

Sheerah, the City-Builder

Sermon on 1 Chronicles 7: 24

Sisters and brothers, believe it or not: I found a new mother of faith. She is of course not new, she is ancient, but she only gets mentioned in one verse of the Old Testament, and even in Biblical commentaries she is sometimes overlooked. It was a complete accident that I “stumbled over” her... I was reading to do research on the prophet Huldah, when her name caught my eye. I sought for her and found her in the Book of Chronicles. Her story is hidden in a long list of genealogies with names hard to pronounce, and family connections even harder to understand.

Her name is Sheerah. She did what no other woman in the Old Testament did. She built cities. She built three cities: Upper and Lower Beth-Horon, and Uzzan-Sheerah, which means “listen to Sheerah”. She’d named her third city after herself, claiming that one would listen to her.

So, let us listen to Sheerah’s story.

There is this one verse, thrown in the midst of all these names – as you have heard in the reading. We have heard of Sheerah’s family, her grandfather & great-grandfather. The text is a little bit unclear on how many generations, but she was a granddaughter of Joseph. Joseph, whom the ending of the book of Genesis is devoted to; Joseph, the favourite son of Jacob, the great-grandson of Abraham; Joseph, who saved his family and all of Egypt from famine... Joseph was given a home and a most important job in Egypt. He married an Egyptian woman. Her name is Asenath. Together they had two sons: Ephraim and Manasseh. Ephraim had sons. But these sons caused him much pain. Not only did they die, but they died committing a crime. They were murdered when they tried to steal cattle. Ephraim was devastated, and after a long time of mourning decided to carry on with life as best as he could. He and his wife had another child, Beriah. Ephraim named his late born, his youngest son, “weeping”. Life from then on held only sadness for him. Pessimism took over... And in all that we find this one verse about a daughter of Ephraim. With her a new story begins: a story of hope, of building up, of building new, - a story of optimism. Instead of remaining trapped and caught in this awful family tragedy, Sheerah escapes its grip and says No. “No, I am not letting that define me! I am building something new!” She did not let the family pain enslave her! She had a vision and made it come true.

Sheerah built three cities. Two of the three cities, Lower Beth-Horon and Upper-Beth-Horon were on a hillside, one high above the other. Their names mean House of the Hollow or House of the Shelter... Her cities are safe places! The third city is Uzen-Sheerah which as I said means "Listen to Sheerah". I imagine, only a famous & highly respected woman can name a town after herself.

So, I imagine Sheerah as she has work to do.

You don't just build a city, whether you are a woman or a man, without planning or preparation, not even in those far-away times. But a question first: How did Sheerah become a city-builder? Was it her childhood dream?

Maybe her family had nurtured her dreams? Or maybe her family and friends, neighbours and strangers told her she was crazy. "You can't build a city. What makes you think you can build a city? What city was ever built by a woman? Go get yourself a man and have children. Your people aren't city-builders. Your people are cattle farmers. You can't do it!"

If there were No-sayers, Sheerah didn't listen to them.

Sheerah started building. She had a dream, she had a plan, she had a vision, she had a calling, she had a commission. She was born to do this work. It was in her bones and in her blood, in her heart and in her hands. And it didn't matter if nobody else understood. It didn't matter what other women or men were saying.

She planned her work and worked her plan. Somehow, she learned to design and build cities. She chose the sites for her cities, taking into account water and other natural resources with an eye to defence. Maybe she had to go back to the drawing board over and over again. It can be hard to give shape to your ideas... But I imagine Sheerah not giving up when it got hard – and it got hard – she had to hire and supervise contractors and subcontractors. She had to manage her workforce: paid labour, forced labour and slave labour were the only options. She couldn't be everywhere on the building sites, so she had to appoint other men and women to share in the responsibility. Maybe she had to commission other architects? Could she read? We don't know.

Since it was in ancient Israel, it may have mattered to some folk that the chief architect and project manager was a woman. They could be kind of sexist in those days...

But God has been using women to build, lead and change the world so often...

