

WEEK 6: Being a Teen in the Bible

This week we are going to look at a few bible stories that have to do with teenagers – not messages to teenagers but more specifically events that took place when the main character was a youth. Some of them will be familiar and some I am sure you probably have never heard before and as you probably would guess – they are all from the Old Testament ;).

Adolescence is not easily identified in the bible, mostly because it was not much of a thing. If you were female, you went from being a little girl to a woman as soon as you were able to have children. Once you reached that age, you were betrothed and whisked off in marriage by your family! So much for high school angst, sleepovers, dances, Tik Tok videos and church retreats. For you guys, you would probably have some schooling (with other boys) but by the time you were a teenager you had been working in the fields along side your father and older brothers for some time or maybe you had the “good fortune” to be send away from your family and apprenticed in a trade. You started making money early to help the family but also to save up to pay your “bride price” when your family matched you with your future wife – whom you probably had never met. And yeah don’t forget, now you must make sure you are following all 613 of the laws of the Torah. So instead of playing ball or a musical instrument, enjoying hanging out with other youth or playing video games on your phone you are worried about whether you cut your hair the right way, did that meat you just ate come from an animal with a cloven hoof? Was that barley seed that I planted in the wheat field? You know, all those things that would incur the wrath of God.

So been a teen was a little different back then, but they were still human. Dealing with the same emotional, physical and spiritual battles – just in a different way. There is still the same struggle to be heard, to be taken seriously and not be marginalized just because of your age. But before we get started with a preview of this week’s readings, I want to share my favor verse from the Job 32 regarding the voice of a youth

Elihu son of Barachel the Buzite answered:

‘I am young in years, and you are aged;

therefore I was timid and afraid to declare my opinion to you.

I said, “Let days speak, and many years teach wisdom.”

But truly it is the spirit in a mortal, the breath of the Almighty, that makes for understanding.

It is not the old that are wise, nor the aged that understand what is right.

Therefore, I say, “Listen to me; let me also declare my opinion.”

Monday

1 Samuel 17:19-23,
31-37

Tuesday

Exodus 2:1-10

Wednesday

2 Chronicles 34:1-4,
30-31

Thursday

Genesis 24: 15,
52-60

Friday

Jeremiah 1:1-10

Monday

Now Saul, and they, and all the men of Israel, were in the valley of Elah, fighting with the Philistines. David rose early in the morning, left someone in charge of the sheep, took the provisions, and went as Jesse had commanded him. He came to the encampment as the army was going forth to the battle line, shouting the war cry. Israel and the Philistines drew up for battle, army against army. David left the things in charge of the keeper of the baggage, ran to the ranks, and went and greeted his brothers. As he talked with them, the champion, the Philistine of Gath, Goliath by name, came up out of the ranks of the Philistines, and spoke the same words as before. And David heard him...

When the words that David spoke were heard, they repeated them before Saul; and he sent for him. David said to Saul, 'Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.' Saul said to David, 'You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth.' But David said to Saul, 'Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God.' David said, 'The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine.' So Saul said to David, 'Go, and may the Lord be with you!'

(1 Samuel 17:19-23, 31-37)

Hopefully you recognize this young man and especially this story. David and Goliath are certainly on the top ten of the Vacation Bible School greatest hits parade. Like most Old Testament stories though, the age of the people in the story is not given but we can tell from one word and the context in which it is used that David is probably a teenager when this happened. When David is in front of King Saul, Saul refers to him as being "just a boy". The Hebrew word here is na'ar which actual means a youth, what we would refer to as a teenager. Given the contextual setting, it is hard to image what we would think of as a boy being allowed to travel to a battle front much less face off with a giant.

There are two themes to this almost fairy tale story: the faithfulness of David and the deliverance of God. The first is rather obvious: David is fearless. This Goliath does not scare him! Again, read what he told King Saul – that when a lion and bear turned on him, he would grab them by the jaw and kill them. Why was he so sure of himself? That leads to the second theme: deliverance. "The Lord who saved me..." the Hebrew verb for save or deliver is natsal and it is used over and over in the Old Testament to stress that God will save and protect the faithful. David was totally sure of this, so much so that right before he faced Goliath in battle he told him that God would make this not much of a contest and after he killed him and cut off his head he would feed his carcass to the birds (v.45-47).

Now we might be tempted to say that is just a great story, makes for a good halftime pep talk. How many underdog triumph stories often get referred to as a David slaying Goliath? I think there is more, because doing that takes away from the incredible faith and belief that was possessed by David. I see that fearlessness when I read the story of Malala Yousatzai facing off against the Taliban, Greta Thunberg facing

off against our own President and in many of you who take a stand every day against things you see that are injustices. To me, the light of the Almighty shines brightest when it is reflected through the passion of our youth!

