

# The Women's Lectionary

*Preaching the Women of the Bible  
throughout the Year*

Ashley M. Wilcox

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# Introduction

What if the church took one year to focus on the stories of women in the Bible? *The Women's Lectionary* reimagines the liturgical calendar of preaching for one year to focus on the passages about women in the Bible and feminine imagery of God. These texts include women who are daughters, wives, and mothers—and more than daughters, wives, and mothers. They are also strong female leaders, evil queens, and wicked stepmothers. They are also disciples, troublemakers, and prophetesses. The feminine descriptions of God in the Bible are similarly varied: how does it change our understanding if God is described as feminine wisdom, as having wings, or as an angry mother bear? Preaching on these passages gives us a better comprehension of God and how God interacts with people.

This book provides a calendar for preaching each Sunday and on holy days for a year, using texts that may also appear in the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), Year D, or other alternative lectionaries. (The calendar of readings on pages xxiii–xxvii emphasizes in bold those texts that are also in the RCL.) This calendar includes one text from the Hebrew Scriptures and one from the New Testament for each of these days. In addition, there is a commentary for each passage that provides exegesis of the text and context. The purpose of the commentaries is to be evocative, not comprehensive: my hope is to spark your imagination as you prepare your sermons.

## ORIGINS AND INFLUENCES

Some may be wondering why a Quaker is writing a lectionary. That's a fair question. I am part of a tradition that, at least historically, completely disregards the liturgical calendar. In our traditional worship in the Religious Society of Friends, we sit in silence, waiting to hear the voice of God. We believe that God may lead anyone to speak, so we sit facing each other. We do not mark holy days because we believe that every day is sacred. For Friends

who worship in the unprogrammed tradition, it does not matter what the occasion is—a holy day, a wedding, or a memorial—the order of worship is the same. We sit in silence, and people speak as led. So I do not seem like an obvious person to take on this project. And yet, I feel led by the Spirit to do so, and I will start by describing some of the influences that brought me here.

I was raised in the church, though not as a Quaker. My first experiences of church were as an infant. My parents attended the local Episcopal church in my hometown of Anchorage, Alaska. I was two months old when I played the baby Jesus in the Christmas pageant (by all accounts, I slept through the whole thing). When I was still a young child, my parents started attending a charismatic nondenominational church; this is the first church I remember. I recall singing, clapping, and being completely unable to speak in tongues. I attended Sonrise Christian School, a small, parent-driven private school in Anchorage, where most of the teachers came from Calvin College. I was involved in Calvinettes (now GEMS) and later the youth group. For most of my childhood, I was in a Christian bubble, with the good and bad that comes with being part of that kind of subculture.

Like many in my generation, I left the church of my childhood because the congregation where I attended was unwilling to affirm the worth and dignity of LGBTQ+ people. Alaska was one of the first states to pass a “defense of marriage” state constitutional amendment. I was in public high school by that point, and I could not reconcile the good I saw in my queer friends with the messages I heard on Sunday mornings in my church. Although I continued attending with my family until I left for college, I no longer considered myself a Christian.

At seventeen I left home to attend a blessedly secular public university in California—and experienced culture shock in more ways than I could name. Although I was in the same country, Santa Cruz was an entirely different world than the one in which I grew up. There I met people who did not go to church and were not conflicted about it, unlike my friends in Alaska. I did not attend church once while I was in Santa Cruz, nor did I seek out any of the religious activities available on campus. I felt free, and I had no intention of going back to church.

The exception was a year I spent studying abroad in Santiago, Chile. That was my first experience of living for an extended time in a predominantly Catholic country, and I found it fascinating. The entire city would shut down for Holy Week, and everyone I met was Catholic. It was a difficult year for me, in large part because a stranger sexually assaulted me halfway through the year. I felt lost, and I would spend Sunday mornings climbing to the top of the large hill near my apartment in Santiago, which had a statue of Mary at the peak. I would stay there, sitting with Mary, until I felt that I could walk

back down. Occasionally I would attend mass. One of my roommates' mothers came to visit, and she asked me if I believed in God. I said that I did not know if I believed in God. Then she asked if I believed in Mary, and I assured her that I did. She said, "That's fine, then, as long as you believe in Mary!"

