

Acts 1 - Election

I hear you have an election coming up in your part of the world. An election. English is not my first language. The sounds of it are strange to my ears – elect. Election. There’s a clicking sound – did you notice? Elect. Elect. Click, click. Like stones being shaken in a bag; like the latch of a door softly but deliberately closing in your face. Elect Elect. Like the small, round stones that slid down the dusty hillside as we carried my mother’s body to the cave where she lies, waiting for justice.

Perhaps I should back up a bit and tell you who I am. My name is Tamar, but this is really my mother’s story. She is not here to tell it. Her voice no longer sings to my children, nor whispers soft and secret things to my father at night. Never again will she raise her song with the others in the meetings of prayer and praise she loved so much. She’s dead. And it’s my voice that will have to tell her story.

I was only a small girl when the Teacher came to our town. My parents were well off by some standards; we had a small pottery business. Father was known as the owner of the business, but really, he and my mother managed it together.

I smile when I think of my mother, (most of the time) her bravery, her compassion, the smell of the earth mixed with cinnamon that always seemed to cling to her hair, her skin, and the dampness of her neck when I would snuggle in for a hug...the hardships she overcame.... Mother was lame. She walked with difficulty, and always, as long as I knew her, she used a stick to help her move. I can still hear the sound of her walking, the good foot in front, then the tap of the stick on the stony path, and finally she’d drag the bad foot up to meet it. Then do it all over again. It was hard for her to go places, but that never stopped her. I think that maybe that’s part of the reason she wanted so much for me.

She was the main potter in our business, and father was the one who dealt with the customers. They were a good team and they made sure that I learned both skills. Mother said that even though I was a girl I should learn to count, and read, and do all the things needful to help in our shop. My girlfriends couldn't believe it – neither could their parents. They'd look at me, practicing my lessons, and their tongues would make disapproving sound. "click, click" their dry little mouths would say. Most of them were learning to cook and spin and do the things that would make them a good bet for a young man looking for a wife. There were others, too; girls who didn't have parents, girls who had to do horrible things to stay alive. We'd see them on the outside of town and mother would take them things to eat, or to wear, and she'd invite them to our home. They didn't come, but Mother always hoped. "Some day, Tamar, some day these girls will have what they need to grow strong and free" she said, and tried to make it happen. All of this made people look at my mother strangely, and also, I think now, with grudging admiration. At the time though, all it meant to my childish mind was that I was different. And my mother and father were different too.

Did I care? Sometimes, yes I did. But when my parents talked with me, anything seemed possible, and I forgot about the disapproval of the others. Mother and Father said they wanted me to be able to learn many things, and that some day I could run their shop by myself, with my own husband, if I had one. They'd sit and talk to me; mother at her potter's wheel, with the sound of the wet clay going 'round and round; father at his task, rearranging the pots or counting the money from the day's business. "Tamar" they'd say, " you must learn all you can. There are great things ahead for you. The Holy One has made you for a purpose." Sometimes I

liked that idea, but sometimes I longed to be like the other girls too, learning to look after children and giggling about the boys we might marry one day. Wouldn't that be a purpose??

Well, things got interesting when the Teacher came to town. Everyone was excited about it. We heard that he had done great things in Galilee; miracles! I wanted to see for myself – I asked if I could go. Mother and Father had heard about him too, but it wasn't his miracles that drew them to him. They heard that he challenged the authorities, and that he said that everyone mattered: old, young, rich, poor, lame and able-bodied. He stood for fairness, Father said. Mother nodded, and added, "Don't settle for cheap magic, Tamar. If He is the One to bring in the Reign of God, that will be miracle enough. And it won't be just for us; it will be for the whole world."

We went to see the teacher, to hear him speak. So many people were there! Mother and Father were thrilled with what he was saying, I could tell. I couldn't see much for all the adults in the way...and so I lost interest after a bit and went to play with some of the children. The thing I remember most though is that he called us over after a little while, asked the adults to let us through, sat us on his knee and from the folds of his robe he brought out some sugar candy. His eyes twinkled and he said "well it's not a miracle, but it's my favourite treat – I hope you like it too" and we ate our candy together, the teacher and we children, as the adults looked on. I could hear some tongue-clicking then too, but the smacking noises of our lips as we licked up the last of the candy more than drowned it out. When we got home that night we were, all three of us, filled with delight and stories of how wonderful the day had been. My father said "Sapphira – I believe he is the One" and she nodded with tears in her eyes. I was

afraid then, but they said “ don’t be afraid, Tamar – this is the work of the Holy One; the One of whom the prophets spoke.”

