

“Eshet Chayil” Woman of Valor
First Congregational Church, Camden, Maine
Sermon by Elizabeth Lally
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There was a popular saying in the 90s and it was “friends don’t let friends drink and drive. If I had a slogan like that it would be “ **Friends Don’t Let Friends Read the Bible by Themselves.**” I don’t mean that you shouldn’t read the bible on your own. I just mean that you shouldn’t read the bible if you aren’t talking about what you are reading with someone else. You shouldn’t read the bible on your own if you aren’t using a commentary. You shouldn’t be reading the bible on your own if you aren’t reading a book about the bible by an author that you trust to be a good source. It’s important not to read the bible in a vacuum. That is why church is awesome. That’s what we do each week . We take some scripture, we unpack it, and we try and apply the message to our lives. Simple, right? Not always.

So--- because I am not ordained, I get to step outside the lines a bit of what we would normally preach on..... I picked the scripture for today instead of using the lectionary. The lectionary is used by many church traditions and it lays out the set of scriptures that will be used for the whole year. It runs on a three year cycle. It’s very interesting.

When I wanted to talk about this scripture in Proverbs, I first looked at the lectionary schedule to make sure that it wasn’t listed somewhere else during the year. And guess what? We never preach on Proverbs. We do preach from the Tanakh, the Hebrew scriptures, but never from Proverbs.

Now if you were listening while Ed was reading----- and you are a woman, it might have sounded....as my kids would say “**kind of cringey.**” It is uncomfortable to listen to if you hear it as a list of expectations for women.

This is actually a 22 line acrostic poem. Each line is the next letter in the Hebrew alphabet. When I first heard this scripture in a bible study, my first inclination was to dismiss it, saying to the group, “but that was written by a man, **right?**” So much easier to dismiss something about women if it is a man telling us what to do. At least it is for me.

But---this was actually written by a **woman**. King Lemuel’s mother wrote it for her son. The chapter heading says “woman of valor”. This woman is an excellent wife. A capable wife. A wife of noble character. A valiant woman.” She was describing for King Lemuel the **perfect woman, the perfect wife**. Now the woman that she was describing in this text would have been upper-class. We know this because it references buying and selling land and fine clothesbut there **are** things on the list that could apply to anyone, regardless of their wealth. Getting up before dawn, being the last person awake. Never spiteful, quick to assist anyone in need. Always speaks kindly and keeps her household busy and productive. I left that bible study **seriously** deflated. **Feeling less than**. Feeling like I could never, even on my very best day, live up to what it described. And as I do most often when I am wrestling with something, I reached out to my best worldly counsel, my mom. And I said, Mom--- do you know anything about Proverbs 31?” Her response was....“**Oh, I know it.**” She knew of it because we attended more

conservative churches while I was growing up. Every woman in those churches would know about Proverbs 31. It was held up as the “**gold standard for women.**” What we should **all** be striving for. So---at that point in my life....I just took Proverbs 31 and I put it on a shelf in my mind because I already knew that there was no way I would ever achieve it. It rested in the back of my mind and always seemed to whisper to me, saying “**You are not enough.**”

It would be at least a year before an answer to Proverbs 31 would come into my life.

Rachel Held Evans is an author who died last year, leaving behind her spouse and two young children. She died of an unexpected illness. I heard her name at a conference I was attending during a time when she was still in a coma. After the conference I sought out her books and I found one titled “**A Year of Biblical Womanhood**”. The book was really funny. Rachel’s idea was that she would take all the scriptures from the bible directed at women and then try to faithfully, to the best of her ability, live them out over the course of the year. She didn’t do them all at once. Before I started the book, I looked in the table of contents and I saw it---**A whole chapter on Proverbs 31. Dun dun dun.....** It took everything I had not to skip ahead.

Rachel was raised in a fundamentalist church and she had since come out of tradition, but she talked in the book about how Proverbs 31 was **EVERYWHERE** when she growing up. Every woman’s conference would reference Proverbs 31. There were books and workshops all addressing this “**perfect woman.**” A popular book is entitled ***Becoming the Woman God wants me to Be: a 90 Day Guide to Living the Proverbs 31 Life.*** It’s rough. By the end of the chapter she wrote about how frustrated she was. She reached out to her Jewish friend, Ahava and asked, “Do Jewish women have as hard a time with Proverbs 31 as Christian Women do?? Her friend was confused. Ahava replied, “Proverbs 31 is not a list of expectations for women, it is an **ODE** to women. Say what?!!!! She went on to say that it isn’t the Jewish **women** who would memorize this poem, **it was the men!** In her house, her husband would sing parts of this poem to her during their Shabbat, praising her for what she brings to his life and their family. The expression is **Eshet Chayil!** Woman of Valor! This scripture is about **praising women!** Not a list of things we are supposed to be able to do. It is a scripture that speaks to the **importance** of women and **their value.** It is meant to **raise women up**, not **keep them down.** Rachel started to use it with the women in her life....when her friend had a baby “Eshet Chayil”. When her friend finished law school, “Eshet Chayil”. We could easily use it here: Susan is shepherding Anna through a difficult time, “**Eshet Chayil!**” Mimi and Susan are doing their work at the Living School, “**Women of Valor**”. Michelle remains steadfast in her love as her daughter navigates treatment, “**Eshet Chayil!**”! Our congregation is wrapping Arlene in the love she deserves, “**Women of Valor!**”