I found my way back to church when I was in law school a few years later. Law school was a strange place for me. I enjoyed the academic challenge, but I struggled to connect with my classmates. I did not like the competition and posturing that law school seemed to bring out in people. My roommate felt similarly, so we did what we had learned to do as children: find a church. We agreed that we could not go back to the denominations we had grown up in (Southern Baptist, in her case), so we tried all the others that we could find. We almost ended up picking an Episcopal church and attended services there several times.

Then I went to visit my aunt and uncle for Thanksgiving. My parents had told them that I was looking for a church, and they suggested that I try a Quaker gathering. They had attended a local Quaker church for several years, and they thought that it might be a good fit for me. When I got home, I looked online for a Quaker church and found Freedom Friends Church. I went with my roommate, and I immediately felt at home. Freedom Friends Church was a semi-programmed Quaker worship, with singing, prayers, and an extended period of silence. I loved all of it, and I kept going on my own after my roommate moved away. I felt that I had found a place where I could be myself, without others telling me how to be or what to believe. My church supported me when I came out as queer. I went deeper and deeper into the silence in worship.

I moved to Seattle for work and joined an unprogrammed Quaker meeting there. Unexpectedly, within my first year of working as a lawyer, I experienced an undeniable call to ministry. I began doing ministry and traveling among Friends, and I became well known for blogging and organizing Quaker events. What was even more strange, I felt called to preach. I would pray in the United Church of Christ church across the street from the court where I worked and envision myself in the pulpit. I felt led to attend a two-year program called The School of the Spirit, with residencies four times a year in North Carolina. People kept asking me if I planned to go to seminary, and I would say, "No, I already have a graduate degree." Then one night it became clear to me and my support committee that I was led to attend seminary. I planned to go to Candler School of Theology, a United Methodist seminary in Atlanta. Just months before I left, my church recorded me as a minister, the Quaker version of ordination.

At Candler, I studied with professors from many traditions, including Lutheran, Catholic, Presbyterian, and Baptist, as well as United Methodist. After graduation, I stayed connected to Candler as part of the teaching team

for professor Ted Smith's Introduction to Preaching course, and I cofounded a church called Church of Mary Magdalene, where women preached. Church of Mary Magdalene came out of a dream I had of preaching for women, who moved their chairs up to hear what I had to say. This was my first experience with weekly preaching, and I enjoyed the challenge. About a year in, I said to my partner Troy that I was feeling torn between wanting to use the Revised Common Lectionary—with the community and resources that accompany it—and wanting to preach about women. Troy said, "Well, why don't you write your own lectionary?"

This idea captured my imagination, and I spent the next several days putting together a draft of a lectionary based on women in the Bible and feminine images of God. I met with Ted Smith to discuss the idea, and he encouraged me to write commentaries for each of the passages. I used this lectionary for a year at Church of Mary Magdalene, exegeting the texts to preach on them and then turning the sermons into commentaries. In addition to preaching at Church of Mary Magdalene, I preached once a month at a local retirement community vespers service. One evening after the service, a woman came up to thank me for my message; she said that she had never heard a sermon from Mary's perspective before. "The women are there in the Bible," she mused, "but no one ever talks about them!" Incrementally, the project grew.

In the course Introduction to Preaching, Ted Smith uses the metaphor of "hybrid vigor" to describe the class's teaching team. Each person on the teaching team has experience in at least two traditions. Many, like me, come from several different traditions. The idea behind hybrid vigor is that this mixing of traditions makes us stronger preachers: we bring the best of multiple denominations to our study and delivery of the message. I believe this to be true, based on my own experiences and having observed students preaching in the class for four years now. We can be deeply rooted in one tradition while appreciating and borrowing from others. As you read the commentaries, you will see the influence of each of the traditions I have encountered, and I am sure you will bring your own as well.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The primary use for this book is for preachers, who can take a year (or two!) to focus on the stories of women in the Bible and feminine images of God. The texts follow the liturgical calendar, with texts for each Sunday and Christian holiday throughout the year. Sometimes the texts from the two Testaments are related to each other—particularly on holidays—but for the most part, they are not. I recommend picking one of the texts and focusing



on that for your sermon; you may choose to include the other as a reading during the liturgy.