Peace (Shalom)

Tuesday

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. 'This must be one of the Hebrews' children,' she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, 'Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?' Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Yes.' So, the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.' So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, 'because', she said, 'I drew him out of the water. (Exodus 2:1-10)

In today's story we read of Moses' sister. Most scholars believe this to be Miriam who is identified later in the story. There are, however, Jewish rabbis who believe Miriam was younger than Moses and this was another sister. Her name is not so important, but we will refer to her as Miriam for this reading. Like the story yesterday, this is another one of bravery. It is also another story where it is difficult to pinpoint Miriam's age. I mean, if you use "Prince of Egypt" as your guide you would have guessed she was four or five years old but, again, the Hebrew word that is used gives us a clue. The word is "ha'al'mah" here translated as "girl" used most often in reference to a young maiden; one who is of age to have children but is not yet married – aka a teenager. This is the same word that is used to refer to Mary in the birth story of Jesus.

Before we go further, I need to introduce you to another Hebrew concept – that of midrash. Midrash literally means textual interpretation. Jewish rabbis spend countless hours reading and re-reading the text to gain meaning and insight. A contemporary scholar defined it as interpretation that not only engages the words of the text but those behind the text and beyond it; looking at what is not said as much as what was said.

I do that because we are going to practice a little bit of "Marty Midrash" on this story because there could be different teachings about Miriam and it has to do with a bit of information that the story left out

(what was not spoken). Specifically, what was Miriam's relationship with Pharaoh's daughter? The story does not tell us, so it allows us to ponder what each reading of the story could suggest. This is what Rabbis refer to as turning the gemstone (the text) so you can see its many facets.

Say that Miriam had no previous contact with Pharaoh's daughter. So what you have is a slave girl approaching and speaking to a member of the royal court and saying "Hey, you don't know me and I know I am a Hebrew slave but let me find you a wet nurse for that baby you just found!" The other option is that Miriam was one of her attendants. That would make her comment seem more plausible, but it now brings to light a different aspect of Miriam. So, did she position the basket in such a way at a very specific time so that it was sure to be found by Pharaoh's daughter? She would have known her routine, maybe that she had a kind heart or had tried to have a child of her own but had not been successful.

Either approach paints a beautiful picture of Miriam. The first being as fierce as David for she was going against a Goliath so to speak by speaking to an Egyptian royal. The second not only speaks to courage but also shows an extremely smart young woman; one who cared so much for her baby brother that she plotted and planned a way to make this all work. I can only imagine the hours she must have spent convincing her poor mother to come up with the baby in a basket plan, assuring her that Pharaoh's daughter would find it and he would be safe from persecution. Either way, Miriam is a fierce youth and goes on to become one of the great prophets of Israel!

Peace (Shalom)

Wednesday

Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign; he reigned for thirty-one years in Jerusalem. He did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the ways of his ancestor David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left. For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was still a boy, he began to seek the God of his ancestor David, and in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the sacred poles, and the carved and the cast images. In his presence they pulled down the altars of the Baals; he demolished the incense altars that stood above them. He broke down the sacred poles and the carved and the cast images; he made dust of them and scattered it over the graves of those who had sacrificed to them.

The king went up to the house of the Lord, with all the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the Levites, all the people both great and small; he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord. The king stood in his place and made a covenant before the Lord, to follow the Lord, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of the covenant that were written in this book. (2 Chronicles 34:1-4, 30-31)

This is probably one of those stories that you are NOT familiar with. It falls into the myriad of Kings of Israel that are recounted in the books of 1 and 2 Kings, and 2 Chronicles. We often don't read from Chronicles as it is a "cliff notes" version of the Old Testament so to speak. Therefore, it just hits the tops of the waves of most stories. Having this much text dedicated to Josiah in this book gives us a hint as to how special he was. What is also interesting about this story is we have an indication as to how old Josiah was when we join the story.

Josiah became king of the Southern Kingdom of Judah when he was eight years old. The scripture says he did what was right in the sight of the Lord. You would probably think that an eight-year-old probably has a lot of help running the kingdom which probably comes from other relatives or advisors of the previous king, his father Amon. What you should know is that Amon was recorded as being evil, just like most of the kings of the time. Moreover, Josiah's grandfather, Manasseh, was known to have brought idol worship into the Temple in Jerusalem and was blamed for the people turning their backs to God. Amidst all the probable bad advice he might have gotten from his father's cronies, Josiah was different.

