

“In Memoriam: Jephthah’s Daughter”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Judges 11:29-40
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
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To begin, I want to zoom in on a particular character, only this character doesn’t actually make an appearance in the story. I want to zoom in on the dead daughter’s mother. Like, where was she? Why isn’t there a hollering, screaming, protesting mother? The first time I preached this story, someone asked me afterwards, “Where was her mother?” and the question has haunted me ever since.

I wonder how many times in those two months between Jephthah’s return and her daughter’s death did she fight with her husband and try to stop him? I wonder how she carried on after the sacrifice or if she went mad from trauma and grief. I have imagined her on the day of the sacrifice when Jephthah returns, grabbing him by the shirt, shaking him fiercely, demanding to know: “Was there a ram?” I imagine Jephthah stammering, uncomprehending. He has returned alone, but still she begs for answer. “Tell me, Jephthah. Like the ram for Isaac, was there a ram for her?”

Next I want to zoom in on another not-so-active character: God. Unlike the angel in Genesis chapter 22 who stays Abraham’s hand from slaying Isaac, there is no divine intervention on the daughter’s behalf, no substitutionary ram caught in the thicket. Unlike Isaac, favored son of Father Abraham, this daughter is not saved but dies.

The only time God actively appears is at the beginning of the story, before Jephthah goes to war. The text reports in v. 29 “The Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah.” Note that the Spirit comes to Jephthah’s side before Jephthah makes his vow. God was already with him. No vow was necessary.

In her seminal work, *Texts of Terror*, biblical scholar, Phyllis Trible, notes that Jephthah’s vow to God was thus an act of unfaithfulness and disbelief. Jephthah did not trust the help God was already providing. She writes, “Jephthah desires to bind God rather than embrace the gift of the Spirit. What comes to him freely, he seeks to earn and manipulate. The meaning of his words is doubt, not faith; it is control, not courage. To such a vow, the deity makes no reply.”ⁱ

Notice how different this is from the binding of Isaac in Genesis. Whatever theological qualms we may have with *that* story, the narrator makes it clear that God both asked for the sacrifice of Isaac and provided the substitute sacrifice. In Jephthah’s case, God is silent both at the making of the vow and at its keeping. The sacrifice is entirely Jephthah’s idea alone. God does not say, “Why thank, Jephthah, I’ve always wanted such a gift.” Instead, God is silent.

Now the text does report that God gave the Ammonites into Jephthah’s hands, but that appears to have been God’s intention all along, before Jephthah made his vow. Still, we might wonder why God did not intervene to stop the sacrifice if it was all just Jephthah’s lousy idea. I wonder, how can we be so sure that God did not attempt to intervene? We know that Jephthah does not

have great faith. We know he acts according to his own wisdom. Another example of Jephthah's presumptuous behavior is when he first sends message to the Ammonites, he speaks to them not as God's representative, but as himself. "What do you have against *me* that you have attacked *my* country?" he says. Usually in Scripture, God's spokesperson begins with the phrase, "Thus says the Lord," but Jephthah says to the king of the Ammonites, "Thus says Jephthah."

Can a man such as this be trusted to hear or notice God's intervention? Might a man like this have passed by a dozen rams on his way to the altar so focused on the egotistical need to keep his word that he wasn't open to any alternative God might provide? Would it have cost Jephthah too much pride to admit he had made a mistake with his vow? Perhaps God would have said, "No! Don't do this!" if only Jephthah had asked rather than presumed. Perhaps God sent the girl's mother to intervene, but Jephthah paid her no heed. Perhaps God said no in a hundred ways but Jephthah's murderous hand prevailed because nothing thwarts God's will like the stubbornness of men's hearts.

Just who was this Jephthah person? Let's zoom in on the father of the girl for a minute. Jephthah, war hero. Jephthah, daughter-killer. Jephthah, judge of Israel. Jephthah, illegitimate son of a prostitute.