Each text has a commentary to accompany it. These commentaries are intended to provide some background on the text and stimulate your ideas as a jumping-off point for your own engagement with the text. I advise you to do your own exegesis on the text as well, working with other translations, sources, and commentaries. One of the reasons I have included many texts from the Revised Common Lectionary is because there are many resources available for working with those texts. The commentaries in this book represent just one voice among many: feel free to disagree with my analysis and conclusions!

One benefit of preaching from a lectionary is being part of a larger community using the same texts each week. I hope that people using this book will have conversations with others who are using *The Women's Lectionary*, both in person and online. You may also want to use this book for group Bible studies or your own personal devotions. If so, I recommend reading the biblical text in multiple modern versions and using the questions at the end of each commentary section for conversation or reflection. If you are posting about your use of this book, connect with others doing the same by using the hashtag #TheWomensLectionary.

If you are not able to do a full year of preaching from this lectionary, this book can serve as a supplement to preaching from the Revised Common Lectionary. Look for the texts that are drawn from the RCL and use the commentaries on those texts in your sermon preparation. Or organize texts from *The Women's Lectionary* into sermon series, either by using the suggested sermon series plans (starting on page xxix) or coming up with your own themes. These texts lend themselves to talking about topics such as feminine images of God, responses to sexual violence, motherhood, and women in leadership.

## Notes of Care and Caution

### GENDER

As I wrote this book, I felt tension between being a part of the queer community and talking about women. It can be hard to talk about women without falling into some version of gender essentialism or believing that women are a certain way simply because they are women. To counter this, my goal is to present many stories about women and feminine images of God side by side, to illustrate the complexity of femininity and womanhood. I hope that readers will also take an expansive definition of women to include trans women and femme nonbinary people. Categories necessarily create distance, but in my experience, focusing on one area tends to expand my thinking in other areas. I hope this is also the case for you.

### RELATIONSHIP WITH JUDAISM

As Christian preachers, there is no way for us to avoid the fact that we are using another religion's scripture. The Hebrew Bible is a Jewish text. Christians have used it for millennia and interpreted it, but it is not originally ours. At some level, all of Christianity is cultural appropriation. Unfortunately, feminist scholars have contributed to anti-Judaism in harmful ways. Specifically, it can be easy to fall into the trap of making the Jews in the Gospels look bad so that Jesus appears to be a feminist in the way he treats women.<sup>1</sup>

There are better and worse ways to use the Hebrew Scriptures in Christian preaching, and I have tried to model some of these approaches in my commentaries. I am grateful for the work of Jewish scholars in guiding these approaches, especially Amy-Jill Levine. First, take the text on its own terms and avoid supersessionism, the belief that Christianity is the fulfillment of Jewish Scripture. Not everything is pointing toward Jesus. Second, listen to Jewish voices, especially when they are telling us that something we have said is

anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic. Third, be mindful of the history of Christian violence against Jews; approach this with humility. Finally, take care when using Christian commentaries, which often repeat misinformation about Judaism. We are blessed to have the record of Christian thought from millennia of scholarship, but some of these works repeat anti-Jewish—or entirely inaccurate—information. We can preach without relying on dangerous shortcuts. God is present in women and in the Bible without our being disingenuous.

## PATRIARCHY

Anyone who attempts to preach from a feminist perspective must find a way to critically engage patriarchy in the Bible. Patriarchy is unavoidable in our sacred text. Many preachers today tend to gravitate to extremes: saying either that patriarchy is God's will for ordering society or that patriarchy is an evil that must be eradicated. In this book, I suggest an alternative approach: patriarchy is a coping strategy that no longer serves us.