In the eighth year of his reign, when he was 16, Josiah began to seek God. Notice that Josiah is still referred to as a "boy" even though the math says he is 16. The word is the same word we found in reference to David (na'ar) and it is one of the reasons we believe the term not to be how we would normally define a boy. Josiah spent the next four years in study and when he was 20, he began a campaign to rid the land of idol worship created by his father and grandfather and restore the Temple in Jerusalem. It was during this restoration that scrolls containing the Torah were discovered and Josiah led all of Israel in a reading of the text and a turning back to God.

Can you imagine the insurmountable odds that Josiah had to overcome? He had to block out the noise of those around him and stay focused and true to what he knew was acceptable in the eyes of God! Not all of you might have the resources to bring to bear that Josiah had, given he was the King, but we all can take an example of the strength and commitment to study that Josiah showed. There is something very important in the fact that it took many years to hear the voice of God moving him to action and then more years of study before he took the first step. It sometimes takes time for that still small voice that you hear inside of you to reach a point at which you feel comfortable to take the first step. It's okay – it took eight years for Josiah! Just always remember to be listening.

Peace (Shalom)

Thursday

Let the girl to whom I shall say, "Please offer your jar that I may drink", and who shall say, "Drink, and I will water your camels"—let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master.' Before he had finished speaking, there was Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, coming out with her water-jar on her shoulder. The girl was very fair to look upon, a virgin whom no man had known. She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up...

Look, Rebekah is before you; take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son, as the Lord has spoken.' When Abraham's servant heard their words, he bowed himself to the ground before the Lord. And the servant brought out jewelry of silver and of gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebekah; he also gave to her brother and to her mother costly ornaments. Then he and the men who were with him ate and drank, and they spent the night there. When they rose in the morning, he said, 'Send me back to my master.' Her brother and her mother said, 'Let the girl remain with us a while, at least ten days; after that she may go.' But he said to them, 'Do not delay me, since the Lord has made my journey successful; let me go, that I may go to my master.' They said, 'We will call the girl, and ask her.' And they called Rebekah, and said to her, 'Will you go with this man?' She said, 'I will.' (Genesis 24:14-16; 51-58)

Today we return to one of the great women of the Old Testament reading the passage where we are first introduced to her. I have always found Rebekah to be a powerful figure. She often gets a bad rap because we remember her for the role she played in helping Jacob fool his father Isaac into thinking he was Esau so that Jacob would get the blessing of the first born.

In today's passage from the book of Genesis, Abraham has sent his trusted servant to look for a wife for his son Isaac. His servant has traveled to the land of Abraham's relatives and, upon finding a well, prays to God that He would give him a sign. Almost on cue, Rebekah emerges and does all the right things, says all the right things – it is a miracle!!!! In fact, this chapter is quite humorous because it tells the story of the servant's quest over and over and over again as he has to explain to person after person carefully editing and emphasizing parts of the story for the different audiences.

The first picture we have painted of Rebekah is that she attractive and she was a virgin. Now the obvious question is how he would have known that, but it is more to the word that was used to describe her. It happens to be the same word that was used to place the age of Miriam (ha'al'mah) which means young maiden; the emphasis being old enough to have children but not yet married, thus, the use of the word virgin. Scholars believe that she was probably around 14 or 15. The next attribute we see from Rebekah in the full account is her hospitality offering the servant drink and place to spend the night (while he tells his story over again).

In the second part of the passage, we fast forward (past retelling number three and four) to Rebekah's brother Laban signing the marriage contract for a rather substantial price, not to mention financial gain for Laban himself. You see, the "bride price" was meant to be a safety net of sorts for the woman entering into the contract should anything go wrong with the marriage. It was not supposed to be a get rich quick scheme for the father or, in this case, older brother. I almost get a sense that Laban is an ancient prototype of Thenardier from *Les Misérables* trying to get more and more money from Jean Valjean for the release of Cosette. If you don't know that story, watch the movie – it is good. Better yet, summer is coming up – read the book – it is even better.