And I fell asleep, with the taste of the candy still on my tongue.

From then on we followed him when we could and – imagine this – he came to *our house* to eat, and to sleep sometimes. The teacher, and his friends. He brought me candies, or a wild lily that he picked from the field; and whatever he brought me, he gave me with a big smile, and I felt like a Queen. Like I was somebody. Like I could be anything I ever wanted to be. I always volunteered to clean the dishes on those days, so that I could touch the plate that he used, and even lick the spoon that he had used to eat his broth. I liked the secret that some of him was inside me.

Mother and Father gave money to them, and food. They told others, arranging for him to meet them in their homes or in our shop. Those were wonderful exciting times. As I got older I understood more about what he was saying, that the Reign and Realm of God was for everyone, even for girls. All people are made in the image of the Holy One, he said. I had heard my parents say that, and I know that’s what the Holy writings say, but when He said it, it seemed real. I heard his words and they seemed like words that had a face. And a smile. And I believed; I really, really believed.

Well, not everyone did. They killed him. They killed him! I don’t know a lot of the details because my parents tried to protect me from what was happening. I only knew, in my child’s heart, that something was breaking open; nothing was ever going to be the same.

My first clear memory is of my mother rising early one morning, taking spices out of our cupboards. I thought she was getting ready to bake. I asked if I could bake with her, hoping that

small act would somehow restore things to normal. Surely if we could mix flour and yeast, sugar and spices, surely if we could smell the hot oven and the aroma of the cakes, then the nightmare would be over; everything else would be restored.

But the spices weren't for baking. Nothing was ever going back to the way it used to be. Not even spice cakes could fix what had happened. Mother told me, through tight lips, that she was going to anoint the Teacher's body. I watched her, not sure exactly what she had meant, I watched her leave through the front door of our shop, step by deliberate painful step, to do something very important. She didn't even look back, although I waved until I couldn't see her for the olive trees.

I could hear her coming before I saw her; the sound of her stick faster than I had ever heard before. She was nearly running! "Ananias!" she shouted to my father; "He isn't there – he is risen from the dead!" My father came, wide-eyed, out of the front of our shop, wiping his dusty hands on his robe. It never crossed his mind to doubt her. They embraced; they wept, and rocked back and forth, back and forth, as if by feeling the movement and each others' bodies they could assure themselves that it was real. "Come, Tamar, dance with us – the Teacher is alive!" my father shouted. And so there we were, the 3 of us, in a dusty, limping, crazy dance. Our steps and mother's stick made a pattern in the dust. It looked like angel tracks, and clouds with eyes in them. It looked like a secret code that no one needed to break because the breaking was over. It looked like home.

So much happened in the days and weeks after that. Some, like my mother, had seen the Teacher alive at the tomb. Others saw him at other times, some only believed those whose reporting of it made it true. Together, they asked God, the Holy One, to guide them in what

they should do next and how to share the incredible news of his rebirth. People looked to my mother for guidance. After all, she had been among the first to know the news. They came to her, asking her to tell them over and over again how it was that glorious day. She never tired of telling it, and always, always, she ended her tale by saying “now it’s up to us to do what he did. It’s our turn now to speak the truth.” She even got me to write it all down as she spoke. “Now do you believe me that God has a purpose for you Tamar?” She laughed. “All those lessons in writing – little did we know that you would use them to write down the most marvellous story of all time!” She called it “The Good News of Jesus of Nazareth, as told by Sapphira to her daughter Tamar”. We gave it to Peter and the rest to pass on to others who needed to hear.

Weeks became months. I was growing up along with the infant church. I became a woman. And because of my wise parents, and because of the wise teacher who assured them that their hearts had been right, I grew into someone who believed in herself and all she could be. I knew without a doubt that I was part of a new community; a family that followed the Teacher in ways of justice and fairness. Our new community would be the place the world had always been meant to be.

One day, the news spread around the believers. Peter and John and James had decided that someone would be elected to take Judas’ place. They had talked it over with Mary, his mother, who thought it would be a good idea to preserve the number of apostles at 12. “It’s the number of perfection” she had said. Mother herself wasn’t sure; she said to my father at dinner that night “there have always been more than 12 of us; but I have no objection to an election. Let them go ahead, is what I say. The more of us with some authority, the better.” Excitement loosened people’s tongues; they came to our shop daily, asking my mother if she

would let her name be considered as one of the possible replacements for Judas. “You’ve been with the Teacher from the first days” they reasoned. “And you were one of the first to see him Resurrected – who better than you?”