Those who preach “crush the patriarchy” impose our current norms on a premodern cultural phenomenon and ignore the ways that patriarchy has solved problems historically, especially in (1) keeping young men from killing each other over women and (2) creating a system of protection for young women. Women who fit within the patriarchal system had protection their entire lives—first from their fathers, then their husbands, and finally their sons.

It is useful to acknowledge this because many of the biblical stories about women are about those who fall outside the protection of patriarchy. This includes all the women who pray to have sons as well as those whose husbands die and leave them without support. It is a mistake to equate women in the Bible who are praying for sons with our current understanding of infertility; the women in the Bible prayed for a son in large part so that they would have someone to protect them in their old age. Women who found themselves outside the bounds of patriarchy faced destitution and sometimes punishment (cf. Tamar, Gen. 38).

Patriarchy was a solution that seemed to work for most people and for most of the time. I find it useful to see patriarchy as a coping strategy because that gives us a framework to appreciate it for what it was and see the ways it no longer serves us. Like the coping strategies that we develop early in life, this is one that worked for a long time. But there comes a point when we see the limitations of our coping strategies and need to leave them behind so that we can live fully.

In addition, many people are attached to the idea of patriarchy. I believe, however, that there are other, better strategies, ones that recognize the full humanity of women. I find this useful as a preacher, because in preaching we

must examine the text in its original context and find ways to apply it to our contexts today. I reject the idea that patriarchy is God's will for the ordering of humanity. I know from Scripture that all people are created in the image of God, and I hope that in our preaching we can critically address the ways that patriarchy has been useful in the past but may harm us now.

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

As scholar Gale Yee notes, "We read all kinds of violence in the Hebrew Bible, and the violence against women is especially distressing. Why don't we hear about these stories in church?"<sup>2</sup> Every lectionary makes choices about what to include and what to leave out. Unfortunately, the Revised Common Lectionary often leaves out the stories of violence against women (it even makes strategic cuts to take out the troubling parts of passages, which often have to do with women, such as the text where the king accuses Haman of attempted rape in Esth. 7:7–8). In our culture today, we are in a time of reckoning: leaders in all fields need to face the ways that they have harassed, abused, disparaged, and dismissed women or been complicit in these actions. This is true in church as much as anywhere else, as we have seen in the #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements.

Too often, the church's response to stories of sexual assault and rape in the Bible has been to avoid them. Every sexual assault is different: there is no one way to experience or respond to that specific kind of trauma. In this book I want to honor these stories and the women who have experienced sexual violence. They did what they had to do to survive, and in some cases they did not survive. Some responded with righteous anger. Some accepted that this was part of daily life. Each of their experiences is valid.

Preachers have a responsibility to talk about the sexual violence in our sacred text. Members of the congregation have experienced rape and assault, and they deserve to know that stories like theirs are part of our sacred texts. Many preachers—of all genders—have experienced sexual violence, and they have found ways to process their trauma, individually and in community. For those who do not have personal experience with sexual violence, this is an opportunity to learn and grow, to empathize with those who have had these experiences, and to work toward justice for all. I hope that sharing these stories will help to deepen our conversations about sexual violence and will inspire Christians to work for justice for women in our sacred texts, our churches, and the world.

