

THE WIDOW'S MIGHT

November 11, 2012

I greet you in the name of El Shaddai, the God who hears me. And you, the listening ones; whose ears are full to nearly splitting with noises and voices; without and within; you, for whom silence is both curse and luxury, I pray that you might hear me too. You have come to me with longing; ears aching for what is real, beings arching toward the ring of truth. Listen, then, and I will tell you what you already know.

It never would have happened but for the sound of those coins against the treasury box wall. Have you ever dropped coins into something metal? Then you know what I mean. The sound is jarring at best. Ah – but have you ever done it when you didn't want the sound to be heard? Perhaps you have. From this distance of time I have watched you in your world, so different and yet so much the same as mine. For example, I have noticed how in your churches, offerings are taken at worship. There, some of you may have had an experience echoing my own. When the plate is passed, and the eyes of the ushers lower discretely, and you place there what you can...when those around you lay down a gift cushioned by wealth; the soft, privileged sound of a bill or an envelope, and all you have is coins, the very sound of them on the offering plate betraying your poverty? Yes, I can see that perhaps you can hear me more clearly than I first thought.

That day, though, with the Temple so busy, the sound of my meager gift shouldn't have been noticed at all. The sharp haggling of the money-changers, the animals bleating pitifully, as though they knew their fate (the one we humans decided for them, their warm and furry lives cut cruelly short by a butcher's knife and a prayer for human deliverance) the squeals of children running in the street outside, and the droning on of the priests made a rich stew of sound into which my little spice of an offering should have been shaken unnoticed.

But no. At the very moment I stepped forward to give my offering, it was as though they all caught their breath at the same time, and there was silence. The way it is when you pour oil into the soup and it floats there, pushing everything else to the side of the pot. That one drop of silence pushed every sound to the edge, at the worst possible moment. The coins left my hand, and the noises in the Temple simply stopped. As if in slow motion, I saw my last two coins fall, and fall, and fall, then clang obscenely against the side of that metal box. I tell you, the clatter would raise the dead! It was horrible, the stuff of nightmares! As though it were not hard enough for me to be there; to be anywhere; to be giving what I was giving. Shame paralyzed me. Surely the whole Temple had heard the sound of my humiliation. I could hear my heart beating inside my head; a hollow lonely sound.

It may sound strange to your ears, hearing of my shame. I will try to explain. This was the first day I had been to Temple since the death of my husband over a year before. He had been a successful business man in Jerusalem, the owner of a good restaurant. We lived simply but comfortably with two servants and more than enough money for our needs. Although people

thought him strange for it, he always shared it with me, and we made most decisions about life together. And although people found me similarly strange, I made friends with one of our servants, Rachael. She and I worked the kitchen of the restaurant together in spite of our difference in social position (a thing unheard of among people in that part of the city), and we grew closer than I had ever been with anyone, even my sisters. With this arrangement, the household and our business grew and prospered. It was together, Rachael and I, that we would decide to give generously to the poor and hungry who came to our door, and together that my husband and I decided how much to give to the Temple and its needs. The priests were very grateful, and it pleased us to be able to help. Going to the Temple with our offering was always a joy to me, and I would say a prayer of thankfulness as my husband dropped in the gift. "Blessed be you, O Holy One" I would say, "You have blessed us so that we might be a blessing to others". How little I really knew of blessings then, and how soon things would change!

With his death, my world spun out of control. Has any among you lost a partner? I don't know your truth about this. I am hungry to hear you speak about it. For me, among the hardest and most surprising things to bear was...how shall I tell you? It was as though I was lost to myself. I no longer understood who I was in the world. And the community echoed the imbalance of my being. No one, including me, knew who I was, or how I would now face my life. The truth is, I did it alone.

After the necessary rituals surrounding his death, I was left to myself, with nothing but the guilty pitying glances of people who had once been friends. No longer able to provide for myself, let alone another, I had to free Rachael to return to her home, many miles away. I mourned her loss almost as much as my husband's. Although it was clear to me that we could have run our restaurant, she and I, we were not allowed to do so. One of his brothers simply took it from me. It was the custom; it was the law. I still feel a rush of anger when I walk past the place, smell the smells and hear the sounds of the pots and the laughter of customers in the place that once held my life's song.

And I worried. I worried about the money. I know that some of you think that being concerned with money is not a spiritual thing, but let me tell you I was reduced to poverty in a matter of months, and the spiritual havoc was devastating. What is spirituality but the truth of your life, your very being? For lack of a man and money, I became nothing in the eyes of the family, the city, the Temple. Nothing. How could I go to Temple now when I had so little to give? How would the Holy One receive what little I had, both in my soul and in my purse? So many questions; more silence as reply. How can a woman be faithful when emptiness is her only possession? Emptiness of purse, of belly, of soul. The silence of that barren space was made cold by my anger and despair. The priests shook their heads, told me to pray, offered food. I resisted prayer, refused to take the food; and whatever else I needed was lost to them in their need to see themselves as my guides.

