

## “Show Up”

Numbers 26:52-56; 27:1-11

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### Numbers Reading

**Kate:** The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: To these the land shall be apportioned for inheritance according to the number of names. To a large tribe you shall give a large inheritance, and to a small tribe you shall give a small inheritance; every tribe shall be given its inheritance according to its enrollment. But the land shall be apportioned by lot; according to the names of their ancestral tribes they shall inherit. Their inheritance shall be apportioned according to lot between the larger and the smaller.

**Kristin:** Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward. Zelophehad was son of Hopher son of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh son of Joseph, a member of the Manassite clans. The names of his daughters were: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. 2They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and they said,

**Theresa:** ‘Our father died in the wilderness; he was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against the Lord in the company of Korah, but died for his own sin; and he had no sons. Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father’s brothers.’

**Leah:** Moses brought their case before the Lord. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father’s brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them.

**Jenny:** You shall also say to the Israelites, ‘If a man dies, and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter. If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father’s brothers. And if his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to the nearest kinsman of his clan, and he shall possess it. It shall be for the Israelites a statute and ordinance, as the Lord commanded Moses.’

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### Introduction

This Sunday afternoon, we find ourselves in the wilderness and the book of Numbers is all about what happens *in* the wilderness. Numbers, the fourth book of the Bible that we often sidestep and seldom preach from because seemingly the endless counting, the recording of names, the Census really doesn't matter.

Times have changed since the Israelites first left Egypt to escape Pharaoh. What started out as a 40 day trek has now taken nearly 40 years, and quite naturally, a lot has changed. Just think about all that’s changed here at Ravensworth Baptist Church since March 1959 when a little over

50 of you go together to form this congregation. There were those who were there from the beginning who remembered the heart racing Exodus and there are those who are no longer alive. As one can imagine, over the years there have been disagreements and alliances, marriages, and births and as they draw closer to Canaan, God tells them to take count and to get their houses in order. God is like the chaperone on a school field trip who keeps taking count over and over again in order to make sure that no one is missing. However, there are people to be counted and voices that must be heard.

*Let us pray.*

At the beginning of Chapter 26, God tells Moses to take yet another Census, but this time to count people “20 years old and upwards.”<sup>1</sup> This time, the Census will include a new generation of Israelites who were not around for the Exodus, but were born in the wilderness. This count will include the voices of younger people with a different understanding of customs, rituals, tradition, and law. And this Census mattered because those counted would be granted landed in Canaan. Those counted would receive resources and be landowners in The Promised Land, but they had to first be counted.

The count is now well underway and they’ve reached over 600,000<sup>2</sup> Isrealite men, but there’s a problem. You see, the Mosaic Law says that only Isrealite men could be landowners, and as a result, women and children were not counted, but there is a problem. They call out the descendants of Dan, Ephraim, Benjamin and Asher, but there is still a problem.

What are they to do with the portion of land belonging to the descendants of Zelophehad? Zelophehad, the first-born, of the tribe of Manasseh, and of the family of Gilead who died in the wilderness and had no sons, only daughters. What are they to do?

I love that Chapter 27:1 of The Message says, “The daughters of Zelophehad showed up.” Yes, indeed - Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, the five daughters of Zelophehad, the five sisters organized and showed up to be counted. I wonder whose idea it was? How long had they planned? Who was the spokesperson? What did they wear? Did they have a hype song? A plan B? There are many details we do not know about the how, but we know the what, and that is - these five daughters, the sisters showed up to be counted.

The text says that, “They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation, at the entrance of the tent of meeting.”<sup>3</sup> This was a strategic move. The sisters knew that the Tent of Meeting was a holy place reserved for priests, only men, and that they needed to approach with reverence. They knew that storming in and taking over the place would not serve them well, but they also knew that they had to stand where they could be seen. So they stood at the entrance. In order to enter and exit the Tent, the authorities had to pass them. The sisters would NOT be ignored.