## The Lectionary Chart

*Texts in bold include passages from the Revised Common Lectionary.*

<i>ADVENT-CHRISTMAS-EPIPHANY</i>		
First Sunday of Advent	Genesis 38:13–19, 24–27 (Tamar)	<b>Luke 1:26–38</b> (The Call of Mary)
Second Sunday of Advent	Joshua 2:1–21 (Rahab)	<b>Luke 1:39–45</b> (Mary Visits Elizabeth)
Third Sunday of Advent	<b>Ruth 3:1–18; 4:13–17</b> (Ruth)	<b>Luke 1:46–55</b> (Magnificat)
Fourth Sunday of Advent	<b>2 Samuel 11:1–15</b> (Bathsheba)	Luke 1:57–66 (Elizabeth Gives Birth)
Christmas	<b>Isaiah 42:5–9, 14</b> (God Giving Birth)	<b>Luke 2:1–20</b> (Mary Gives Birth)
First Sunday of Christmas	<b>Isaiah 49:1–7</b> (Called in the Womb)	<b>Matthew 2:13–15, 19–23</b> (Mary’s Family Goes to Nazareth)
Second Sunday of Christmas	<b>Isaiah 49:8–16</b> (Mothers Do Not Forget)	<b>Matthew 2:16–18</b> (Mothers’ Babies Are Killed)
Epiphany	<b>Isaiah 43:1–7</b> (Bring Daughters)	<b>Matthew 2:1–12</b> (Mary Meets the Magi)
1st Sunday in Ordinary Time	<b>Psalms 131</b> (Mother with Weaned Child)	<b>Luke 2:22–38</b> (Anna Sees Jesus)

<i>ADVENT-CHRISTMAS-EPIPHANY (cont.)</i>		
2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time	<b>Isaiah 60:1–6</b> (Return to Zion)	<b>Luke 2:41–52</b> (Mary Loses Jesus in the Temple)
3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time	<b>Isaiah 62:1–5</b> (Zion as Bride)	<b>John 2:1–11</b> (Mary Attends the Wedding at Cana)
4th Sunday in Ordinary Time	<b>Jeremiah 29:1, 4–7</b> (Wives in Exile)	Matthew 12:33–37, 46–50 (Mary Waits for Jesus)
5th Sunday in Ordinary Time	<b>Lamentations 1:1–6</b> (Jerusalem as Widow)	<b>Mark 6:14–29</b> (Herodias)
6th Sunday in Ordinary Time	Ezekiel 16:1–22 (Unfaithful Wife)	<b>Mark 7:24–37</b> (The Syrophenician Woman)
7th Sunday in Ordinary Time	Ezekiel 23:1–21 (Oholah and Oholibah)	<b>Luke 10:38–42</b> (Mary and Martha)
8th Sunday in Ordinary Time	<b>Hosea 1:2–10</b> (Gomer)	<b>Luke 20:27–38</b> (Marriage after Resurrection)
Transfiguration Sunday	<b>Hosea 11:1–11</b> (God as Parent)	<b>Mark 5:25–34</b> (Woman with Hemorrhages)

<i>LENT-EASTER-PENTECOST</i>		
Ash Wednesday	<b>Genesis 3:1–24</b> (Eve and Adam)	<b>Matthew 25:1–13</b> (The Ten Bridesmaids)
First Sunday of Lent	<b>Psalms 17:1–9</b> (Under God's Wings)	<b>Mark 12:38–44</b> (The Widow's Offering)
Second Sunday of Lent	<b>Isaiah 66:10–14</b> (God as Comforting Mother)	John 8:1–11 (The Woman Accused of Adultery)
Third Sunday of Lent	Judges 16:6–21 (Delilah)	<b>John 4:7–15</b> (The Woman at the Well)
Fourth Sunday of Lent	Job 28:1–20 (Wisdom)	<b>John 11:17–35</b> (Mary and Martha's Brother Raised)