His story begins as that of an outcast. Jephthah, originally, was a guy who was kicked out of Gilead on account of his illegitimacy. "You are not going to get any inheritance in our family," his brothers told him, "because you are the son of another woman." And so Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob, where, the text reports, "a gang of scoundrels gathered around him and followed him."

Much later, when the people of Gilead are in trouble, to Jephthah's surprise, they turn to him for help. Imagine: the rejected one now asked to be the hero. It isn't just the fate of the people resting on this victory—Jephthah's own legitimacy is at stake. Win the battle, and he is back in. And for the first time, he could really be one of them. You can perhaps see why this victory is so crucial for Jephthah, why he cares so much. He doesn't just want to win. He needs to win. He has something to prove. He has a deep childhood wound that craves resolution.

And so Jephthah attempts to bargain with God. God, as we've already noted, does not even show up for that conversation because no such bargaining is necessary. God has already come to Jephthah's aid. But Jephthah cannot see that—at least, he cannot trust it. And so he promises, "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."

And you have to wonder, what did he think was going to happen? What did he expect to walk out the door of his house to greet him first? A fatted calf? A servant, perhaps? Did he intend a human sacrifice, and if so, where did he get the idea that God would want such a thing? As early as Cain and Abel we know not all sacrifices please the Lord. Jephthah is not in tune with who God is or what God wants. Jephthah knows what he wants—victory in battle—and he assumes the more dramatic his vow, the more persuasive his prayer. Have you ever tried to bargain with God under the false assumption that God's gifts are conditional rather than free and merciful?

Upon returning home from battle, who should be the first one out his door, but his one and only child, his daughter? Jephthah remembers his vow and tears his clothes. But he does not say, “What have I done?” No. Instead he blames her. “Oh no, my daughter. You have brought me down and I am devastated.” His grief appears to be not for her but for himself. “I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break.” From the beginning of the story to the end, Jephthah’s primary point of focus—maybe his only point of focus—is himself.

Unfortunately, many discussions of this story through the centuries have been influenced by patriarchal interpretations so that Jephthah is praised for his faithfulness rather than condemned for his unfaithfulness and his daughter is often not mentioned at all. The ancient rabbis, however, did not view Jephthah in a favorable light, which is evident in the midrash concerning Jephthah. Midrash is a Jewish form of interpretation in which the rabbis expound upon a biblical text often by telling more of the story, and there is a bit of old Jewish midrash in which Jephthah’s daughter actually argued with her father in an effort to spare her own life. Midrash often finds those pockets of the story that remain untold and by telling the untold parts, midrash shapes the meaning of the original story in a particular direction. In the midrash telling, Jephthah’s daughter proves to be articulate in matters concerning the law whereas Jephthah appears ignorant, but despite her best efforts, she does not persuade him. The Jewish retelling further vilifies Jephthah while humanizing the daughter.ⁱⁱ

Let’s zoom in close on her, the daughter. She is a main character of this story even though we do not know her name. She comes running out to meet her father with music and dancing like women in that time often would, but her celebration is short-lived. This is the moment in time depicted by the artwork on the front of your worship guide.

In the piece, the tambourine she carried out to her father now lies still in her hands, its sound dead, same as her future. On her finger is a trickle of blood foreshadowing what is to come. In her eyes I see the dreams that will never be realized. I wrote to the artist who created this piece, and he wrote me back. He told me the piece was created live at a church in Huntsville. He described it as “the moment she was dancing and sees the look in her father’s eyes, not knowing what is to come but knowing everything has now gone terribly wrong. For me,” he said, “she is the face of Judges.”

This particular artist, Kevin Rolly, has an entire series on the book of Judges, and when I asked him what inspired the series, he said it was the story of Jephthah’s daughter. For him, as it is for me, the book of Judges is about the women. He said “the dark uncanny valley of the Old Testament” is “a prophetic window into our current times. A warning and a lesson to us.” And that is how he started his journey into Judges twelve years ago. It was about twelve years ago for me too when I first heard a graduate student present his research on the topic of women in Judges and I began to see the book in a whole new light. As the fidelity of the people to YHWH declines over the trajectory of the book, the plight of the women grows increasingly worse.