Anyway, there is a twist at the end of the story, one that gives us even more insight into this teenage girl now adorned with gold and silver. That is, even at a young age of 14 or 15 she is her own woman. It might be hard to see that from the text but there are several clues. Laban is telling Abraham's servant that Rebekah can go but she needs to delay her departure date. It was customary in those times for a betrothed woman to be given time to prepare but you almost get the sense that maybe Laban was trying to extort more money. Laban offers up, almost as if in jest, "ask my sister – maybe you can convince her to go," knowing full well that she would not dare go against the wishes of the head of the household. Here is where we get into the second and more profound bit of insight into Rebekah. When asked, she immediately responds she will go. There are many stories and interpretations in the Jewish faith written on the courage and discernment of Rebekah because of this simple action. Not only does she establish the law, still used today, that a Jewish maiden cannot be forced into marriage, she is believed to be the reason that the people of Israel would always follow God's voice in any situation or time of peril. There is a midrash that says, God was able to deliver the people of Israel through the simple words of Moses because Rebekah had embodied that spirit of faith and obedience in all her offspring. What a powerful image and powerful young woman! Later in her life, God speaks directly to Rebekah regarding which of her twin boys will be the one to carry on the promise, and that she must at times take it into her own hands to make sure that God's plan is carried out!

Peace (Shalom)

Friday

The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,

'Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you,

and before you were born I consecrated you;

I appointed you a prophet to the nations.'

Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.'

But the Lord said to me,

'Do not say, "I am only a boy";

for you shall go to all to whom I send you,

and you shall speak whatever I command you.

Do not be afraid of them,

for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.'

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me,

'Now I have put my words in your mouth.

See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,

to pluck up and to pull down,

to destroy and to overthrow,

to build and to plant.' (Jeremiah 1:1-10)

Our last story this week is about the prophet Jeremiah. We often pull this one out and use it in the Youth House to get across the message that God can do mighty things even through the words of a child. It is used to build up self-confidence and resolve. I can remember as a youth hearing this text, especially at summer camp, as a rally cry to get us all to be Jeremiahs as we entered back into the reality of the new school year. I can also remember being totally overwhelmed when I entered back into the halls of my high school ready to be a prophet only for that spiritual calling to dissipate shortly after lunch period the first day back. Maybe you have felt the same?

Why was that? Now I don't doubt that what I had experienced was very real and it was not just some emotional high, so what went wrong? I guess for me, I did not read the rest of the book of Jeremiah. If you do have the time to read all 52 chapters of the book you will find out that, not only is the text hard to read, but Jeremiah's life was also very hard. He faced abandonment by friends and family, ridicule, imprisonment, and often found himself in situations where others would have called it quits. He prophesied for 40 years of the coming destruction of the temple and fall of Jerusalem. He is referred to, in a sense, as a reverse form of Moses. Moses tried for 40 years to get the people to be ready to enter the promised land. Jeremiah spent 40 years trying to get the people ready for going back into a time of exile. If I had read the whole book maybe I would have had second thoughts about being a Jeremiah.

Honestly, I think that is the trap of the Jeremiah story. When we look at it in its entirety it seems daunting. The reality is that there are very few Jeremiahs. We can think of people like Mahatma Gandhi, Mother

Theresa or Fredrick Bonhoeffer but they are exceptions, not the rule. What do we take, then, from Jeremiah, especially as it relates to when he was a teenager?

Like the previous days' studies, there is a clue in the text. Most of the time when we read this passage about Jeremiah's call, we start at verse four (the "before I formed you" part). We skip right over the first couple of verses that describe who he was and the time frame in which he ministered. In fact, this is quite unusual. You will see this in the books of Samuel and Kings, but we really don't see this in the prophets.

What we find from these first few verses is that Jeremiah was the son of a priest, and he was from the tribe of Levi. Not only that, the lineage of his family traces back to the high priest Eli (High Priest when Samuel was a boy). That meant he was to be a priest and perhaps even a High Priest. Therefore, he was already in a spiritual calling, a man of God so to speak, but for what God wanted to use him for it was the wrong calling.

My problem, ironically some 40 years ago, was that I thought God wanted me to be a prophet – nope. Then a couple years later I thought he wanted me to be a minister, I was sure of it – nope. When I finally took the time to listen to Him, I found out that, yes, I did have a spiritual calling, but it was to be a teacher. It took me quite a while to get to that realization. The point of this story is that every one of you has spiritual calling. Maybe you will be a prophet like Jeremiah speaking truths that many will not be willing to hear. Or maybe you will be a Miriam, who works inside the system to make sure a greater truth and way to freedom emerges. Maybe you are called to be a Josiah, in a position of leadership where you will need to pray and study, and constantly ask God for direction because what you do can affect so many lives. Maybe you will be a David and have to face some precipice in which you will need the assurance of God's strength to make the right call, or maybe you will be a Rebekah who listened to the still voice of God and made decisions in her normal life that affect the outcome of peoples for centuries to come. Whomever you are or come to be – listen to the small still voice of God.

Peace (Shalom)