

## Daughters of Zelophehad

So, we're kicking off a new sermon series this morning! Like I wrote in the newsletter on Thursday, I know you all read it- I'm just repeating.

There is a huge importance to being named in the Bible. When your name is included in the story, it is because people know who was being talked about. It was fundamentally important for the whos who of social history. Think of the disciples, the prophets, and or the families in the Old Testament. It is very likely that you're thinking of men who are important to different stories. Women were often assumed to be background figures or supporting characters in the stories that were passed down from generation to generation. Therefore, when a woman is named in the Bible, it is important to pay attention to her story and the context around her at the time. This month, we're going to hear women in our congregation preach about women in the Bible and pair them with a woman who is working in the world of faith and theology today.

The QR code is on the screen behind me; feel free to scan that for the study guide this week. We're also all going to lovingly lower our standards of having a study guide each week this month. We will just figure it out as we go, and it will be wonderful! This morning, I have brought you the story of 5 women. Not just 1. I'm a real overachiever, apparently. But these 5 women, are never written about separately. They are one group, one entity. The Daughters of Zelophehad (pronounced Zello-fe-had). Yes- I have pronunciations specified in this manuscript. If this is not how you pronounce the names- that is okay. We serve a graceful God, and we are imperfect people. For example, on Thursday night, I had completely different ways of pronouncing it written in here, and it worked exactly 0%, so here we go! In the Women's Bible Commentary, this story falls under the heading: Women Challenge Authority. With that title, I am immediately drawn to the story of these women fighting for their name to continue and to be present in future generations.

Numbers chapter 27 verses, 1ish through 11ish.

**“27** The daughters of Zelophehad... came forward. His daughters' names were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. **2** They stood before Moses, Eleazar, the priest, the chiefs, and the entire community at the entrance of the meeting tent and said, **3** “Our father died in the desert. He wasn't part of the community who gathered against the Lord with Korah's community. He died for his own sin, but he had no sons. **4** Why should our father's name be taken away from his clan because he didn't have a son? Give us property among our father's brothers.”

**5** Moses brought their case before the Lord. **6** The Lord said to Moses: **7** Zelophehad's daughters are right in what they are saying. By all means, give them property as an inheritance among their father's brothers. Hand over their father's inheritance to them. **8** Speak to the Israelites and say: If a man dies and doesn't have a son, you must hand his inheritance over to his daughters. **9** If he doesn't have a daughter, you will give his inheritance to his brothers. **10** If he doesn't have any brothers, you

should give his inheritance to his father's brothers. **11** If his father had no brothers, you should give his inheritance to his nearest relative from his clan..."

At first glance, this story is pretty straightforward. We have some daughters who have lost their father. They are part of an important family line, which is the first part I cut out because the names were very long. The gist of it is that these women came from about 4 generations of belonging to the same clan. Their great great grandfather could be traced back and was the head of their clan, it was really important who they were. Well, their father died. And the women didn't have any brothers. So, only the uncles would inherit the land that Zelophehad owned. The women wouldn't have had any claim to that land. Therefore, their father's name, Zelophehad, would be lost to history as no one could inherit the land.

Zelophehad is part of the generation of Israelites who left Egypt under Moses' leadership. He died during the 40 years in the wilderness. His five daughters belong to the new generation who would enter and possess the promised land. God had decreed that the promised land would be divided up according to the number of names of those in this second generation counted in the census. Since only men were counted in the census, Zelophehad's daughters didn't quite literally didn't count and would be left without an inheritance.

A census back in this time isn't just about the numbers. (you're welcome for that little play on words being that this book is called Numbers because it contains 2 different censuses.) The census isn't simple math. It's about organizing power, people, and resources. In the censuses in Numbers, there were two purposes – counting up the number of men who could be in the military and how the new land would be distributed.

The daughters went to Moses and pointed out that a decree from God wasn't complete. A bold move on their part. The decree in question is from Numbers 26: 52-56

**“52** The Lord spoke to Moses: **53** The land will be apportioned to these as an inheritance according to the number of names. **54** To a large clan, you will give a large inheritance, and to a small clan, you will give a small inheritance. Each will be given its inheritance according to the number of its enrollment. **55** The land, however, will be apportioned by lot. They will inherit according to the names of their ancestral tribes. **56** Whether they are large or small, each tribe will inherit by means of the lot.

So, we know this is directly from God. The Hebrew text tends to say the same concept multiple ways just so we know we really got what it's saying. And this is a quote from God, so that it is extra important that we understand it. We know that God is planning to distribute the land based on the clans and the number of people in each family. The daughters, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, saw a loophole that needed to be closed. I feel the need to emphasize here, that this didn't just *happen*. It was a big deal that the women went to Moses himself, and the other leaders, and argued the rule set forward by God. The best part is that when God replies, God says the women are right! The loophole is closed, and the women inherit the land and preserve their father's name. This is all incredible news for Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. It is important to know, that the second half of this story falls in Numbers chapter 36, a

shockingly short 9 chapters away. The end of the story is that the land will be in the daughter's name only until she is married. Then, the land will pass to their husbands. The daughters are instructed to marry within their clan, so the land doesn't go to someone outside. Not great. But a true step in the right direction. And, for a moment, it looked like women were being held up as important members of a family.