Richard Rohr says, “Text without context is dangerous!” That couldn’t be more true than with the bible. I don’t think that this scripture was **TWISTED** on purpose. But Christians across the country have been preaching it that way for decades because someone didn’t take the time to reach out to the people who have had this text since it was first written. We **cannot** take scriptures literally, at face-value, and call it God’s Word. At the end of Rachel’s book she speaks this **truth:**

We all wrestle with how to interpret and apply the bible to our lives. We go to the text looking for **something** and we all have a tendency to find it. The question we have to ask ourselves is this: Are we reading with the prejudice of love or are we reading with the prejudices of judgment and power, self-interest and greed? If you are looking for

verses with which to oppress women, you will find them. If you are looking for verses with which to liberate and honor women, you will find them.

The greater Christian culture has made this scripture all about **expectation**. Interpreting Proverbs 31 that way plays **RIGHT** into the culture of expectation that our society pushes on us. **If we live under the chains of expectation, we snuff out the life giving force inside us. Living under expectation is like being on the treadmill to nowhere. Not understanding why we will never get where we want to be.**

When I think of expectation, I think about a big bucket of sand. And the sand represents our culture, our society, and everyone in it.. If you poured water into that bucket it would fill every open space..... that water is expectation. It fills every open space. Women are crippled by expectation. Have the **perfect** body. Have kids. Nurse them. Stay home. Have a career. Use that education. Be successful. Volunteer. Healthy meals. Don't "let yourself go." Be a perfect Mother, perfect Spouse, perfect Friend, Sister, Daughter. **Do-not-make-mistakes.**

Expectation follows us to our death. Men don't escape it. Be strong. Be tender. Protect. Provide. Be emotionally available. In shape. Successful. Well read. Be educated. **Do not cry.**

It goes on and on for all of us.

I reached out to the Adas Yoshuron Synagogue in Rockland to find out whether there was a comparable phrase to "Eshet Chayil" for men. The word back from three professional translators in Israel is that there is no comparable Hebrew phrase for men. But that doesn't mean that we can't intentionally raise men up. I have been trying it out with Michael. You can imagine how that's been going. Michael is not a praise-seeking man. That hasn't stopped me. Made it through another week of work? **"You Rock!"** Dropped off 3 kids in three different places so your wife can attend a meeting? **Man of valor!**

We need more of that in our lives, **for everyone.**

In the bible it says.....Be **"IN"** the world without being **OF"** the world. We must, **MUST** pull back against the culture of expectation that we live in. When someone asks me what I do, my impulse is to say that I work for a church or that I am the mother of four sons..... But what I really **DO, how I really live, is that I am looking for that connection with God in every moment.** I seek a connection with the **Creator, this Connector of the Universe** because that is what I am meant to do. That is what we were **created to do.** Jesus commanded the people to "Love the Lord God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind." **We are to love---to Connect with God.** Every other commandment can fall away. Just that one would cover all of the rest. Jesus said: Seek a connection with God and the kingdom of Heaven will be right here and right now. **For me,** heaven is not some far off place that you go to when you die.....**HEAVEN is NOW** when you are able to feel God's presence. **We are seeking the presence of God NOW. We are IN the presence of God NOW. And NOW. And NOW.** Our culture calls us to seek **status, success, safety, perfect bodies, perfect families**.....That is our **misinterpreted Proverbs 31. This culture.** You can have it all, they say, but **It will never REALLY come.**

When we look at Jesus' life, it was a life that was lived beautifully connected to God. Jesus lived in perfect union with God, even when he struggled, even when he wrestled with what he faced. He was vulnerable. Approachable. Humble. Was it God's intent to hold Jesus up to us as some unattainable **"Gold standard"**? What if God's intent was to show us an example

of what a life would look like when someone is **perfectly connected to God**? Someone who is aware of God's presence all the time. All that is required of us in this life is to **seek a connection with God**. To **practice the presence of God**. God's presence is always with us. We just have to awaken to it.

