

Say Her Name

Exodus 1:8-21

Romans 12:4-8

A sermon by Jan Kinney
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Shiphrah and Puah. These are the women who invented passive civil disobedience. The last time we looked at these two heroines, three years ago, we considered how they might have participated in the demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri. And now the lectionary brings their story round again, just in time for Charlottesville. One of the things that strikes me about this story, this time, is that we know the names of these two women.

There are a lot of stories in the Bible of women who quietly did heroic deeds, like these two. Judah's daughter-in-law Tamar, who resorted to seducing her father-in-law to get justice. Hagar, the mother of Abraham's first son, who was thrown out of the house for being too uppity, and came back, for the sake of her child. Miriam, who helped save baby Moses, and grew up to be his co-leader in the Exodus.

Other women in the Bible have no names, and they had no chance to be heroic. The daughters of Abraham's nephew Lot. He offered them to a lustful mob in the city of Sodom, to protect his male guests. A woman known only as the Levite's concubine, who was *actually* thrown to a mob, who left her for dead the next morning. Jephta's daughter. He sacrificed her to God as a thanks offering for a victory. The hundreds of women who were kidnapped as prizes of war and taken as involuntary "wives," or slaves, for Israelite men.

So many nameless women, and forgotten women.

And the forgetting continues. It's almost a cliché that when an attractive White woman goes missing, the media devote front pages and lead stories to her plight, sometimes for weeks. But so many women of color, girls of color, are lost to us with no public attention.

In the long roll call of victims, we know about Trayon Martin, Amadou Diallo, Sean Bell, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Samuel DuBose, Freddie Gray, Walter Scott, Laquan McDonald, Jordan Gray, Tamir Rice. In Seattle, Che Taylor and John Williams.

But somehow, we forget about Kendra James, Yvette Smith, Rekia Boyd, Shereese Francis, LaTanya Haggerty, Margaret LaVerne Mitchell. And then there are Renee Davis, Jackie Salyers, Loreal Tsingine, Hanna Harris, and Allison High Wolf, because indigenous women are even more invisible and vulnerable.

So we now hear people chant “Say Her Name” at Black Lives Matter demonstrations. It’s a demand that these victims be remembered, that we note and grieve their loss as much as we note and grieve the loss of black men and White women.

So when Sandra Bland died in custody after a routine traffic stop in Texas, her family told mourners and protestors to *say her name*, to ensure that her life would not disappear from memory as so many others have. This was partly for Sandra’s own sake, and partly as a reminder that women of color are no safer from violence than are men of color.

And at a City Council hearing a month ago, a grieving father told us *how* to say his daughter’s name. She was named after him: His name is Charles. It’s his father’s name, too. *She* was Charleena. Charleena Lyles.

Two weeks ago, a group of far-right protesters travelled from all over America to protect a statue designed to keep alive the name of a man who fought for the right to own other people, and their labor, and their children. And when that awful weekend was over, Americans—media, counter-protesters, clergy, and ordinary, concerned citizens—were finally able to name out loud the evil that is very much a part of our history: White supremacy. Call it the Ku Klux Klan, Nazis, White Citizens Council, White Nationalism, alt-right; its name is **White supremacy**.

Say its name.

White supremacy can be expressed violently, as it was in Charlottesville, as it is when a child is killed for playing with a toy gun in a park, or a bridegroom is shot down after his bachelor party, or a young man is murdered in his car in front of his child and her mother.

White supremacy can be expressed legally, as when the penalty for crack cocaine, used mostly by black people, was five times as severe as the punishment for powdered cocaine, used mostly by White people.

White supremacy can be expressed politely, as when a resume with an “African American” name is rejected, or an apartment is suddenly unavailable when a dark family comes to look at it, or when the media search for ways to demonize victims of police shootings.

The pervasive presence of White supremacy has been a dreadful surprise for a lot of White people—as much of an awful shock as the election of Donald Trump—which is another face of White supremacy. But people of color have been telling White people about it for a very long time—shouting its name, screaming its name, trying to make White people understand.

Do we get it now? Do we know its name? And now that White people finally know its name, what can we do about it?

We have examples of how to deal with evil, women whose names we remember thousands of years later. Think again about Shiphrah and Puah. Two working class women, just doing their jobs, but just a little too slowly to be able to commit the monstrous crime the Pharaoh had demanded of them.

Shiphrah and Puah. Say their names!

I ask you to say these names today, and I apologize to Black Lives Matter activists who want this ritual reserved for the many forgotten women of color. We say these names this morning, not as a remembrance of victims, but as a reminder that we have inherited a very long legacy of traditionally powerless persons—women—who contributed to the unfolding of Israel’s relationship with God. Some were peasants or working women or sex workers with no real power in the world, and they used what talents and resources they had to resist evil. And some were rich and powerful women who used their status as tools to act for justice.