“Mary, for one,” she replied, “and Mary Magdelene, and Joanna, and Reuben...there are many others who qualify. Peter and John are organizing this – I’m sure they will do the right thing.”

And so would ensue a discussion about all the wise and wonderful women and men who had been with Jesus from the start until the end. They sat around as my mother worked her magic at the potter’s wheel, the wet clay clicking and smacking as they talked. They delighted in the gifts each brought into this new community and wondered aloud who would be the one God would choose. I was thrilled to listen, and asked them how it would work; how God would make the choice from among so many fine women and men. Someone explained that the names would be gathered; names of those who qualified. The rule was that it had to be someone who was there with the Teacher from the beginning until now. Those names would be written on small stones, placed in a bag. The community would pray, asking the Holy One to guide them, and then the bag would be shaken until a stone fell out. This stone would bear the name of the one God had chosen.

On the day of the election we arrived, breathless, at Joanna’s home – over a hundred of us. She had the largest room, upstairs in the inn she owned. The room was hot, humid. I could smell baking, and unwashed bodies. The bag with the stones was already on a small table. “Whose names are in there?” people kept asking. Peter and John had not yet arrived. “Peter

and John know what they're doing" mother kept saying when the others asked her. "I don't know whose names are there, but they will have done the right thing."

Finally Peter arrived, and looking straight ahead, walked up to the front of the room where the table held the bag of stones. He wouldn't look at us, or at anyone, just straight ahead. I had never seen him so... strange. I thought maybe he was ill. I looked at mother for a clue. She too was looking straight ahead, tense with anticipation. I waited. He began to speak: "Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled", he said, in a voice unlike I had heard from him. Harsh, somehow, and sticky. Someone brought him water. He took the cup without making eye contact and drank, lifting the cup to his lips with both hands. He cleared his throat. Silence. He cleared it again.

"You know how Judas, who was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry, how he became a guide for those who arrested Jesus, and how he died..." he began; "and told us what we already knew about poor Judas and how bitterly he had repented. My mind wandered to Judas, the last night I had seen him...a look of disbelief in his eyes, as though he was not only the betrayer, but also the betrayed. I'd thought since that the stories that had spread about him assured that was true. Peter was still speaking. "...and the scripture also says, let another take his place. So One of the men who have accompanied us during the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us; one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection."

I felt it first in my stomach. I looked at my mother, who was looking at Joanna, and Mary, standing together. They all looked the same. Mother turned to look at me. I mouthed the word I thought I'd heard.

“Men?” The movement of my lips made a clicking, gluey sound.

I looked back at Peter, who refused to look in the direction of the women. He knew what they had done. They shook the stones in the bag, and the clicking sound will stay with me always. The sound of exclusion. The sound of a dream dying. The sound of death.

It was over in minutes. While others went forward to congratulate Matthias, the women left, my mother’s stick clicking slowly on the stones. They went to our house and mother gave them wine, lots of it, and they cried. A certain light went out in her after that. And she got sick. Perhaps she was sick before it happened and I just didn’t see it. But after that night – after the “election” she just seemed to fade away. She began to talk to me more and more about taking over the pottery shop. She wanted me to expand it, and to hire some of the girls from the edge of town, those without hope, without dignity. “It’s what the Teacher would have us do, Tamar” she said. “It will be up to you now, to carry on my dream, just as it’s up to us to carry on His dream.”

We planned it all; how the new rooms would look, how I could teach them to read and write and throw pots and work with money. I sat with my mother as she weakened, and listened to the dry, throat-ripping cough that would end her life. I gave her water, and wine, and bread. Sometimes she took it, and sometimes she had no stomach for it. I kept trying. We dreamed and schemed, my mother and I. Whenever I would ask about the money, she said “don’t worry about that part – your father and I have a plan”.

The day came when they sold piece of land. They gave some of the money to Peter and the rest. Some of it, though, they kept, for the shop. For the school. For the work of the Teacher, carried out through their dreams of equality.

They both died soon after. Not as the story by Luke has reported – they fell down dead, true enough. My mother of a broken heart for the shattering of the dream of a just and fair church. My father, of a broken heart for his lover, his friend, his companion and his wife. Her dreams were his dreams. I believe they are dreaming together now.

As for me, I carry the dream on. I have opened and expanded the pottery shop and three young women now own it with me. We talk about the Teacher and we try to follow his way of justice and fairness for everyone. We laugh, and we sing and we cry too, and the sound of our carrying on must mystify the neighbours at times! Above our shop door is my mother's walking stick, hanging there like a lantern, or like a mirror.