Sheerah built her cities. But she did not do it alone. She needed a whole community to get the work done. Her dream wasn't hers alone. Someone else had to be inspired through it and

impressed with it, too. It takes loads of people to raise a city, to clear the land, to quarry the stone, to transport the building materials – there had to be some men who did not mind taking orders from a woman, men who could see the vision, men who trusted the woman with the vision, the plan, the call and the commission.

I don't imagine that Sheerah stood around giving orders all the time – although I am sure that she had to do this at times. I see her tying up her hair, rolling up her sleeves and doing the work with her own hands.

When you are giving birth to a vision, when you are making your own dreams come true, when you are doing what God called you to do, you don't mind getting a little dirty, you don't mind putting in the hard work and long hours.

Sheerah had to build her city in the right order. She couldn't start with the wallpaper and the flower arrangements. She had to start in the dirt. She had to lay her foundation. She had to build her walls, and those walls had to hold – they were still at war with some of the surrounding nations, - the place had to be safe.

Sheerah had to choose which buildings to build first. Maybe she built her own house first; maybe one for her parents – if they were still alive, one for her brother and his family. She built houses for her workers and her people and maybe even for people who she didn't know. And when she finished building her city, Sheerah didn't retire. She built another city, and then she built one more.

I guess she never married or gave birth. That wasn't her calling. Sheerah became the mother of cities. And her name lives on in the Bible through her cities, the work of her hands.

The Bible tells us of two of Sheerah's cities involved in fighting and war. And when it had come to the worst God stood up and fought for them.

We read in the book of Joshua how full of violence and war the old times in Israel were. A battle here, a murder there, a conquest one day, a defeat the next. Nothing was ever stable or safe. (Jos10). And in this instability and mess we find a note that God stepped in and fought for his people.

This is of course an image of God that we do not favour today. My God is no warrior, my God is love and love and love again, and we are infused by this love, we are surrounded by it, carried through by it and live in it. God's love is my universe.

That helps me believe...

But the old Israelites needed something else. They needed a fighter at their side who gave them courage & strength. They needed those stories of a mighty warrior God and all the battles they fought with him victoriously because in real life they were almost always the losers.

Research proves that the stories in Joshua have no historical evidence. Jericho was never taken by the Israelites. They simply moved in with the people who were already there and mixed with them and lived with them more or less peacefully.

In their storytelling however they needed the power and the victories to give them identity and strength. It is the storytelling of a people that was constantly conquered and oppressed. A plaything of the mighty nations surrounding them...

The Israelites were dreaming of greatness and a God who fought for them...

But back to the story: it also has this image of a God who listens.

God listened to Sheerah, who'd named her city after herself. God listened to her hopes and prayers for her cities and the people in them. When Sheerah's cities were in trouble, God came to rescue. God saved Sheerah's cities. God saved Sheerah's work.

Sheerah's cities endured through the end of the Old Testament into the period of the Maccabees, more than a thousand years after she had built them. The Maccabean warriors who took back the temple in Jerusalem from the Greek who had desecrated it, used Sheerah's cities as their base of operations. And today, more than 3000 years after Sheerah built her cities, the remains of Upper Beth-Horon and Lower Beth-Horon are still visible in Palestine.

Let us take Sheerah's story as an image of our lives.

What dreams do we have? What unusual and nonorthodox ideas and visions do we have? What are we building? What are we building for God? What are we building for our community? What are we building for those who come after us? What legacy will we leave behind for the people of God to build on?

And how are we building? Do we have a plan?

What ever plan or vision you have...

Build on your foundation. Build your city. Raise the walls; let the towers touch the skies. Fill it with your folk: family and friends, neighbours and strangers. And when your city comes into

danger God will stay with you and strengthen your hands to repair and build again. God will stay with you, listen to you and help you survive and carry on.

Tonight, Sheerah's story has come out from oblivion into new life. Let's listen to it and write our own stories. May they not be hidden and forgotten. May we too, as Sheerah was, be women and men of faith who lead the way, as we dream of something new, and build the world as God intended it to be.

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly father. (Matthew 5)

Amen.