Rahab was a sex worker in Jericho. She hid the two Hebrew spies who had been casing her city, and by doing so, she made the Promised Land a reality for the Israelites.

Rahab. Say her name.

Esther was a Jew in exile, under Persian rule. She won a beauty contest where the prize was to marry the king. She used her favored status to stop the wholesale slaughter of the Jews.

Esther. Say her name.

Deborah was a prophet and a judge during the early days of Israel's conquest of Canaan. She ordered her general to go out against the enemy, but he was scared and refused to go unless she came with him to the battlefield. And so she did, and so the Israelites triumphed. But it gets better.

The enemy general ran away to the home of a friend, where he begged the wife, whose name was Jael, for a drink of water. She gave him milk. He asked to rest on her floor, and she gave him soft carpets to lie on. And when he had fallen asleep, she used a tent peg to assassinate him. And so Israel lived in peace for the next forty years.

Deborah and Jael. Say their names!

And we have our share of heroines in these hard times in America.

Senator John McCain came back to work after learning that he has brain cancer, to vote *No* on the destruction of the Affordable Health Care Act, and he is rightly recognized for that action. But he was preceded by two women, Lisa Murkowski and Susan Collins, Republicans like him, who had been there all along, doing the hard work of struggling against pressure from their own party and threats from the president. Between the three of them, they pushed the "No" vote over the top.

And McCain was also joined in his heroism by Senator Mazie Hirono of Hawaii, who interrupted her own treatment for stage four kidney cancer, and flew to Washington DC to cast her No vote.

Ieshia Evans, who stood alone in the street against police, during the demonstrations protesting the shootings by police of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile. You may remember the photo: she's the young African American woman in the long dress, standing serenely, with a shackle already on one wrist. And the two armored police who've come to arrest her look as if they're being blown backwards by the force of her quiet courage.

Traci Blackmon, the Executive Minister of Justice & Witness Ministries of The United Church of Christ. She went to Charlottesville with other clergy to witness on *our* behalf, in the face of danger. She is daily speaking and writing the truth about White supremacy where she sees it.

Heather Heyer, who set for herself the daily task of making the world somehow a better place. She was demonstrating against White supremacy when a very angry White man drove his car into a crowd, injuring many and murdering Heather.

So—what can I do? What can you do? Each of these heroines—in the Bible, in contemporary times—saw an opportunity to act for justice, using only her own resources. Shiphrah and Puah worked less efficiently. Rahab had a spare room. Jael used hospitality as a weapon, and Esther used her own beauty. As we open ourselves to the work of justice, we need to assess our own resources. The God of Love and Justice will provide plenty of opportunities to do the work.

The time for leaving people of color to deal with White supremacy is over. They have been carrying this terrible burden for way, way too long. Jews have been saying “Never again,” since the Holocaust. But “Never again” is now.

So, again, what can we do?

First: keep educating ourselves and each other. Read! Read books, read online articles. Read blogs produced by people of color: *Field Negro* and *Indominable* are my favorites. Read the *Sojourners* website, where Jim Wallis talks about what White churches can do about White supremacy. Prepare yourself with facts.

And then talk to other White people. When you hear racist language, racist attitudes, stories of racist actions, confront them. As I said, you *will* find chances to practice. Last spring I was on a bus after a Black Lives Matter march when the White woman next to me saw the demonstrators and said angrily, “Well, I think *all* lives matter!” Now isn’t that a great opportunity!

Demonstrate, as you are able. Let’s bring the church banner out to demonstrations. Or we can march as individuals. There need to be White faces in demonstrations. People of color need our support, and White people need our example. Take your cues from people of color; they’ve been doing this work for a very long time.

Write to elected officials, or call them, and don’t stop with one. Try keeping a stack of stamped postcards beside your computer, so you can quickly send a note about what needs attention. We are fortunate to have two senators who work for justice, and they need to know they have your support.

Contribute to organizations that confront White supremacy. Join the ACLU, support the Southern Poverty Law Center, which names hate groups, help support a group called Life After Hate, which helps people rise up out of White supremacy and turns them into advocates for real justice.

Love. Remember that you love your neighbors, and remember who your neighbors are. *Do not waste your energy on hatred.* Love can include righteous anger, but it does not make room for hate.

Above all, don't give up. White people still—for now—have the luxury of getting tired of the struggle, and going home. Other people can't do that.

As Paul wrote to the Romans: "...in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function. So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and ... we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us."

God calls us by our names to find the gifts each of us has been given, and to use them.

Are you ready to do the work of love and justice?

Say your name!

Amen.