There have always been those funny questions people ask," if you could be any animal, what would you be?" And the best answer I ever heard was a starfish. Perfectly content whether the seas were calm or they were crashing down. That is what we are all seeking, really, **a contentment in whatever IS---**

In my experience, that contentment comes only after awakening to God's presence, being able to rest in God's care, being able to stand in the flow of love, and being able to purposely let go of this world and its expectations.

This is an excerpt of my favorite prayer (mind you--- it wasn't always my favorite prayer-- I thought it was cuckoo the first time I heard it.): Close your eyes if that helps you listen better. Let it sink in deep.

This is by Thomas Keating:

I let go of my desire for power and control. I let go of my desire for affection, esteem, approval and pleasure.

I let go of my desire for survival and security. I let go of my desire to change any situation, condition, person, or myself.

I open to the love and presence of God and God's action within. Amen

I mean this is IT people! Thomas Keating **had it**. He knew that our lives are not about striving for more of this world.....our lives are about striving for **LESS** of this world. **Less connection to worldly things, more connection to Godly things**. Everyone has this struggle. We are all **seeking fulfillment**-----but because we try to fill ourselves up with the wrong things, we end up walking around starving.

Every **single person** in this room has struggled with addiction. Every single person in this room has struggled in their search for God and has been **tricked, seduced, or tempted** by something that says " **I am it! I am the answer to your unhappiness. I will stop your pain.**" It's a lie. The only thing that can bring us lasting peace is a connection to God. Instead of turning to God we turn to drugs, or alcohol, or smoking, or sugar, or overeating , **or the more acceptable**: perfectionism, workaholism, phones, shows, sports, exercise, diets, even books.... When we turn to that instead of turning to God, all we find is pleasure----**something that temporarily dulls our pain, but not lasting happiness**. Pleasure is feeling good when you are doing it, but the feeling is fleeting. It doesn't carry you through life's trials. **A strong relationship with God will sustain you through hard times. That contentment comes only from a connection to God.**

This culture will not give us that. When our culture says more, more, more. Our response must be to seek less. When we strip away the excess in our lives, we will find God. **In every day, in every hour, in every minute, every moment, every breath, every situation, argument, conversation....God is there with us. We will notice God's presence.**

Cynthia Bourgeault says, " Presence is the straight and narrow gate through which one passes to Wisdom." Big "W."

But just how do we do that? How do we find that connection to God? How will we be able to experience God's presence? For me, it began with a Sabbath. Taking a Sabbath clears a space for God. Does that need to be a whole day? Not at first. Maybe for you it is a focused time of 30 minutes on a Sunday. Does it have to be a Sunday? No. 10 minutes on a Monday? It doesn't matter, really. However it works for you. Just take the step! The importance of Sabbath is that the Sabbath was a **gift to us from God** and for the most part we have taken that gift, balled it up, and thrown it in trash. It's built right into the story of creation! **GOD RESTED**. Where are we today? We are cruising along at 30, 50, 70, 100mph. No stopping in sight. "I'll rest when I'm dead," they say. **Disaster**. You must have a mindful space of rest to have an active relationship with God.

We can see from history that it only takes ONE person to start a revolution. Jesus was a revolutionary! But his message hasn't carried well over time. We can't hear it clearly anymore. Our world is moving too fast. The static is too loud. Everything is vying for our attention.

Jesus led his followers by modelling for them how they should live. He modelled **THE WAY**. When you have a strong connection to God, how can you model the **TRUTH** that you know? Not by continuing to be a slave to this culture. It is through **RESISTANCE!** Little revolutions--every single day until the message that **God is the answer** is being **shouted again from the rooftops!**

Resist this culture by having that conversation in person and not through technology.

Resist this culture by saying no to good things, because they are happening on your Sabbath.

Resist this culture by stepping out of the world of **competitive living**.

Resist this culture by saying, "I.... have.... enough."

Resist this culture by choosing love, when hate is appropriate.

Salvation has been a loaded word for my entire life... "**Get saved! They say**"liberation speaks so much more clearly to me. **Liberated! Be Liberated from fear, Be Liberated from worry, from loneliness, from expectation, from desire. That is the gift we receive when we walk with God, when we are mindful of God's presence.**

My hope would be that we would leave church today carrying a spark that would rekindle that revolution.

If we can remember to:

Watch our intentions as we read scripture. Remembering that we will find exactly what we are looking for.

Remember to dig deeper into the text, utilizing many voices for interpretation.

Remember to raise each other up. Eshet Chayil and Man of Valor!

Remember to be "IN" the world without being a slave to this culture.

Remember to seek God's presence first, before anything else.

Work to strip away our addictions, that we might be better able to walk closely with God.

Remember to protect our Sabbath.

Thoreau said: "The soul... grows... through... subtraction."

So do less.

Amen.