

“The Text, the Talk and the Temple”

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Reimagining . . . God . . . Community . . . The Church

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So would you stand up again, please? It's afternoon and you're all tired and I admire you tremendously for even being here and still wanting to listen. I'm trying to make a light work here while I'm talking to you, so forgive me. So I thought we'd begin with a song. I know we've sung already, but we can stand to sing some more I think. It's a very simple song. I'm going to teach it to you, okay? It's a habit these days that I start all my classes with singing, and I just thought I'd stay in the groove (laugh)... (Song.) We shall not give up the fight. We have only started. Together we'll have victory. Hand holding hand....

The song is in the spirit of what I want to talk to you about. I was tempted to take Chung Hyun-Kyung's words seriously and give us all thirty minutes to reclaim our silence, but I thought I won't do that because I did prepare this for you. What I'm going to speak to you about is called “The Text, the Talk and the Temple.” And let me briefly explain how these words function in this presentation apart from their most obvious meaning in the sense that I've got a text, and I've got a talk, and it concerns a temple.

The text I understand to be the words as they are set down in a document and in the reading that we are going to do from the text. It is a scroll, although I've called it a book. Now specifically for the religious community, this document is a holy book or Holy Scripture. The talk is the conversation that goes on with this text, about this text, the comment, the interpretation, the reimagining that makes the words of the document come alive. The temple functions both as a concrete entity and as a symbol. It is the space, the actual space that represents God's presence for the community, and it is also the symbol for the entire community. In the text we are about to read, the words “this place” work in a similar fashion as both indicating the center of worship and the community of Judah.

The text we read is from 2 Kings. We're going to go into the Hebrew Bible, Old Testament, here. That's my work. That's what I do so I thought I would do best to stay there with you and then move in and out of it. The events recorded in the twenty-second chapter of 2 Kings take place at the time of King Josiah, around 620 BCE, and Josiah had come on the throne in a violent context. His grandfather Manassah's reign was filled with idolatry, including child sacrifice and bloodshed. His father, Amon, was on the throne for only a couple of years before he was assassinated by his own servants. And had it not been for the people of the land, the *am ha eretz*, Josiah might never have become king at all. He is by the text's account twenty-six years old when he undertakes extensive temple repairs. Old wood is replaced, walls are restored, new paint is applied. The place is turned upside down, and as may happen at such times when we clean our attics, curious objects are found and scrutinized as to whether we should keep them or throw them away. And at such a moment we pick up the text in 2 Kings 22. And I'll read to you from Scripture.

Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan, the secretary, I have found a book of the law in the house of Adonai. (I will read for the traditional word Lord, Adonai every time so that you know that.) So Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan and he read it. Then secretary Shaphan came to the king and reported to the king, “Your

servants have emptied the money from the house and have given it to the workers who have taken care of the house of Adonai.” And secretary Shaphan told the king, “Priest Hilkiah gave me a book.” And Shaphan read it to the king. When the king heard the words of the book of the law he tore his clothes. Also the king commanded priest Hilkiah, Ahikam, Shaphan’s son, Achbor, Micaiah’s son, secretary Shaphan and Asaiah, the king’s servant “Go inquire of Adonai on my behalf and on behalf of all the people in all of Judah about the words of this book that was found for great is the anger of Adonai that burns against us because our ancestors did not listen to the words of this book, to all that is written concerning us.” So priest Hilkiah with Ahikam, Achbor, Shapham and Azaiah went to Huldah the prophet, wife of Shallum, Tikvah’s son, Harhas’ son, keeper of the wardrobe. And she lived in Jerusalem’s New town where they spoke with her.

She said to them, “Go, say to the man who sent you to me, so says Adonai, the God of Israel, I am going to bring disaster on this place and its inhabitants, all the things of the book that the king of Judah has read, because they abandoned me and worshiped other Gods. They grieved me with all the work of their hands. Therefore, my anger burns against this place and it will not be quenched.” And to the king of Judah who sent you inquire of Adonai say this to him, “So says Adonai the God of Israel about the things that you heard because your heart was touched and you humbled yourself before Adonai when you heard how I spoke against this place and its inhabitants that it would become a ruin and a curse. And because you tore your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard,” says Adonai. “Therefore I will be there to gather you to your ancestors and you will be gathered to your grave in peace and your eyes will not see the disaster that I am bringing on this place.” So they brought word back to the king.

