



“GET UP!”
SCRIPTURE: PSALM 23; ACTS 9: 36-41
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
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Psalm 23

23:1 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

23:2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

23:3 he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

23:4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff-- they comfort me.

23:5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

23:6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Acts 9:36-43

9:36 Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity.

9:37 At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs.

9:38 Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay."

9:39 So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them.

9:40 Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up.

9:41 He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive.

9:42 This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

9:43 Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

"Tabitha, get up."

The writer of Luke/Acts needed some well-placed miracles. He wanted the Roman Empire to think favorably of the burgeoning Christian movement. So, he played a tune they would like to hear—the sound of men’s voices changing things, shape-shifting things, making things happen.

"Tabitha, get up."

And just like that we have another chapter in a new patriarchal tradition speaking the old language of Empire.

Peter, the Rock of the Church—needed Tabitha to get up for lots of reasons. His ability to carry on the miracle working of Jesus and to attract people to the movement was the kind of power the Roman Empire would respect and want to ally with. Whatever happened to Tabitha becomes secondary to what Peter had the power to do, through his proximity to the resurrected Christ.

This story helps put women’s work in its place; men are the focus of Acts, namely Peter and Paul. And women are secondary.

The writer of Luke/Acts uses diminutive language to describe what Tabitha does. Instead of the word for ministry, “diakonia,” that is used to describe the same work Tabitha does when men do it, the author uses words for good works and almsgiving, signaling that what Tabitha is doing does not count as ministry.¹

Patriarchal culture delivered this story to us and our consciousness and biases have been deeply informed and policed by our own culture formed by patriarchy.

And this story can easily become another reason why women are not seen as equally capable or equally called or equally able to lead.

But, Peter asked her to “get up” and she did—and she has more to say and be for us than the easy tropes of self-sacrifice or giving of herself.

A close read of this story shows us that Tabitha is more than a second-class citizen. She was important, she was powerful, she impacted people's lives. Tabitha was a community builder, a resource, an organizer, an advocate. She was a confidant, a spiritual companion, a leader, a friend. She was a teacher, a sister, a listener, a doer. She is the only woman in the New Testament to be called "*mathitrea*" the feminine form of the word for disciple.

What does it mean to make room for the full story of Tabitha—a powerful woman, a woman coopted by a culture that needed her to be both less and more than she was simultaneously.

She is an iconic mother figure in scripture—although we know nothing of her biological connection to anyone in her community. You see motherhood is really more a style of existence than it is a biological relationship. Motherhood is about being so tangled up with people, that you live and die together every day—being present on that razor's edge of birth and death together.

Mothering is an iconic disposition of mutual vulnerability—and this disposition is the heart of the matter when it comes to how we are called to live and die as Christians.

Shalon Irving² was an epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, GA.³ She was a woman with two Masters degrees, one from John's Hopkins, and a double PhD from Purdue.

At 36 years old, Shalon was one of the best and brightest of the CDC, where she focused on structural inequality, trauma and violence and how these things made people of color sick.⁴ She was dedicated to showing the world the realities of racialized inequity in medical outcomes.

Shalon had so many advantages —degrees, great health insurance, and an amazing and substantial support system.⁵ But in America, even all those advantages don't mitigate the deeply entrenched impacts of racism and white supremacy on health outcomes for people of color.

Even Shalon's expert awareness of these inequities weren't enough to conquer them.

Black mothers are 3-4 times more likely to die in childbirth in the United States. Black women are less likely to be believed in their pre-natal and post-natal care when they report signs of deterioration or distress.

"...a black woman is 22 percent more likely to die from heart disease than a white woman, 71 percent more likely to perish from cervical cancer, but 243 percent more

likely to die from pregnancy- or childbirth-related causes. What's more, even relatively well-off black women like Shalon die and nearly die at higher rates than whites... [A New York City study in 2016 analyzed] five years of data and found that black, college-educated mothers who gave birth in local hospitals were more likely to suffer severe complications of pregnancy or childbirth than white women who never graduated from high school.”⁶

Shalon’s c-section wound became infected about a week after her daughter was born. “I just don’t feel right,” she told doctors. She was gaining weight (9 lbs in 10 days post partum). Her legs were swelling. Her blood pressure was up. She kept going to the doctor to talk about her concerns. And she kept being sent home.

She told her mother, Wanda, “They just don’t listen to us.” After returning home after her 4th visit in just over two weeks to seek medical care, Shalon collapsed. Paramedics found her without a pulse. She died leaving behind her mother, Wanda, to raise her not yet 3-week old daughter, Soleil.