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 26:2

<sup>2</sup> Numbers 26:51

<sup>3</sup> Numbers 27:2

They then began to speak and tell their father's story. I wonder if their voices shook as they said, "Our father died in the wilderness. He wasn't part of Korah's rebel anti-God gang. He died for his own sins. And he left no sons." These words gave testimony of their father's loyalty and commitment to God and Moses. They wanted to clear his reputation from the possible rumors that their father was a misfit who rebelled against God and thus didn't deserve land. They also spoke the truth of their familial situation, that their father had no sons. This was not only a truth about their family, but also the truth of their socio-economic plight as women living in a patriarchal society - they had no one to take care of them, to provide for them, no stable source of financial support.

They then made another strategic move. Instead of first stating their demands, they took the approach of asking a question that would appeal to the moral conscience of Moses and the religious leaders. They asked, "But why should our father's name die out from his clan just because he had no sons?" These five sisters were asking the leaders to not only reconsider the letter of the law, but to wrestle with the spirit of the law.

By standing there before these leaders, the daughters gave a face to the law. Their presence made an argument for how the law was outdated, how it denied their humanity, and greatly compromised their quality of life. As your Rev. Dr. Leah Grundset Davis wrote in her book about the pastoral journeys of Baptist women, the five daughters "believed God had looked with favor on them, as they are created by God."<sup>4</sup>

And finally, after clearing their father's name and appealing to the moral conscience of the leaders, they closed with a direct demand, "So give us an inheritance among our father's relatives." Even this demand was strategic because they did not just make it about their own personal needs, but they were clear to make their demand about the importance of familial and communal connections. They asked for land so that they could be with the rest of their relatives. They didn't want to be treated special, they just wanted what everyone else was fairly given, the ability to live and thrive in the Promised Land.

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<sup>4</sup> Leah Grundset Davis, *Believe the Women: a Journey of Liberation with Alliance of Baptists Women* (Macon, GA: Nurturing Faith Inc., 2019), 7.

These five daughters, the five sisters, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah were seemingly before their time. Their move was bold and radical. Rabbi Ira Dounn, a Hillel Rabbi at Princeton University reminded me that feminism isn't new, but it is an ancient practice. These women were amongst some of the first feminist recorded in the Bible by name and deed. "They were the first women recorded to propose a change to Mosaic Law. They were the first women recorded to challenge inheritance rights."<sup>5</sup> They were such a force, that after this moment, whenever Zelophehad's name is mentioned in scripture, so are his daughters. This is their story. Their moment.

These intelligent young women, born in the wilderness were part of a new generation. They were not constrained by the way things used to be and were audaciously hopeful about what could be. They knew the importance of moving forward with their convictions and callings. They organized, they questioned the arbitrary laws, they gave a face to the situation, they demanded what was rightfully theirs, and they showed up. While this is a powerful story in and of itself, and I could end right here, there's more. I do not want us to miss the importance of what happens next. But first, I want to tell you about Elizabeth Thompson Butler.

I love podcasts and I could rattle off a list of podcasts that I listen to daily. However, one of my favorites is Malcolm Gladwell's, *Revisionist History*. For those of you who have never heard of him, Malcolm Gladwell is a Canadian journalist, author, public speaker and social scientist who's written bestselling books such as, *The Tipping Point* (2000); *Blink* (2005); *Outliers* (2008); and his most recent book, *Talking to Strangers*. In his podcast, *Revisionist History*, Gladwell revisits historical moments in order to gain further insights, provide a new lens of understanding given the historical distance.

In June 2016 Gladwell launches the podcast and in the very first episode, season 1, episode 1 he introduces the modern world to Elizabeth Thompson Butler,<sup>6</sup> born in 1846, a talented British artist and painter. In the beginning of her career, Butler concentrated on religious subjects like *The Magnificat* (1872), but after visiting Paris and being introduced to battle scenes, she began painting portraits of war. In 1874, her most famous piece, *The Roll Call*, gained her entrance into the Royal Academy of London exhibition, the first woman ever.

Her painting caused such a stir that people would line up for hours to catch a glimpse and the painting was protected by an armed guard. Her painting was placed on over 200,000 postcards, a major marking feat for that time. This young 20 year old woman had literally changed the art world. And yet, the next year they moved her painting to the back of the museum, and she too was soon forgotten in history. They didn't elect another woman to the Royal Academy until 1936, 61 years later.

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<sup>5</sup>Lindsay Hardin Freeman, *Bible Women: All Their Words and Why They Matter* (Forward Movement, 2016), 102.

