

January 2, 2022
Message: The Messy Middle
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In high school, I listened to Cds. You know, those little round discs that you put into a player, before you just say, "Hey Alexa play No Doubt" or "Hey Siri, play Five Iron Frenzy." I would sit next to my cd player with friends, cousins, or by myself, and listen to songs on repeat, holding tightly to the perfect square lyric booklet that came with each cd. I'd follow along word by word with every song until I had the lyrics memorized.

This story in Numbers, about these girls Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah makes me think of one such song I used to listen to on repeat. I can see them as back-up singers with Gwen Stefanie in the ska punk band No Doubt singing, "I'm Just a Girl."

I'm just a girl living in captivity
Your rule of thumb makes me worrisome
Oh I'm just a girl what's my destiny?
What I've succumbed to is making me numb
Ohhhhhhh, I've had it up to here!

With or without No Doubt, this story in Numbers is so fascinating. I had not studied this story until recently when I offered an intergenerational spiritual formation offering on Sundays. We have been going through a curriculum designed for children, youth and adults called *Seeking Justice Together* and each week we've been looking at stories of justice in scripture.

After reading this story in Numbers, I just could not shake it. In a time when women had no power, five sisters change the law.

See they were Israelites, God's chosen people. The Israelites had already experienced God's rescue enslavement. Then they spent years in the wilderness on their journey to the promised land. During this time, the girls' dad dies. And this presents a problem because in this patriarchal system, land inheritance went to men only. The sisters, would have no land once they reach the promised land. They will just be cut out of it all together. They aren't married. They don't have brothers. And so what do they do? They decide to petition those in power. They decided to ask for change. They aren't willing to accept the phrase, "This is how we've always done it."

They go to the tent of meeting, a sacred place in the middle of the community, and advocate for change, they cry out for justice in the streets so to speak. Moses doesn't even answer. Instead he seeks counsel from God. And God says, "What the daughters say is right!" Their voices prompt change - a new law! Now, according to God and spoken by Moses, daughters may inherit land.

In seminary I took the Core Clarity test which puts your strengths into 4 different quadrants. Most of my strengths fall into the “reflect” quadrant. I like to deeply think about things. I ask questions, I research, I stew and stir and revisit.

So I can't help but think deeply about this story. Some might see this story as cut and dry. These women advocate change. They stood up for what was right. Amazing. The end. But what about the middle? What about what isn't written in the text? The feelings, the tension, the angst. Using our imagination we can reflect deeply on what the characters in the narrative experience.

Take the sisters for example. They lost their father. What happened in the middle of the story for them? I'm sure they went through a time of grief. Weeping? Were they worried about their future without their father's love, his provision, protection?

And how did they come to that conclusion to petition the powers at be, to advocate for themselves? Did they disagree about how to go about this advocacy? Did they write a pros and cons list and tally up each side? How long did it take for them to decide to petition with this bold move?

I wonder which sister led the group to the tent of meeting?

You know, in my family, sometimes my oldest asks my youngest to ask me for a favor. You know, more screen time or if they can have candy. I can often hear them conversing about who is going to ask me what. You, ask mom if we can watch a movie, no you!

I can imagine the same conversation between the sisters - “Noah, you talk to Moses.”
“No, Tirzah, you do it!”

Maybe they just drew straws on who would speak.

Did they each have a different opinion or method on how to go about this ask?

What was it like for them the night before they stood before the tent of meeting and used their voices for change? Could they sleep? Were they wide awake, nervous? I wonder if they stood shaking or stood strong and steady before Moses, Eleazar, all the leaders and the whole congregation. When Moses goes to God about their request, I wonder how they felt. I bet every second of waiting felt like an eternity.

Moses is in the place of power and seeks God's clarity on how to move forward. And God tells him to change the law. Change the law. Wow. I wonder how he felt coming back with this change. Like leaders who stand up to injustice today, was he worried about the Israelite push back?

Regardless of what the middle looked like, I argue that there indeed was a messy middle. There were tears, fears, grief, angst, discussion, anger, advocacy, and joy/relief.

A story written in eleven verses actually expands over *many* days. And God was in the midst of them, at each part of the story.

Today is January 2, marking a new year. New goals. Some of us can focus on the new, the beginnings. We might be ready to use our voices, our energy for advocacy, for change in ourselves, in our community and in the world, just like the sisters as they stood at the tent of meeting.

Yet, some of us may be in the messy middle. We might be at home sick. We might be at the part of the story where there is grief. We might be in deep reflection on our choices and still formulating a way forward. We might have said our piece and, like the sisters, are patiently waiting for a response from the powers at be.

And no matter where you are in your journey, God is with you.

This morning I leave you with this prayer in the form of a prayer by Arianne Lehn from her book *Ash and Starlight*:

When I'm in the messy middle of something
Slow and Steady God,
Things have changed,
and I know they're not done changing.

I'm here on your potter's wheel
where you're shaping my essence into
something new with
guiding, loving hands.

But this messy middle time....
it's painful, and scary, and hard.
The wheel spins and my world swirls
and all I want is to see the end result.

Becoming the broken-down
lump of clay was a
hard stage too, I might add.

Help me, God,
commit to the process,
not the outcome.

Help me embrace this messy, middle time
where I must make space
for shifts and questions.

Change my mantras from
clarity to exciting ambiguity,
definition to open-endedness,
certainty to awe-filled surprises,
timeline to *trust*.

Help me believe, Lord,
that even what seems like negative change
makes room in me and around me
for something fresh (and good).

You hum a tune of possibility
and potential as you work.
With each move of your hand,
you mutter,
“Beautiful.”
“Beautiful.”
“Beautiful.”
And you smile.
Amen.

Benediction:

May we be a people of advocacy, a people who cry out for justice, for change in our
own lives and in the lives of the marginalized, and may we know that God is with us in
each step of our journeys, even in the messy middle. Amen.