A find in the temple and a lot of upset men. Hilkiah, the priest, is disturbed by what he found. He doesn’t know exactly what it is, and he gives it to secretary Shaphan, someone a little higher up, working at the court. And Shaphan goes and reads it to the king. And you notice how he stays on the safe side. He doesn’t call it the book of the law or a book of the law. He says priest Hilkiah gave me a book. And then he reads it. He’s not taking any chances. In any case, this book goes from one important man to the next more important one until the last and most important one of all, the king, kicks it even higher up. These words frighten him. “Go ask God,” he says. The movements in the text are fairly predictable until the sequel. For without further ado, the text reports that the carefully composed delegation went to Huldah, the prophet, as if it were natural that they would go to her as if they were going to God, as if they had never heard that women should not have authority, that they should be silent and learn from their husbands.

Huldah the prophet is introduced in two ways: First, as female prophet, *niveah* in Hebrew. And then as the wife of... followed by her husband’s name, his father’s name, his grandfather’s name and his credentials. As Claudia Camp has observed, that she is introduced by male identity says nothing about her capabilities. So indeed the text lists her calling and profession first, prophet. Yet the listing of no less than three male names plus a profession has its effect, does it not? Huldah, when she first appears in the text, prophet though she may be, arrives blanketed by men’s names and professions. Surely her voice will be muffled, surrounded as it is by priest, secretary, delegates, king, and wardrobe keeper. Now as my mind was playing with

possible titles for this presentation on my way this summer to the Adirondacks for a short vacation in the car, I was aware that I arrived at the one I chose via the title of C. S. Lewis's well known story *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*. I thought that was a fetching title. I've always liked the story, the three words went well together and did what I wanted them to do, that is what I wanted to talk about. But I have to say that I was at that time not consciously aware of the presence of a wardrobe in the text of my choice.

Now, you know, if you know the story, that in the C. S. Lewis book the wardrobe is the transition point for the children from one world into the other, from this world into Narnia. In reimagining our text then, let us say that here, too, in Jerusalem of 2600-plus years ago, the questers go from one world into another. From one of highly centralized power, an exclusively male world, they must go into the world of the people of the land, the *am ha eretz*, the marketplace of town, to find a word from God. They must go through and behind the names of men, through the wardrobe, and out the other side to find a word that comes in female presence.

When I introduce my students to Huldah, as I always do, for she marks a crucial moment in the development of the biblical canon, a suspicious mood enters the classroom, as if I am tricking them somehow or made her up. Most of them have never heard of this prophet. If they know her name at all, they may associate her with a broomstick and a cartoon figure from American folklore. Where there are wardrobes, there are witches, it seems. But that is where our links with the C. S. Lewis story, the story by C. S. Lewis, that great misogynist, that is, I say, where the links break down. For the powers in his tale that are evil and therefore naturally female, the witch, Jadis, and the powers that are good and therefore naturally male, the lion Aslan, in our text are scripted altogether differently. Huldah, the one female in the story, is the one who has a word from the source of all good, Adonai, the god of Israel. The men come to consult her, to speak with her. They listen to her. She speaks with authority directly in God's name. No less than four times a form of the expression "says Adonai" occurs in her speech. She hasn't heard of 1 Timothy 2 either, of course. She gives them straight talk.

Now the text describes that the men in power – and could be that part of the reason they go to Huldah, the *niveah*, the woman prophet, that they had hoped from her, for something different, some more optimism, something more gentle, something generally more expected when women speak. And maybe Huldah was tempted. Prophets before her had vowed to speak the truth and not done it. Just read the last chapter of 1 Kings and the story of the prophet Micaiah, who says, "I will speak the truth as the Lord lives," and then lies through his teeth. Huldah may have been tempted, but whether she was tempted or not, her talk leaves no room for optimism. She gives it to them straight between the eyes. This place is doomed, she says. God will bring it to wreck and ruin. Only for King Josiah is there a word of hope and a promise that he will die before it will all happen, a rather meager comfort.