You may know that in our culture, a woman's wealth is often carried with her in the coins on her headdress. That was so for me, and the only thing left to me when my brother-in-law took over our restaurant and home, was my headdress with its coins. Never a great amount, they represented what independence I had left. One by one I used those coins to buy food and fuel,

measuring them out at the end of each day, and wondering what on earth I would do when the last one had been spent.

The day before I went to Temple, the day I began to tell you about, I had only two coins left. I unfastened them from my headdress and set them on the table, then sat in silence. I began to pray; I prayed as I had never prayed before. Not a prayer of anger, no longer that. This was too deep for anger, too silent for despair. How shall I tell you? I simply prayed; opened myself to the presence of the Holy One and waited.

I wish I could say that something miraculous happened. It didn't. But when I rose from my mat, I knew what it was I must do. Take the coins to the Temple. Such poverty of spirit and of purse can only belong to God. There is nowhere else for it to exist, no other place for it to be held safely. I knew inside myself the decision was right. Whatever else was to happen would simply happen. I knew somehow it would be all right.

That should be the end; a happy conclusion, but of course life isn't like that. When I rose from my mat, the sun was beginning to set, and the light inside my small hut had taken on that hue that questions what daylight assumes. The evening birds had begun their song. The air took on the smells of neighbours cooking the evening meals, and the sounds of the busy street had quieted as people took their leave and went home to eat. I stood, my knees sore from sitting, and reached for my coins.

One was missing!!!! I couldn't believe it- had I been so stupid as to misplace it? How could it have been there just a few minutes ago and not there now? I was frantic. Not for the coin itself but for...for my decision about what to do with it; for the trust and the peace inside that this decision represented to me; for the sheer indignity of losing something so precious. Was I losing my mind? Is it true what they say about women my age? I became like a crazy woman, I reached for the broom and I swept the house as though I would take that broom and be swept away, riding it to heaven in a whirlwind of human dust. I swept in a frenzied, desperate search, not knowing what it was I truly sought. Finally I stopped, sweating from the exertion, and fell to my knees, sobbing in defeat and resignation. When I finally raised my red and swollen eyes, there, right in front of me just under the mat, was the coin. Too spent to feel anything, I picked it up and placed both coins carefully in my satchel, ready for the trip to the Temple the next day.

These, my friends, were the coins I dropped into the treasury box that day. I was hoping beyond hope that no one recognized me and that this offering, small to others, yet huge to me in ways no one else could understand, would be received without undue attention. Even that hope was crashing around me. The coins made their earth-shaking noise, and there I was.

I kept my head down, face burning hot inside my veil, and waited. Seconds passed, then minutes, (or perhaps it only felt that way, who can tell?). Then, as quickly as they had stopped, the sounds of the temple resumed their hum. I let them build around me, until I felt safe enough to move. It was as though the familiar vibrations clothed me. In the long moment of their absence I had felt naked and conspicuous, and everything in me shrieked "no" at the exposure, recoiling at such a thing.

I had survived, as women do, by keeping my peace, not making a sound, or a spectacle of myself. Never. Not with my parents, nor in the home of my husband, and certainly not in public. Rachael and I had often talked about that. One day, as we were spreading flat bread with a rich olive paste for the hungry lunch time customers, she looked up, and said: “Miriam, we lived in a silence sandwich!” When I asked her what in heaven’s name she was talking about, she explained. “The way it works, the sounds and the silence – think about it, Miriam. It’s just like a sandwich; the rich sounds of our inner lives on one side, the noise of the outside world on the other, and in between the filling, a thickly spread layer of silence keeping the two forever apart!” I had howled with laughter at the truth of that. Who but Rachael would think of it that way? She was wonderful. She always made me laugh. There is no one who does that now.

“A silence sandwich” I hooted. “Yes, with the silence in the middle so the sounds on either end won’t me made soggy with whatever the silence might hold!” We laughed until the tears rolled down our cheeks. It was more truthful than a serious conversation could bear.

I have come to believe that there are even more layers than we thought, Rachael and I. There is, for example, a huge crust of silence imposed over the bustling of the city. People make noise, but don’t speak of what is most important. Someone might really listen, you see, and then everything would have to change. The silence is thick and almost impenetrable. You might call it a club sandwich; the sounds and silence of living stacked upon each other. Thick, but does it give the nutrition we need?

That stack pressed down on me as I faced the treasury box that day, and I felt it physically, a heaviness in my being, through my shoulders and lower back. This is what I had to do. It was right, it was time. But how I wished for something else – how deeply I longed for the old familiar sounds of what had once been my life. There was nothing there. Silence can weigh a person down. It can make you sick. It can kill.