<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia entry for Elizabeth Thompson, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth\\_Thompson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Thompson). Accessed February 20, 2020.

For Gladwell, the story of Elizabeth Thompson Butler is important because it is an example of the concept of moral licensing. Malcolm Gladwell cites Daniel Effron to say that moral self-licensing is when "past good deeds liberate individuals to engage in behaviors that are immoral, unethical, or otherwise problematic, behaviors that they would otherwise avoid for fear of feeling or appearing immoral."<sup>7</sup> In summary, because someone has done the right thing one time, they have the license to go back to business as usual. I know you're wondering how Elizabeth Thompson Butler connects to the daughters of Zelophehad? I'm glad you asked.

After the daughters and sisters spoke, Moses was stumped. He and the other priests were more than likely stunned silent. They were likely not used to women approaching the Tent and these were young women. Instead of brushing them off or sending them away, the scripture says that, "Moses brought their case to God. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: "The daughters of Zelophehad are right. It shall be for the Israelites a statute and ordinance, as the Lord commanded Moses."<sup>8</sup>

The LORD told Moses that what the daughters said was indeed right and just and to not only make an exception for them, to not tokenize them, but to change the statute and ordinance for all all women, sisters and daughters. It's not enough to pat ourselves on the back because we did one thing right and thus have moral license, to go back to our old ways. But this text challenges us to keep the door open for what is right and all together remove the door, remove any barriers to justice and equality for the next generation and the next.

And because the five daughters of Zelophehad showed up and Moses and the leaders showed up in support, these sisters gave birth to the next generation of daughters and sisters who showed up. Throughout the Biblical text, we find sisters and daughters, named and unnamed who have shown up.

I want us to hop on over to the New Testament, in the Gospels, and we will find another group of women, daughters and sisters in spirit, standing at an entrance. The women showed up early before the sun was even out. However, when they arrived at the entrance of the tomb, the stone was rolled away and when they looked inside they found that the son had risen. The sisters show up! They too went out to find the disciples to declare and proclaim the Good News, but the menfolks were confounded, they didn't know what to do, they didn't know what to say, but the sisters and daughters kept showing up.

When the church would not recognize the sisters and daughters, they kept showing up. We thank God for the ordained women and pastors who kept showing up to meetings and councils, who had their humanity questioned and their callings mocked, but who would not be ignored. We give thanks for Reverends Anna Howard Shaw, Julia A. J. Foote, Margaret Towner, Addie Davis, Alison Cheek, Katie Geneva Cannon, and Leontine Kelly are a few of the first women ordained in their denominations. While ordination is a good start, but it is not enough. Installing

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<sup>7</sup> Gladwell, Malcolm, narrator. "The Lady Vanishes." *Revisionist History*, season 1, episode 1, Slate Group, 2016, [revisionisthistory.com/seasons?selected=season-1](http://revisionisthistory.com/seasons?selected=season-1).

<sup>8</sup> Numbers 27:5-7

women as pastors is a good start, but it is not enough. Denominations and congregations must continue to celebrate, support, encourage, and protect the woman in their pews and pulpits. It was the Lord that declared that such support and such assurance was right and just. We all must SHOW up!

Today Ravensworth Baptist Church, we are here to install the Rev. Dr. Leah Amanda Grundset Davis as your pastor because she too has stood at the entrance. She too has asked the hard questions and done the selfless work to fight for justice, to preach the Gospel. She too has spread the Good News in season and out of season.

Ravensworth, as you already know, Leah is a beautiful soul, gifted leader, dedicated wife, mother, sister, friend, and an amazing woman of faith. Please know that she does not come to Ravensworth alone. Leah, my sister, look around and know that you are surrounded by a heavenly and earthly cloud of witnesses of sisters and daughters who have shown up. And because Leah has shown up, she has given voice and bears witness to Lydia and Sadie Pearl and so many other girls, young women, and older women in this congregation and community who will too, some day, show up.

We thank God for the sisters and daughters who show up and now, I ask you Ravensworth to show up and support her as you both as a community - pastor and congregation, leaders and followers, everyone a minister, show up to God's beloved children throughout this world who are in desperate need of a people, a Church, bearers of the Good News, who will show up!

Thanks be to God!

Amen!