Now, that students in the classrooms have not heard of Huldah is not such a surprise, because until a short time ago Huldah was roundly ignored by major commentaries and interpretations of Scripture, even though that moment, the moment of biblical history and King Josiah's role, received elaborate attention, for it is an important moment. Indeed the commentaries reinforce the covering of Huldah's name and presence begun in Scripture. Not until recent years has Huldah come into clearer focus. Claudia Camp, in her essay "Female Voice, Written Word: Women and Authority in Hebrew Scripture," counts Huldah as one of three who authenticate the written word to women and a female literary figure. Huldah, Esther and Lady Wisdom in Proverbs. She suggests that the biblical women provide images that lead to new imagination in dealing with the Bible. Imagine Huldah, then. She has thrown off the covers

of her thrice-named husband and his wardrobe and speaks truth about the temple and the community of the temple. The first known interpreter and canonizer of the text as Holy Scripture is Huldah the prophet, and we might do worse than learn at her feet. Her talk is bold and goes straight to the point and it announces the end of things as they are.

Part of the title for the context of this conference which so fills us with hope and joy and learning, part of the title is Churches in Solidarity with Women. And that phrase, though without doubt correct in its intentions, creates a snarl in my thought processes, for what does that mean exactly? Are the churches out there somewhere and women out some other place, and the churches out there are intending to show solidarity with women? Are we women not part of the church? Are we not also the church? Should it then be Women in Solidarity with Churches, I wonder? But then the question is: can we still be in solidarity with churches that have so robbed us, that have so abused us, that have robbed us of voice and presence and dignity? Imagine Huldah. For her it was clear. The temple was out there. Her presence, even though she represented the voice of God, was not a part of the temple. That was an entirely male enterprise, and perhaps she was not entirely unhappy to call out its disastrous future. Those walls so newly repaired, king, and that wood so nicely refinished, it will not last long. The trumpet of judgment has sounded, and the walls will come tumbling down.

But the announced judgment is not only directed toward an edifice, a powerful center of worship, but against the entire community. This place and its inhabitants have abandoned God, worshipped other gods, and grieved the heart of the God of Israel by all the work of their hands. Now, the scroll that they were looking at is by general agreement of scholars some form of what is now the book of Deuteronomy. That text emphasizes the importance of loyalty to the God of Israel, a God who instructed the community toward a common life of compassion and righteousness. That life was lived in attention to the voice of the ones who ordinarily conduct their fragile lives on the margin of the community. The widow, the orphan, and the stranger epitomize in Deuteronomy the people of God's special concern. And those people should be of special concern to the community of the covenant. Just one quote from Deuteronomy 10: "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great god, mighty and awesome and is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow and who loves the strangers, giving them food and clothing. You then shall also love the stranger." The paean of praise for God's power that articulates thus how God chooses to exercise that power on behalf of those who are without the necessities that make life viable, sustenance and shelter.

For what exactly was wrong in Huldah's community? King Josiah has, after all, begun to clean up the temple. He puts blame for what went wrong in the past with the ancestors. He says, "because our ancestors did wrong." The prophet in a telling change includes the present wrongdoers. It is not *that* place, it is *this* place that has abandoned and grieved God. It is *this* community that has collaborated with a system in which widow, orphan and stranger, far from being cared for, are deprived of sustenance and shelter. Justice had not flowed there like water or righteousness like an everlasting stream. The hands that bring God offering, that are lifted in prayer, are said to be full of blood. The text that Huldah authorizes reveals God, the source of all good, in implacable opposition to structures of oppression. The theme of Scripture in George Edward's words, the theme of Scripture is the process in which God engages the creation to deliver from the pit. Today we are aware of the pit of patriarchy. And most of us have been engaged in the struggle for reimagining a different community in the church. We have known for a while of the pit of patriarchy. We have known that patriarchy distorts all relations in the created world and its institutions, between human beings and God, among human beings themselves, and

between humans and the rest of creation. We have begun the cleaning, like King Josiah, and have looked at our ancestors and admitted their wrongdoing. With the prophet Huldah, we might look around also, and see what surely grieves God, that in Mercy Oduyoye's words, the present state of partnership of men and women in all cultures on all continents and in all churches and in all faiths is a state of sin.

