

**2024 07 28 – Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah & Tirzah
(The Daughters of Zelophehad)**

Scripture: Numbers 27:1-11 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

What a week this has been in the world and in Canada! It was so hard to know where to put our attention! Should we be focussed south to the politics in the U.S., northwest to the devastation in Jasper or across the Atlantic to the Olympics in Paris? It has been a week of record-breaking temperatures, ground-breaking announcements, incredible loss of property and exciting competition. For me, watching the news has resulted in a roller-coaster of emotion.

The first big news that flashed across our screens came late last Sunday evening. It was President Joe Biden's announcement that he was withdrawing from the U.S. Presidential Race and endorsing Kamala Harris as his replacement. Assuming Vice President Harris wins the nomination, and that seems pretty sure at this point, she will be only the second woman and the first woman of colour to be a major party's nominee for president.

What a fitting news item for the fourth week of our summer series on Women of the Hebrew Scriptures. This week we will be exploring the story of Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah & Tirzah, the daughters of Zelophehad. This particular story is not found in the revised common lectionary, the three year cycle of scripture passages, that we usually follow each Sunday, so there's a good chance that you've never heard it before. I know it was new to me.

I'm going to begin by providing you with some context for this particular story. If you remember, last week we talked about the midwives Shiphrah and Puah. They had a role in the saving of Moses, the prophet who led the Israelites in their exodus from Egypt. Today's story takes place a few generations later. The Israelites have completed their journey through the wilderness and are now situated on the plains of Moab by the Jordan River. Very shortly, they will cross the Jordan and take possession of the land that YHWH has promised them.

But before they complete this final step in their journey, a census must be taken. YHWH speaks to Moses and to Eleazar, the son of Moses' dead brother, Aaron, and says, "Take a census of all of the Israelites, family by family, recording all able-bodied warriors, twenty years or older" (Numbers 26:2). The reason for this census was to determine how the land that they were about to colonize would be divided. You see YHWH had told Moses that each Israelite clan would receive its share based on the census. More able-bodied warriors, meant more land (Numbers 26:53).

This brings us to today's reading. You see there was man named Zelophehad who was a descendant of Joseph. But Zelophehad died in the desert before the Israelites reached their current location. Zelophehad had been a loyal follower of Moses, but he died leaving five daughters, and no sons. In their patriarchal society this meant no able-bodied warriors. Therefore his family would be excluded from the census and would receive no land at all. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah, the daughters, of Zelophehad could see the injustice

in this law and so they decided to go and state their case directly to Moses and Eleazar.

Just imagine the courage it must have taken for these five young sisters to approach the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, a large room where Moses, Eleazar, the elders and the whole assembly of men, were gathered. By standing together and raising their voices, these five young women risked being kicked out of the assembly and being told to go back to their tent. They risked being pariahs in their family and community. They risked their uncles' wrath. Despite these risks, the women entered the tent, explained their situation and asked, "Why should the name of 'Zelophehad' disappear from the clan for lack of a son?" And they made their claim, "Give us property equal to the share of our uncles!"

It's fascinating to note that Moses did not make a decision in that moment. He didn't check with Eleazar, or call for a vote of the elders. Instead, Moses, the prophet, brought this case to YHWH. In other words, Moses prayed about it. And the answer he got through prayer was that the daughters of Zelophehad had a claim that was right and just. They were to receive their father's inheritance. In fact, Moses was to make this a new legal statute for the Israelites.

One modern scholar named Rev. Owusu-Ansah wrote that "the daughters of Zelophehad made the first crack in the process of shattering the glass ceiling in ancient Israel." If you are not familiar with the "glass ceiling" metaphor, it was first used in the late 1970's in reference to the barriers that women experience in reaching top positions in corporations and other workplaces. It was a term that I

was very aware of during my time working for IBM in the 80's and 90's. It is now used even more broadly to represent the invisible barrier that prevents any oppressed group from rising beyond a certain level in a hierarchy.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glass> <https://www.faithward.org/women-of-the-bible-study-series/the-daughters-of-zelophehad-its-glass-shattering-time/>

Rev. Owusu-Ansah goes on to say that Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah don't put cracks in the glass ceiling on their own. After their display of courage, it is Moses who makes the choice to ignore the status quo, and to ignore the people most likely to uphold the status quo. Moses goes to his God instead. It is YHWH, the God of peace and justice, who completely shatters the ceiling and declares that the law itself must be changed.

Which brings us back to Vice President Kamala Harris, soon to be the first woman of colour nominated to run for president of The United States. Glass ceilings are broken one crack at a time. Right and just changes are made one step at a time. Just ask the suffragists who gained the right for white women to vote in Canada and the U.S. just over 100 years ago. And the women of colour, who fought for another 45 years before changing the constitution of the United States and achieving their right to vote. Just ask the ten French women recognized with statues in the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games; ten women who put cracks in the glass ceiling in their various endeavours.

Stories like these, give us hope. Hope for change in a world that is often stuck in the status quo or even yearning for a more hierarchical past. Stories like these remind us that we live in an imperfect world that is constantly changing and that

our God is a re-creating Spirit, a Spirit of Love that is pulling us towards a kingdom of peace and justice.

When we recognize the injustices that exist in our world, then we, like Zelophehad's daughters, are called to speak out. When we have a goal that seems unreachable, then we, like Kamala Harris, are called to shatter glass ceilings, to break invisible barriers that hold us back. And when we are not the ones being marginalized, when we may ourselves be the oppressors, when we are unsure of what to do, then we, like Moses, are called to seek the wisdom of the Ground of our Being, the Spirit of Love. We are called to pray, to be still and to listen and then to act for what is right and just.

May it be so. Amen.