<i>LENT–EASTER–PENTECOST (cont.)</i>		
Fifth Sunday of Lent	<b>Proverbs 1:20–33</b> (Wisdom Calls)	Luke 8:1–15 (Women Accompany Jesus)
Sixth Sunday of Lent	<b>Proverbs 8:1–4, 22–31</b> (Wisdom’s Gifts)	<b>Matthew 27:11–23</b> (Pilate’s Wife)
Maundy Thursday	<b>Proverbs 9:1–6</b> (Wisdom’s Feast)	<b>Mark 14:1–9</b> (The Woman Anoints Jesus)
Good Friday	Deuteronomy 32:10–20 (God as Mother Eagle)	John 19:23–30 (The Women Watch)
Holy Saturday	Hosea 13:2–16 (God as Angry Mother Bear)	Luke 23:50–56 (The Women See the Tomb)
Resurrection Sunday	Song of Solomon 1:1–8 (Beloved)	<b>Mark 16:1–8</b> (The Women Go to the Tomb)
Resurrection Evening	<b>Song of Solomon 2:8–13</b> (Lover)	<b>John 20:11–18</b> (Mary Magdalene Sees Jesus)
Second Sunday of Easter	Esther 1:10–22 (Vashti)	<b>Matthew 28:1–10</b> (Mary Magdalene and Mary)
Third Sunday of Easter	Esther 2:1–18 (Women Taken / Esther Is Queen)	<b>Luke 24:13–24</b> (The Women Are Not Believed)
Fourth Sunday of Easter	Esther 5:1–8 (Esther’s Banquet)	<b>Luke 7:11–17</b> (The Widow’s Son Raised)
Fifth Sunday of Easter	<b>Esther 7:1–10; 9:20–22</b> (Esther)	<b>Luke 13:10–17</b> (The Crippled Woman)
Sixth Sunday of Easter	<b>Job 1:1; 2:1–10</b> (Job’s Wife)	<b>Luke 13:31–35</b> (God as Mother Hen)
Ascension (Thursday)	<b>Psalms 123</b> (Maid and Mistress)	<b>Luke 15:1–10</b> (The Woman Finds Her Coin)

<i>LENT–EASTER–PENTECOST (cont.)</i>		
Seventh Sunday of Easter	Proverbs 7:6–23 (Strange Woman)	<b>Luke 18:1–8</b> (The Widow and the Judge)
Pentecost Sunday	<b>Joel 2:23–32</b> (Daughters Shall Prophesy)	<b>Acts 1:14; 2:1–8, 14–18</b> (Women Pray and Prophesy)

<i>SEASON AFTER PENTECOST</i>		
Trinity Sunday	<b>Genesis 1:1–2:4</b> (Creator)	<b>John 7:37–39</b> (Holy Spirit)
9th Sunday in Ordinary Time	Genesis 2:4–9, 15–25 (Woman and Man)	Acts 5:1–11 (Sapphira)
10th Sunday in Ordinary Time	<b>Genesis 18:1–15</b> (Sarah Laughs)	<b>Acts 9:36–43</b> (Tabitha)
11th Sunday in Ordinary Time	Genesis 19:12–26 (Lot's Wife)	Acts 12:11–16 (Rhoda)
12th Sunday in Ordinary Time	Genesis 19:30–38 (Lot's Daughters)	Acts 16:11–19 (Lydia and the Enslaved Girl)
13th Sunday in Ordinary Time	<b>Genesis 21:8–21</b> (Sarah and Hagar)	Acts 18:1–4, 24–28 (Priscilla)
14th Sunday in Ordinary Time	Genesis 24:10–21 (Rebekah)	Acts 21:7–15 (Daughters Who Prophesy)
15th Sunday in Ordinary Time	<b>Genesis 25:21–28</b> (Rebekah Gives Birth)	Romans 16:1–7, 12–16 (Phoebe)
16th Sunday in Ordinary Time	<b>Genesis 29:15–28</b> (Rachel and Leah)	<b>1 Corinthians 1:10–18</b> (Chloe)
17th Sunday in Ordinary Time	Genesis 31:14–35 (Rachel Steals the Gods)	<b>1 Corinthians 7:25–40</b> (Unmarried and Widows)
18th Sunday in Ordinary Time	Genesis 34:1–29 (Dinah)	1 Corinthians 14:26–40 (Women Speaking)
19th Sunday in Ordinary Time	Genesis 39:1–20 (Potiphar's Wife)	<b>Mark 10:2–16</b> (Divorce)



