, to tell us something of their history. Today we need to reclaim what is left of the lives and stories of these women and see them as central parts of our salvation history. We need to do this for (at least) three reasons:

1. because they are our forebears, our fore-mothers, and so much of their stories has already been lost;
2. because their lives, their pain, their sufferings are still the lives and pain and sufferings of women today;
3. because they have very important messages to give women and men today.

Before I recall acts of courage and virtue of remarkable women, I want to start with the most amazing example of bravery. From Eve onwards almost until the present, every woman who became pregnant and gave birth put her life on the line. Every woman in agreeing to become a mother risked her life; was prepared to sacrifice up her own life for the hope of new life. That is an absolutely amazing act of courage. If women had done nothing else in the whole history of humanity, they should still be held up as THE examples of bravery, held up above all the conquerors, all the explorers, all the warriors who are usually listed as the brave and the fair.

As a woman without children I am not going to talk to you about being mothers, you all know far more about that than I do.

What I want to concentrate on here is the amazing fact that women did more than this. Let us start to look at some of the hidden treasures of our scriptures.

Sections of the story of Moses are used about thirty times in the three-year cycle of readings in the Sunday lectionary. But of the women in the story we hear scarcely a word. Remember at the time, of his birth, the Pharaoh decreed that Hebrew male children were to be killed at birth. Now there were two Hebrew mid-wives, Shiprah and Puah, who, on their own, decided to disobey this law; who decided that this law was wrong, and they would break it: they would let the babies live. And so Moses was able to live. Today we would call their action 'civil disobedience', Non-violent action, passive resistance. (I am reminded of the black American woman who refused to give up her seat on the bus, and so sparked the civil rights movement). Alone, these mid-wives courageously broke the law to allow life. We know their names, Shiprah and Puah and we can honour them. But the Sunday lectionary ignores them. Not a word of their brave action

do we hear. A little later in Moses story, we meet two more women. After Moses birth, his mother puts him into a little boat to try to save him. Along to the river bank comes the daughter of the Pharaoh; the daughter of the very ruler whose laws were bringing death to the Hebrews. And in spite of that, she rescues the boy. Watching is the baby boy's sister. She speaks up. Together she and the princess save the boy - and give him to his own mother to feed him. These two women reach across all the barriers of race, class, politics that separate an Egyptian princess and a Hebrew slave girl. And across these barriers they reach out to each other to save life. Today, when barriers of race, barriers of religion, barriers of class and barriers of state separate us and when across these barriers go bullets, bombs, hate, what models these women are for us all today. These foremothers can be models for us, models of positive action for peace. We need to reclaim them as central figures in our salvation history.

This same brave sister, Miriam, the Prophet Miriam, is found later leading the women of Israel in song and dance after they had escaped captivity. A Bold woman, we find her, later still, challenging Moses, her brother as the sole voice of authority: "Has Yahweh spoken to Moses only, Has he not spoken to us too?" A dangerous thing, to challenge authority, and she became a leper for a week. But the story ends with the comment that : "The people did not set out until she returned". The people were not going on to the promised land without Miriam, no matter whom she had challenged.

Shiphrah, Puah, Miriam; brave foremothers of our faith. And Ruth . Ruth left her homeland, her family and friends, to go emptyhanded to a foreign land. She made the radical step of leaving her own to live with, look after and love another woman, and this in a society where women had no power, no right to lead their own lives. Only Abraham matched this brave act: if he matched it. Abraham acted after a clear call from God, and he set out with wife and (other) possessions. Ruth set out with nothing to be with Naomi. She had only the hidden God in her heart to guide her, but her words of allegiance ring down through the ages. She shines out for us as a model of friendship between women, as a model of one woman honouring another, as a woman of faith, hope and love. So why is Ruth not seen as one of the great figures of our history? Why is her story not a major part of our liturgy?

In the whole three-year cycle of readings in our Sunday lectionary, there is not a single selection from the Old Testament in which a woman is the major actor. Not one. Only three women, plus Eve, are given voice in readings of the Old Testament in the three year cycle. And even with these women, important parts of their story are omitted. One of the three women who are heard is the Shumannite woman who befriended Elisha.

Our liturgy tells us part of the story, ending with her being promised a son in return for her hospitality. But the liturgy omits the first offer Elisha makes, This is: "is there anything you would like said for you to the king or the commander of the army"? But she rejects this offer, saying, ' I live with my own people about me'. We have here a model of a woman being offered access to political and military power - a rare thing for a woman in her society - and she refuses to accept this offer. She wants to stay with her own people. Today i think we would call this choice a preferential option for the poor, and we say that this is where we find God. So here is woman being a model of god for us, a God-like figure for us in our power-hungry society. Let us reclaim her strength, let us honour her choice, and have her as a model of God as we struggle today to take up a preferential option for the poor.

Our sacred literature is rich with the deeds of great women; they are figures of compassion with messages of peace and caring that our society desperately needs yet we hear so little of them.

On a much sadder note, there are another group of stories about women which we also need to reclaim. Professor Phyllis TRible has done this for us in her book *Texts of Terror*. She brings alive the stories of rejection, rape, incest, and murder committed against women: the stories of Hagar, Tamar, the concubine of the Levite and the daughter of Jephthah. These terrible stories need to be heard aloud again today. We need to honour and mourn these women; and we need to do this because the stories of these women are not strange deeds of past history: they are the stories of women throughout our society today. Women still suffer rejection, rape, incest, murder. The suffering women of scripture can be, for us, images of the suffering servant, innocent victims of male violence.

We find, then, in our scripture, portrayals of women of compassion, and women of suffering, women of strength, and women of action, women who can be models for us as we search for new ways in which to minister to God's people. I should like to finish by presenting one final figure, this time from the New testament, who for me at present sums up much of the strength and power of women and the potential of their ministry. This is the figure of the Syrophenecian woman, the first gentile woman of faith. In her determination to save her daughter, she confronted the silence of Jesus, the displeasure of the disciples, and the initial rejection by Jesus. His mission, He said, was only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But by her wit, and her repartee she helped Him to see that she too was part of his mission. She is the only person in scripture who is recorded as getting the better of Jesus in dialogue. And he loved her for it. She opened to him his vision of ministry. Through her courage, she enlarged his vision of his mission. If this uppity woman can minister to Jesus and receive in return his healing and his love, then I would like to suggest to you that there is no limit to the potential of women as ministers to all of God's people.

As so often, it is a poet who encapsulates what I feel about these women and their stories:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
 so much has been destroyed
 I have to cast my lot with those
 who age after age, perversely,
 with no extraordinary power,
 reconstitute the world.

Questions for discussion:

1. What other brave women of scripture do you know?

What relevance, if any, do they have for you today?

Think of a time of suffering in your life. Do you know of any woman in scripture with a similar experience? Does this help you now? Did it help you at the time of your suffering?

2. Are you comfortable with inclusive language?

Do you know of anywhere it is used in our worship?

3. If you were asked to participate in the Church's ministry, in what areas would you care to work?

What as a woman can you add to the church's ministry?

Do you see yourself fitting in to the present structure of ministry?

Do you see new areas of ministry that you would like to be involved with?