

This is week three in our series looking at some of the women in the bible who get overlooked, or whose story is not properly recognised. The story we read today appears again in 2 Chronicles 34 and these are the only two mentions of Huldah in the bible.

In order to understand the story of Huldah, we have to understand the story of Israel at this point in their history. You see, we are now long past the “golden days” of King David’s reign and King Solomon after him. The twelve tribes have been divided into two different kingdoms; ten of the tribes are joined into what’s called the Kingdom of Israel in the north, and the other two tribes are called the Kingdom of Judah in the south. The Northern Kingdom had been conquered years before by the Assyrians, and the Southern Kingdom was suffering under poor leadership. King Manasseh had ruled for 55 years, the longest of any king in Judah’s history. And the Bible tells us, “he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” King Manasseh’s son, Amon, followed right in his father’s footsteps. Amon was so evil, in fact, that his servants conspired to assassinate him only two years after Amon became King.

The immediate heir to the throne was an eight-year-old boy named Josiah. Now, we balk at the thought of any eight-year-old ruling a kingdom. But in the ancient world of kings and queens, this sort of thing didn’t seem to cause the kind of havoc we would expect. While a king’s power was certainly absolute, most of the day-by-day administration was in the hands of a variety of royal servants. The real question was how the young king would use his extensive power once he was old enough to figure out that he had it.

The reading today simply says ‘he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord’. In 2 Chronicles 34:3-7 <sup>3</sup> *In the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David. In his twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of high places, Asherah poles and idols. <sup>4</sup> Under his direction the altars of the Baals were torn down; he cut to pieces the incense altars that were above them, and smashed the Asherah poles and the idols. These he broke to pieces and scattered over the graves of those who had sacrificed to them. <sup>5</sup> He burned the bones of the priests on their altars,*

*and so he purged Judah and Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> In the towns of Manasseh, Ephraim and Simeon, as far as Naphtali, and in the ruins around them,<sup>7</sup> he tore down the altars and the Asherah poles and crushed the idols to powder and cut to pieces all the incense altars throughout Israel. Then he went back to Jerusalem.*

As the Kingdom of Judah had ignored the Temple over time, it had fallen into disrepair, and so Josiah has decided to get things spruced up. So Josiah sends in teams of workers. They begin to get things cleaned up and start making some of the necessary repairs, when suddenly, word comes from the priest, Hilkiah, that he has found the book of the law of the Lord given through Moses. We don't know what this book was. Some people argue it was a copy of Deuteronomy and others that it was the first five books or Pentateuch. How they had managed to lose the book of the Law is another question entirely, but I think it just goes to show the extreme waywardness in the Kingdom of Judah at this time.

In any case, when the book was brought to King Josiah, he did what I think any of us would do with a great ancient book found buried like a treasure beneath years of discarded rubbish; he read it. And it wouldn't have taken a genius to understand that the Israelites were living way off base. So as soon as Josiah finished the reading of the scroll, he tore his clothes in extreme distress. Josiah was so serious about following God that he realized how far short he and his nation were from living according to the will of God, and he was terribly upset.

Now Josiah had already been at work trying to reform his kingdom and get them back on track, but now he realized just how much more needed to be done. And it seems that King Josiah was not fully comfortable proceeding on his own without the advice of a spiritual "insider," so to speak. So he decides to call on a prophet who can give him the word of God and tell him what will happen to his kingdom because of their waywardness. At this time in Judah's history, there were two prophets working in the land. One of those prophets was a

man named Jeremiah. The other prophet was a woman named Huldah.

Josiah gives his servants instructions, they are to “Go and ask the LORD on my behalf, and on behalf of those who still remain in Israel and Judah, concerning the contents of this scroll that has been found.” So, the Bible tells us, Hilkiah and the royal officials went to the prophetess, Huldah. The Bible doesn’t tell us much about Huldah at all; she was married to Shallum and lived in Jerusalem’s second district. But this was clearly a critical point in Israel’s history, and it’s worth noting that as the Kingdom of Judah was seeking a way forward in following God, they chose to go to Huldah for advice. And that’s where I want to go to glean our message this morning.

I don’t think I have to remind you that women weren’t really called upon to do much of anything in the ancient world. They birthed and raised the children, fetched the water, cooked the meals, and kept the house clean. They weren’t found in the royal court or teaching in the synagogues; that was the man’s place. And there was, in fact, a male prophet available to King Josiah; he could have called upon Jeremiah. But Josiah and his royal servants didn’t choose Jeremiah, they chose Huldah. At this major turning point in Judah’s history, Huldah was the one to go to.

She was the wife of the keeper of the wardrobe and perhaps she shared in that work. She may have been a seamstress living in the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter in Jerusalem, but we simply don’t know. We know nothing else about her. What we do know is that the King’s secretary and the High Priest knew, somehow, that God was with her and that he spoke to her. We don’t know how they knew it; maybe it was because she had been warning the people in Jerusalem for years, or maybe it was something more subtle, something in her character or appearance. We don’t know, but they did. And if you have a strong connection with God, that can only mean that you are a faithful person. So we can conclude that even as all the folks around her were following pagan ways and worshipping pagan gods, Huldah remained faithful to the one true God. She was not swayed by popular practice, nor it would seem, by any promptings or urgings from neighbours or friends. And

finally, I think it's fair to say that Huldah was trustworthy. Kings and royal councils don't approach just anyone for advice.

It says so much about her that these two men realised that the best way to know what God wanted to say was to ask Huldah. She got her message from God and she passed it on. What courage it must have taken – for Huldah and all of these prophets who had a message of judgement from God. God says that judgement is coming because they have forsaken him and worshipped other gods. How much pressure must there have been to say, “It will be fine.” But this faithful, Godly woman speaks what God has given her to speak.

She also has a message for the king – because he responded to the message of the Law in humility the disaster that was coming would not come in his time.

Here was the message. They brought it to the king; and the effect is seen in 2 Kings 23:1-3 *Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup> He went up to the temple of the Lord with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets—all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the Lord. <sup>3</sup> The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord—to follow the Lord and keep his commands, statutes and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant.*

So, you might be asking what this has to do with us. We haven't lost the bible. You can go into a shop and buy one, in fact, there are lots of different versions. You can even get it on your phone. No, we haven't lost it. There are two things we need to be wary of with that thinking. I have a fishing rod in my cupboard. It's not lost. I know where it is, but I never go fishing. I haven't fished in years. Just having a rod and knowing where it is doesn't make me a fisherman. Having multiple copies of the bible means nothing if I don't read it and expect to learn about, and from, God as I do.

Equally I might read it regularly but ignore the bits I don't like or that challenge my personal views and opinions. Disregarding the word or trying to make it fit me means that it is possible to lose it just as much as it was lost in Josiah's day.

Notice that the word was found only after Josiah had started to seek God. It wasn't found and then Josiah responded. He responded and, when he was ready to lead, the word was found. When people actively seek God they develop a hunger for his word because that is where we learn his story and his plans for us. We need more people like Huldah who have a deep relationship with God and who are able to speak truth into the life of the church today. People who are trustworthy and reliable, unafraid to bring challenging words as well as encouragement.

*1 Corinthians 14:1-5 Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy. <sup>2</sup> For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit. <sup>3</sup> But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort. <sup>4</sup> Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church. <sup>5</sup> I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy.*

Prophecy comes through God's people listening to God and speaking words that strengthen, encourage and comfort. Strengthening comes as we face challenges together and learn to trust in God and his plan.