The Lectionary Chart

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20th Sunday in Ordinary Time	<b>Exodus 1:8–2:10</b> (Shiprah and Puah)	Galatians 4:21–30 (Hagar and Sarah)
21st Sunday in Ordinary Time	Exodus 4:18–26 (Zipporah)	Ephesians 5:21–33 (Wives and Husbands)
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time	<b>Exodus 15:1–11, 20–21</b> (Miriam)	<b>Philippians 4:1–9</b> (Euodia and Syntyche)
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time	Numbers 27:1–11 (Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah)	Colossians 4:2–15 (Nympha)
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time	<b>Judges 4:1–7</b> (Deborah)	<b>1 Timothy 2:1–15</b> (Women Silent/Saved)
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time	Judges 4:12–22 (Jael)	1 Timothy 5:1–16 (Widows)
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time	Judges 11:29–40 (Jephthah's Daughter)	<b>2 Timothy 1:3–7</b> (Lois and Eunice)
27th Sunday in Ordinary Time	<b>Ruth 1:1–22</b> (Ruth and Naomi)	2 Timothy 3:1–7 (Silly Women)
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time	<b>1 Samuel 2:1–10</b> (Hannah)	2 Timothy 4:9–22 (Claudia and Prisca)
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time	1 Samuel 19:11–17 (Michal)	Titus 2:1–10 (Household Roles)
30th Sunday in Ordinary Time	1 Samuel 25:2–3, 18–31 (Abigail)	<b>Philemon 1–7</b> (Apphia)
All Saints' Day	<b>Proverbs 31:10–31</b> (Capable Wife)	<b>James 2:14–26</b> (Rahab)
31st Sunday in Ordinary Time	2 Samuel 13:1–21 (Tamar and Amnon)	Revelation 12:1–6, 13–17 (Woman and Earth)
32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time	1 Kings 10:1–13 (Queen of Sheba)	Revelation 17:1–6 (The Great Whore)
33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time	2 Kings 9:30–37 (Jezebel)	Revelation 2:18–29 (Jezebel)
Christ the King Sunday	2 Kings 22:3–20 (Huldah)	Revelation 19:4–9; 22:17 (Bride)

# Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany

# First Sunday of Advent

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## GENESIS 38:13–19, 24–27

### Tamar

The story of Tamar may be the least familiar of the four women listed in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew 1:1–17. Tamar's story falls in the middle of the Joseph narrative, immediately after Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery and before the passage about Potiphar's wife (another seductive foreign woman). This account is about Joseph's brother Judah and Judah's daughter-in-law, Tamar.

Tamar is a woman who has experienced a lot of loss. She loses two husbands and her home, and she is waiting for her husbands' third brother to be old enough to marry and give her sons. Her first husband, Er, was "wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD put him to death" (Gen. 38:7). Her second husband, Onan, pulled out and "spilled his semen on the ground" instead of impregnating Tamar (38:9).<sup>1</sup> This was displeasing to the Lord, so God put him to death as well. According to the law of levirate marriage, Judah should give Tamar his third son, Shelah, to marry (cf. Deut. 25:5–10). But Judah is afraid that Shelah will die too, so he instead sends Tamar back to her father's house to wait until Shelah grows up.

This text illustrates the failure of patriarchy to protect women who fall outside the patriarchal structure. One of the benefits of a patriarchal system is that everyone knows who the head of the family is: the patriarch (in this case, Judah). In an ideal patriarchal system, a woman has protection throughout her life: first from her father, then her husband, and then her sons. However, Tamar is a woman outside of this protection.<sup>2</sup> After the deaths of her husbands, she is no longer a virgin, a wife, or a mother. She is a foreigner, making

her even more of an outsider. Tamar is stuck in limbo, waiting at her father's house and unable to marry again or to have children.<sup>3</sup>

When Tamar discovers that Shelah has grown but Judah has not given her to him in marriage, she takes the law into her own hands. She acts to protect herself and the family line by going to the next closest male relative: Judah. Tamar takes off her widow's garments and disguises herself in a veil. Thus, Judah thinks that she is a prostitute and solicits her for sex (38:14–15). Tamar negotiates for his signet and cord and his staff in exchange, and Judah “[comes] in to” Tamar and impregnates her (38:18).