Huldah may help us to see that it may not be enough to clean it all up... that the old has to come down before the new community can begin. Now, in my research on this text, I turned up some interesting things about Huldah's name. The dictionaries and word books derive it from a name, *Hld* in Hebrew, that means either rat or weasel. Based on a root meaning *to dig* or *to creep*, the gentlemen of the word books speculate solemnly on the desirability of such a name. They elaborate on the possibility of parent's choosing this kind of name for a child that had characteristics perhaps reminiscent of the animal. They conjure up images of proud parents pointing to their little weasel or little rat. It was amazing, I'm not kidding you. Check it out for yourself. Now I did some research on the weasel, as some of you here know. I didn't do that in the usual fashion by going to the books. I asked people what they knew about weasels because I wanted to know how this animal lives in people's minds. And it became rather a pooling of ignorance so that one fact about the weasel stood out – not many people know much about it. Except last night, two of my friends and students, one in particular spoke with great confidence about the weasel and informed me that they are aggressive and smart. Survivors, they assured me. Now aggressive is a word we reserve usually for a negative judgment. We might substitute brave or bold as a positive evaluation for Huldah's case. And let's try to hold on to those thoughts. There is an unfamiliar quality to her presence in the text, as there is a quality of the unknown to the presence of women issuing the challenge to the holy places. For who knows what they might do next? As for bold and smart, I leave it up to you to decide.

Now there is also a possibility that Huldah is derived from a totally different root meaning *duration*, *lastingness* or *world*. Without hesitation, the same gentlemen who assign Huldah to rat and weasel assign to male characters in the Bible who have names similar to Huldah to the root meaning duration, lastingness, or world. Surprise, surprise. So much for objective biblical scholarship. Now if interpreted in this way, Huldah might be the one who lasts, who is in it for the duration. I refuse to make the choice for Huldah, and I claim both possibilities. Bold, clever, she slides into the text and out again before we have time to become familiar with her, like the holed weasel. But then it appeared she was there to stay after all, her voice resurrected in women's voices today, so she was in it for the duration. Bold and clever, we may need to reclaim for ourselves the quality of lastingness that we are not going to go away, that the presence of women in all its glorious diversity is here to provide a worldwide ongoing challenge to the patriarchy of our faith and of our religious institutions. Institutions are, after all, not the end all for God's dealings with the creation. This place may not be God's place. For it to become God's place the old authorities and powers need to come down. We reimagine Huldah not only speaking her authorizing and interpreting word, but stepping out through the wardrobe into the center of power. Together with her and with each other, this old house of patriarchy has got to come down.

Good sisters and brothers, we have come to the center of power not just to have a piece of the pie, not just to point out that we belong here to. We are not here to join the great pissing contest. We have come here, in cognizance of the cries of the most vulnerable among us, to empower them and to let their voices take on a sound of their own, as Rosario said. We are not here so much to jump on the feminist band wagon but to upset the patriarchal applecart. In our

solidarity together we recognize especially the voices of the weak and the oppressed and what Sharon Welch has called the epistemological privilege of the oppressed. We are out to build a new house together with God's help. Women in solidarity with God, who declares, 'I will be who I will be.' And with one another and with the men who have seen the need to change the structures and to experience the voice of domination and control as destructive to their own dignity and humanity.

When word comes from the prophet Huldah to Josiah, he doesn't say, "oh well, it won't happen in my lifetime. I can stop now. I've done enough cleaning." He steps up his efforts, and he enters into a new covenant to walk in all the ways of Adonai, and all the people join in it. And there is no doubt in my mind that there are men among us for whom the patriarchal house is no abiding place. All of us need to stand together, hand in hand, and assume our responsibility to break through the walls of lies, secrets, and silence of the patriarchal house with its supporting pyramid of multiplicative oppressions, as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has called it, that pyramid of sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, and all the -isms that make it up. All of us, women and men, have acted in complicity with the existing oppressive system, and all need a conscious break with the system.

In the text of 2 Kings, the old hierarchies, of course, stay in place. By God's grace we recognize today that the word of judgment has come especially to those patriarchal hierarchies that possess the temple as if they were demons in Rita Nakashima Brock's image. But we know that the axe has been laid to the root of that tree. We go home from here, from this celebration, we go home to our place, to engage the battle with the structures, and we do it knowing that change may be a long time coming. But come it will, and we, after all, have only started. Will you rise and sing the song with me to end this? (sung) We shall not give up the fight...