We're going to jump forward just a smidge from when Numbers was written, in the 5th century BCE, to June 8, 1981, when a woman named Rachel Held was born. Once Rachel got married, and changed her name to Rachel Held Evans, she wrote blogs and books and was on President Obama's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. Unfortunately, Rachel Held Evans passed away in 2019 after complications from the flu and an infection, which is awful because the world lost an incredible prophet and saint. Rachel wrote 4 books in her lifetime, and 2 more were finished and published by friends after her death.

Her books are about growing up in a conservative, Christian home in the Bible Belt and having to deconstruct her own faith to get back into loving God again and coming back to the church. I truly believe she would have found Copper Creek to be a lovely church home. She wrote about the hurt the Church causes and how we, as Christians, need to help support people who are hurting. I encourage you to read her books, and her blog. She was taken far too soon for the incredible work she was doing in the world.

In her third book, which is called *Inspired*, she breaks down the different types of literature in the Bible and works through different ways to understand the stories we read in scripture. She wrote this about God and gender and God's incarnation through Christ. **"Yes, in Jesus, God was once a man. But also? In Jesus, God was once a baby—a baby who nestled in a woman's womb, a baby whose life depended on a woman for nourishment, a baby who fell asleep on a woman's chest... The miracle of the incarnation isn't that God became a man; it's that God became human—with all of a human's weaknesses, dependencies, and interconnectedness."** That doesn't have much to do with this particular story in the Old Testament. But it does show that she was thinking of theology in a different way than most people. She walked the line between two worlds in a way that truly brought everyone to a space of shared conversation. She wrote about the justice needed for all people. She wrote about marginalized communities being believed and supported. The daughters of Zelophehad were being told they were less important simply by being women. They would be counted as less than, literally, uncounted because only men were included in the census... just because they were women. Rachel Held Evans wrote this: "Anytime the Bible is used to justify the oppression and exploitation of others, we have strayed far from the God who brought the people of Israel out of Egypt, 'out of the land of slavery' (Exodus 20:2). This is why it's especially important for those of us who come to the Bible from positions of relative social, economic, and racial privilege to read its stories alongside people from marginalized communities, past and present, who are often more practiced at tracing that crimson thread of justice through its pages."

The women in this story, and the stories that you'll hear this month, have been told they are less than, and that they didn't count, just by being women. The impact they made on our faith

history, is vitally important. God clearly states that women are to be believed. Women are able to be trusted to carry on family names and stories.

Now, I know that this isn't a shocking concept these days. Women are just as important as men. Women are counted in censuses, we've come a long way. We have... but not everyone has. There were people in my classes in seminary that had never heard a woman preach until they were in seminary. Every time I tell people I'm a pastor, they look a little shocked because it is a shockingly low number of denominations and religions that allow women to lead. I'm sure you've heard the justification from 1 Timothy, "**11** A woman should learn quietly with complete submission. **12** I don't allow a woman to teach or to control her husband. Instead, she should be a quiet listener." Yikes... also, oops. I definitely didn't follow that one well at all. But think of what Rachel Held Evans wrote, "Anytime the Bible is used to justify the oppression and exploitation of others, we have strayed far from the God who brought the people of Israel out of Egypt." The God who brought the people of Israel out of Egypt clearly said the daughters of Zelophehad were right. They could hold the property. They were supposed to be believed and supported.

These women, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, fight for property, and to inherit their father's land. And they aren't just doing so on a whim. They knew what they were asking for. They knew that it was asking a lot from Moses and the leadership. This story wasn't preserved for women to be upheld and supported throughout history. That's probably why it was clarified 9 chapters later, that they could hold the land until being married... This story was probably held in the canon to comfort men who didn't have male heirs. So they knew that all was not lost.

It is a blessing in our own context to be able to read a story of women fighting for their rights to own land and be counted in history. This story is important for women because Moses believed them. Moses took their concern and their question seriously. God clarified the decree, siding with the women! We must hold these stories higher than oppressive verses and viewpoints. We have to support and believe women, and people who are being overlooked or who aren't being counted simply for existing. It isn't easy, but it is what we are called to do by God.

Please pray with me.

God,

You called your people out of Egypt. You protected and loved your people through countless failures and shortcomings. Thank you for remaining faithful and steadfast when we seem to be determined to go against you. Continue to walk with us and guide us when we don't follow the correct path. Help us uplift and support those around us and believe them when they share their stories. Amen.