But listen – it doesn’t have to be that way! I know that, because of what happened to me that very day, there at the Temple. Amazing. My coins left my hand, clanged against the wall of the treasury box, and in the stillness that followed, the sound and silence merged. The after-vibrations of my coins’ clatter hung in the air, a question. A warning. An invitation. I turned around.

Under normal circumstances I would have kept my eyes on the ground and hurried home. But this was no ordinary time. I could feel that in my bones. I braced myself and looked straight ahead, ready for anything. What I saw was the world going about its normal business, which I suppose is exactly what one sees when one decides to really look. Everyone was engrossed in some activity or conversation. Save one man. He was sitting, surrounded by a group of people who all watched him with expectation. He, however, was looking directly at me. Our eyes met. And he smiled. I flushed, lowered my eyes and began to walk more quickly to the gate. He turned to the gathering near him, and began to speak. I slowed my pace, curious to know the sound of his voice. By the time I could actually hear him, he was speaking about the religious leaders.

“Beware of the scribes” he said, “they like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets. They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance, they say long prayers.” I smiled beneath my veil. He was right – at least some of them were like that. I had known many who seemed genuinely holy, close to God and eager to help the poor. Before my husband’s death, when it seemed we had a place in the world, when we had moved in those circles, and given generously to the Temple out of our income, we had known many scribes and priests. Even then, I noticed those who enjoyed the sound of their own voices. Since his death, I had less occasion to observe, but from a distance the chasm spoke louder than ever it had. Those like me who find themselves just out of earshot of the sounds of power, have a unique ear to offer, and we hear sounds that those too close simply cannot.

The man looked over at the rich people who had just come from the centre of the city to put large sums into the treasury box. He continued speaking and I stepped even closer, wanting to hear more. “Look at the rich, who are giving from their wealth” he said. And then, looking around for a contrast, he stopped. What to set over against these men of such stature? These “somebodies” – what would he use to make the starkest of comparisons? A nobody. A nothing. That’s what the force of his point required. He scanned the Temple precinct. I was anticipating that he would use an animal to compare – the weakest and least powerful who gave their lives for the sacrifice. Suddenly his eyes fell on me again. I felt it like a punch in the stomach as he continued.

“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had; all she had to live on.”

Never, even in all the things I have endured in the last year, never had I felt so diminished. I stood there, stunned and silenced, with nothing but a cold lump in my gut. He noticed immediately, and to my absolute horror, he left the group and came to me. His eyes were kind, and he said “I’ve hurt you – I’m sorry. Please tell me about it.”

And I did! Even now I can’t believe I spoke so forthrightly to a man, and in public! Expressing anger! He led me to the edge of the courtyard, where there was a bench with at least a bit of privacy. He invited me to sit, then sat himself, at a respectful distance, but turned his body to face me. It was just past noon, and his robes smelled like roasted meat and sweat. He looked at me again, raised those dark eyebrows as though asking permission to speak. I nodded slightly, and he said “Please talk to me. Help me understand.”

All the pain of my life came pouring out. I told him everything, my childhood, my early dreams, the secret hopes, the things that crush my soul...everything. Part way through my tirade I found myself smiling inside, wondering if he was sorry he asked to hear about it. But I didn’t really care – I continued, because the truth is I couldn’t have stopped myself even if I had wanted to. He was a good listener. When I got to the part about my coin being lost yesterday, he paid especially close attention. And finally, the part about being used as a contrast to those who are somebody in this world. “you really hurt me” I said. “I am NOT nobody. Please don’t use that comparison again.” I stopped, shocked at my own words. I had gone too far. It was rude, it was ungrateful, he was only trying to...

He stopped me mid-thought. “Miriam” he said, using my name for the first time. I turned to look at him. His eyes were filled with tears. “Rabboni” I said, not knowing why. He wasn’t MY teacher, was he? Yet that’s what I said, and raised my eyebrows in an invitation for him to speak. “I am so sorry, Miriam. You are more precious than any story I try to tell. You are somebody in God’s eyes and in my eyes, and I just didn’t think. I was too eager to make my point. I won’t do that again. And it is not I who am your teacher this afternoon, but rather you who are mine.”

I was speechless. And at the same time my speech had been restored. And when I told you earlier about the merging of that day, I can tell you now that it was as though something pierced through the layers upon layers of separation. Silence and sound bled into one another until the boundaries between them blurred. It would take an ear more attuned than any I knew to separate sound from silence now.

Today when you remember, when you give thanks for those who have given what they could - everything they had, remember me too. Remember - and let the memory invite and compel you to listen, to speak, to let the sounds of your living be sounds of peace.