

September 25th, 2022

Jeremiah 32:1-3, 6-15 and Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16

“The Mighty Teat”

O God, May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for you are our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

The lectionary grouped the passages from Jeremiah and Psalms together; maybe Kyle can educate us on how these things are chosen, but at first glance there seems to be little to no relationship between the two. I looked at the various options of scripture and settled on Psalm 91 after reading the first verse and taking notice of the footnote at the bottom of my New International Version Bible that states in place of ‘Almighty’, we see the Hebrew word *Shaddai*. Many of you know I love foreign languages, so I took this opportunity to educate myself about this ancient name and its roots in Christianity. I am here today to share my findings... and to see if they let me preach again after this.

Before we fall down the rabbit hole, I wanted to say a special thank you to the Hebrew student who is also a veteran and friend of my dad. She preferred to remain anonymous but her insights into helping me understand more about the Hebrew language and its relationship with the sacred name El Shaddai were invaluable.

Shaddai is special in that it is one of seven covenant names we have for God and has come to mean many things based on context. For example, in today’s Psalm in addition to meaning ‘Almighty’, it can also mean ‘the destroyer’ which makes sense when we look at the verses again with some modern updates:

Surely he will save you from the ill-intentioned public servant and the local official making poor policy decisions regarding certificates of obligation. He will cover you like that emergency shelter your prepper neighbor is building and in it, you will find safety. You will not fear the results of the upcoming election, nor extremists posting hate on various internet platforms, nor the COVID that stalks in the darkness, nor the monkeypox that destroys at midday.

This Psalm clearly demonstrates God's capacity to act as 'the destroyer'; however, upon more research into the word '*shaddai*' I learned about further nuances with this name. When paired with '*el*', derived from '*elohim*', the meaning of the word is altered once more and as such things go, what the word means depends on who you ask.

El Shaddai has multiple translations such as "all sufficient one", "God Almighty", and "the God who is more than enough". Some Messianic teachers believe the word is derived from 'shaddu', the Akkadian word for 'mountain' from the belief God inhabited peaks and ranges. Further sources provide the translation of "to pour forth" as God the "rain giver". Another source credits the word being linked to the Hebrew verb "lishdod" which means to "destroy" or "overpower", as we see in Psalm 91. One translation listed "source of food for babies"; another flat out says "breast" based on the Ancient Hebrew root. I am not suggesting that any of these translations are wrong or not applicable and it's impossible to say with certainty what the name means; however, if we look at the other instances of *El Shaddai* being used in the Bible, they are typically associated with passages related to fertility and therefore specifically support the theory that God functions as the Mighty Teat who sustains us as a mother does her child.

In the Old Testament, *El Shaddai* appears seven times. We first see it in Genesis 17:1-2 where God is speaking to Abraham at 99 years of age and says "I am *El Shaddai*, walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers". Further into the chapter (Genesis 28:3), we see more fertility verbiage: "*El Shaddai* bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples". Again in Genesis 35:11 "And God said to him, "I am *El Shaddai*. Be fruitful and multiply". Once more in Genesis 48:3-4 "And Jacob said to Joseph, "El Shaddai appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, and said to me, 'Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession.'" Again in Genesis 49:25 "because

of your father's God, who helps you, because of Shaddai, who blesses you with the blessings of the heavens above, blessings of the deep that lies below, blessings of the breast and womb". All this to say that most of the times we see El Shaddai referenced in the Old Testament, it is specifically related to reproduction.

The original pictograph for the Ancient Hebrew has two symbols. One looks a bit like a messily written lower case 'w', representing the front teeth, and could mean 'sharp', 'press' as in to chew, and the number 'two'- the 'sh' sound. The second part of the pictograph is a small triangle which was symbolic of a tent door but can also suggest "hang" or "dangle" as this is how a tent door would be mounted and function- the 'd' sound. Its combined meaning was more or less '2 danglers'. As a wedding present, we were gifted two beautiful dairy goats by Joe and Marilyn Richardson and use our doe's milk on a regular basis to cook, drink, and make cheese. I don't know how many of you have ever milked a goat, but '2 danglers' is spot on as far as descriptions of a goat's teats are concerned. Fast forward to the Hebrew and we learn the word for breast is '*shad*', somehow through time 'ai' was added to the end (I have learned this typically indicates personal possession) and when paired with the word '*el*' which can be used as strong or mighty, we get "the mighty teat".

We can get uncomfortable thinking about breasts being included as one of God's characteristics or as one of the names we use when referring to God. The translator was likely hesitant to include this in the work and instead went with the less salacious and more Westerner friendly "Almighty".