Jephthah’s story occurs directly in the middle of the book: chapter eleven out of twenty-one chapters. From Acsah to Deborah to Jael to the woman of Thebez to her, daughter of Jephthah. The further we go into the book, the less we know the women’s names. The further we go, the

less active the women become. Jephthah's daughter's story, though tragic, occupies this middle space.

Aside from what the midrash imagines her saying to her father, what she says in the biblical text is simply this: "My father, you have given your word to the Lord. Do to me just as you promised" She appears to submit to her father's vow. Perhaps she is trying to be courageous or righteous. Perhaps she thinks it will please God or please her father to be compliant. Perhaps she feels she has no other choice. There are many reasons women accept and tolerate the violence of men even when it puts their own lives at risk.

But what I admire most about Jephthah's daughter is that she does not go quietly. Though she accepts her father's decision, she sets her own terms. She tells, rather than asks, her father, "Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends." She desires a space of her own, separate and apart from her father, and she takes it. As a female child in the confines of a male-dominated culture, perhaps this is the most she can claim for herself. Perhaps these two months of independence are the most she can imagine taking. Stress and oppression often limit the imagination, but even in the face of death, her imagination persists. There is no guidebook for how to respond when your father decides to make a burnt offering out of you.

Have you ever been blindsided by betrayal? Someone who was supposed to love and protect you harms you instead? The world goes dark, doesn't it? You are lost. Up is down and down is up; nothing makes sense. Can a child be expected to defend herself against her father? It is his job to protect her and care for her. She has trusted him all her life. Her protector and her killer are now into one. How could she possibly know what to do? It is incredible to me that she manages to name and insist on receiving something she needs.

I wonder how she and her friends spent their two months together roaming the hills, don't you? What did they do with this time that was all their own, no chaperones, no instructions, no examples? They had to create a way to deal with the unbearable, and they did it together. Certainly they mourned and wept, but I think maybe they also laughed and danced, attempting to squeeze as much life into her remaining days as possible.

Three times the narrator reminds us that she is a virgin who will never marry. This highlights the tragedy because hers is a life cut short. In a culture where women were remembered and revered for bearing children, she will never bear children, never even have the chance to conceive. As a woman who dies young with no children, she will be forgotten and unknown.

This is the part of the story where we zoom out, way out. As the story concludes, Jephthah's daughter is not forgotten but remembered. Every year the daughters of Israel commemorate her death for four days. There is a Jewish legend that says every year on the anniversary of her death, water would turn to blood.

Phyllis Tribble translates v. 39 this way: "Although she had not known a man, nevertheless she became a tradition."ⁱⁱⁱ That is to say, she defies her barren and brief existence and becomes something more. Even today she is not forgotten. Today we remember her.

Which isn't to say this annual remembrance makes for a happy ending. Nothing has been resolved. No one has been saved. The evil has not been redeemed.

But as Phyllis Tribble says of sad stories, “by enabling insight, they may inspire repentance . . . Sad stories may yield new beginnings.”^{iv} The fact that Jephthah's daughter is remembered and her story told and retold means that we can imagine a different and better future. We can imagine a future in which no child is ever sacrificed in the name of God, in the name of religion, in the name of border security or immigration law. We can imagine a future in which mothers intervene and those in power listen. We can imagine a future in which little girls are valued equally to little boys. We can imagine a future in which Jephthah's daughter is remembered not through a patriarchal lens but a compassionate one. We can imagine a future where acts of religious devotion create rather than destroy, where spiritual fervor only nourishes life and never kills. Family of God, let us be people who imagine and enact a better future. Amen.

ⁱ Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror* (Fortress Press 1984), 97.

ⁱⁱ <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/jephthahs-daughter-midrash-and-aggadah>

ⁱⁱⁱ Tribble, 106.

^{iv} Tribble, 2.