Shalon was the third child that Wanda had buried. Two other sons had died, one as a child in a car accident, another from early onset of MS. Wanda is drowning in grief and most days she doesn’t want to live anymore, most days she doesn’t want to get up.

Soleil is a toddler now and many mornings comes into her grandmother’s room way too early and says, “Nana, get up! Nana, it’s time to get up!”⁷ And Wanda rises up out of her death bed to live another day—to live another day tangled up with another—life, loss, love—fold into each other over and over again, that is what makes Wanda get up and make a life with Soleil.

Mothering is an excruciating style of existence. It is ambiguous. It is disruptive and it is solace. It is impossible and it is, some days, the only reason we have to get up. All of us are called to love this way; all of us are called to let ourselves be loved this way.

All of us are loved this way. God our mother—tending to our needs, knowing us better than we know ourselves, telling us not to be afraid, telling us to trust our lives. Singing us lullabies in the shadow lands of life.

This mysterious kind of love is the lifeblood of our connection to God and to each other. And we miss its power if we equate it with the stereotypes patriarchy has used to trivialize motherhood. We miss its power if we try to erase its ambiguity.

Frederick Douglas’ wrote perhaps one of the most painful accounts of this ambiguity of motherhood about his own mother:

I never saw my mother, to know her as such more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night. She was hired by Mr. Stewart, who lived about twelve miles from my house. She made her journeys to see me in the night, traveling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day's work. She was a field hand, and a whipping is the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise . . . I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day. She was with me in the night. She would lie down with me and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone.⁸

Her muscles, calluses, cells, synapses, and yearning enflashed her love. And with her hard-won determination to love her son come her son's ambiguous memories of her, as if he never knew her. Douglas later wrote that she was like a stranger to him, that he never knew the "soothing presence" of a mother's care.⁹

What excruciating pain, what powerful love, what an indictment on our culture, what an incredible testimony to the love that will not let us go.

I cannot help but find echoes here of what God must feel like when we say we have been forsaken, when all the while God is holding us in the dark, traversing across the shards of broken communities, abusive systems, abusive power, and violence to be with us while we sleep.

And we wonder where God is—when she's been right here all along—whispering "get up, it's time to get up" and love the world as fiercely as God loves us.

This year my mother's day present was being in Tucson, AZ helping Sidney move out of his dorm room.

That may sound like a strange way to celebrate Mother's Day—scrubbing out a micro-fridge, deciding that some sheets are better off in the garbage dumpster than the washing machine, cleaning some things that may well be classified as a biohazard. But being there with Sidney was the greatest gift I could have received, and it wasn't about gendered stereotypes of self-sacrifice for women or gendered stereotypes of learned helplessness about deep cleaning for men.

Those tropes can get in the way sometimes of living into how shared vulnerability really works.

It was a gift because I was invited to get up and to come alongside someone who I have shared life with now for 19 years. I got to embody the brute fact that my life is tangled up with someone else's life. And that tangle of lives is complicated and beautiful and heartbreaking and heart-making.

For decades now I have been writing and preaching and teaching about motherhood as a window into our human experience. I've written and preached on placentas and deep cellular connections, on feminist disruptions of self-sacrifice, on making room for real mothers and for the complexities of being mothered, on miscarriages, and infertility, and abortion, and rape, and racism, and on mothers who never were or who never wanted to be.

And I believe it's never been more urgent for us to make space for the truth that mothering reveals in such clear relief, the truth given to us by our great mother—by the mothering forces of the universe, the power of birthing, the potency of living at that threshold between life and death—because that is where we all are—birthing and being birthed, tasting death and being told to get up, to rise up, to wise up, to wake up—to find a way to make and keep life, to tend to the living and to the dead.

This year our world needs Mother's Day to be about something categorically different than flowers and cards or a special meal. It must be about powerful truth—the kind of truth that sets us free, the kind of truth that says no more lying here, no more dying here, it's time to wake up, it's time to get up.

Thanks be to God.

¹ Gail O'Day, "Acts," *Women's Bible Commentary*.

² <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/07/568948782/black-mothers-keep-dying-after-giving-birth-shalon-irvings-story-explains-why>

³ https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/magazine/magazine_article/america-is-failing-its-black-mothers/

⁴ "Black Mothers Keep Dying," NPR.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Mount Shoop, Marcia W. *Let the Bones Dance: Embodiment and the Body of Christ*. (WJKP, 2010), 107.

⁹ Ibid.