Alright, Christina, enough with the linguistics lesson. What about Jeremiah? After all, he was known as the 'weeping prophet' and we don't want to upset him further by leaving him out of this!

Jeremiah's story seems unremarkable at first read until we put it into context. Jeremiah is sitting in his cell. A family member comes to visit and wants to offer Jeremiah the land first because of specifics about how land is passed down based on tradition. His cousin cuts him a deal and sells him the land for

17 shekels of silver which is approximately 192 grams of silver which roughly equates to \$121.17 based on **today's** fair market value of silver. He follows all the proper policies and procedures to legally purchase the land; Jeremiah has salvaged the family homestead even while being imprisoned. Oh, and did I mention the land is currently located in an active war zone? It reads more like a bad news headline: **Imprisoned Man Makes Land Deal With Family Member Who Doesn't Bail Him Out Afterwards.**

But why would Jeremiah do this? Well, we know from the story God came to Jeremiah beforehand and told him exactly what was going to go down. All the same, Jeremiah had faith that God would restore Israel, even if he never came to see the day that this would happen. His story shows us how God can and will provide what we need, even when things seem precarious, and the outcome is questionable. He knew his heirs would eventually make it back to the property and be restored through El Shaddai.

Despite the family land being currently occupied by the Chaldeans, they likely had other plots and probably kept goats or sheep. These animals were and still are critical to a successful life in the Middle East and sometimes milk was the only thing people had for nourishment for days at a time. Milk is produced in the udder and then extracted by the kids with squeezing and sucking, providing necessary nutrients. Just as a doe or ewe provides nourishment to her kids through milk, God sustains her children through blessings and provides all the necessities of life. Milk is mentioned in the Bible over 50 times, has huge symbolic importance, and represents abundance. That same dairy goat I mentioned earlier in the sermon gave birth to 4 kids in January of this year. That is double the amount of kids goats usually have! All the kids went on to greener pastures but what amazed me most was an animal with only 2 teats was able to sustain and nourish 4 offspring- abundance indeed. Milk was and still is life sustaining.

In an article by Mary F. Willson, a retired professor of ecology, she writes "lactation is considered to be the single most expensive thing a female mammal ever does". Mothers out there, can I get an amen? After giving birth to Sage, my first child, I struggled immensely with breastfeeding as a new mom. He

was tongue-tied and lip-tied which impacted his ability to effectively latch and nurse. This resulted in moments where he was frequently not satiated and would cry until he was given formula, even after the ritualistic 15 minutes on each side. My pump was not sized correctly for me and therefore inefficient in extracting my milk. I would stay up late and pump for over an hour to get just one ounce of milk day after day, week after week, never seeing any increase in my supply. There was an added layer of defeat when my persistent nursing efforts and his physical limitations resulted in cracked, dry skin prone to bleeding and pain when feeding my baby.

Friends and family learned of my struggle. My youngest sister, Rachel, would breastfeed him any time we were together and donated several dozen ounces of her milk to me. Catie Munguia delivered her baby, Jade, just a few days after Sage was born and also gave me extra milk she had. Amy Chism nursed him on multiple occasions and gave me her extra milk as well. I know we frequently speak in metaphors, but from my perspective, God as the mighty teat literally sustained my child through the generosity of my family and friends.

Earlier this month on a Thursday night, the fabulous Denise McDonald organized a Meeting in a Box where people could come and contribute their ideas about how the city should look in 20 years. We ended up staying quite late; the meeting ended well past 8 PM. It was dark outside and as my family, myself, and a few stragglers were chatting in the kitchen of the church, Rosemary turned to me and asked "Mama, is the church closed?". I chuckled to myself and went on to answer her question about how the church might be locked, but it's never closed.

The church might be up late pumping even though she has work early the next day or trying to squeeze in a session between classes. The church is at the party, hearing my baby cry, seeing my defeat, taking him from me and then nursing him to satiation. The church takes a leap of faith every year with the proposed budget and has to pray God will sustain us and continue to help us do good works here on this

earth. The church is always at work, even if we don't know the work is being done at the time or without the knowledge ahead of time that the work is going to pay off.

Is the church open to taking risks like Jeremiah without the benefit of knowing what would come to pass beforehand? Are we willing to test ourselves, our relationships with one another, and our faith by challenging thoughts and ideas we had about God and thinking about her in a new way? Do we have the same faith and trust in God as the Mighty Teat to sustain and restore us, even during moments of doubt or when making difficult decisions?

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; One True God; Mother of us all. Amen.