When Tamar takes Judah's signet, cord, and staff, she puts herself in Judah's role as the head of the tribe and takes on his identity;<sup>4</sup> the Hebrew word for “staff” also translates as “tribe.” Symbolically, Tamar is now the head of the tribe. Thus, this marginalized woman subverts the patriarchy to do what is right and continue the family line, which leads to David and Jesus. When Tamar later confronts Judah with the signet, cord, and staff, he recognizes what she has done and says, “She is more in the right than I” (38:26). Jewish tradition does not stigmatize Tamar for what she did, but instead praises her.<sup>5</sup>

Because this text probably is unfamiliar to many in the congregation, one way for the preacher to approach it is to retell the story of Tamar, explaining her actions in the context of the law of levirate marriage. Without this context, it may seem like Tamar is engaging in strange or unethical sexual behavior. But with an understanding of why she makes these choices, the congregation can see that, through her courageous acts, Tamar saves the family name. The sermon can also highlight how God works through this seemingly powerless woman, who upends the power structure to save herself, her family, her people, and all of us. Christians should remember her story.

- Have you heard the story of Tamar before? In what context?
- How does the law of levirate marriage protect women?
- How can churches celebrate Tamar and remember her story?

## LUKE 1:26–38

### The Call of Mary

This text begins with “In the sixth month” (Luke 1:26), which refers to the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy.<sup>6</sup> Thus the story of Mary's miraculous pregnancy is bookended by Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy. There are other parallels between the two stories. For example, the conversation between Mary and the angel Gabriel echoes and contrasts with the conversation that

Zechariah had with Gabriel. Zechariah's story may be more of what people might expect: an announcement to a priest in a temple (1:8).<sup>7</sup> Instead, this announcement is to a young woman in a small, rural village in Galilee.<sup>8</sup>

The angel says to Mary, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you" (1:28). From this point on, the angel's conversation with Mary follows the prophetic call narrative. Traditionally, a prophet's call includes a divine confrontation, an introductory word, a commission, an objection, reassurance, and a sign; a classic version of this type of call occurs in Exodus, when God called Moses from the burning bush (Exod. 3:2–12). These parts of a prophetic call are present in Mary's story. There is a divine confrontation when the angel comes to Mary (Luke 1:26–27). The introductory word occurs when the angel says to Mary that she is "favored" and that the Lord is with her (1:28). Then there is a commission: "And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus" (1:31). Like Moses questioning God, Mary also objects: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (1:34). And God gives her a sign: Elizabeth's pregnancy. The angel says, "And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren" (1:36). Finally, Mary accepts this call: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (1:38).

Some commentators say that this is not a fully prophetic call.<sup>9</sup> They argue that it falls short of a full prophetic call because Mary is merely called to womanly things like childbirth and raising a child. However, there are many examples of God calling prophets to use their bodies as signs. Examples include God calling Isaiah to walk naked and barefoot for three years as a sign (Isa. 20:2–4), Ezekiel lying bound on the ground in ropes (Ezek. 4:4–8), and Jeremiah burying a waist sash and then digging it up to show that he could not wear it (Jer. 13:1–7). These are called sign acts, and they have two parts: (1) a nonverbal act followed by (2) a prophetic word. Both Mary and Elizabeth have a nonverbal act followed by a prophetic word. Their nonverbal acts are in their miraculous pregnancies, and then the Holy Spirit calls them to prophetic speech. When Mary goes to Elizabeth's house, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and cries out, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Luke 1:42). And Mary responds with the Magnificat (1:46–55).

This is such a familiar story, one that is often taken out of context. By using the prophetic call narratives and the story of Elizabeth, preachers can place this story back into the context of the biblical narrative and the book of Luke. The angel appearing to Mary, while miraculous, is not unique in the Bible. Mary is one of a long line of people whom God has called to speak and act prophetically, and she immediately joins another prophetess when she visits her relative Elizabeth.

- How is Mary's interaction with the angel similar to the story of Zechariah and the angel? Why do they each respond differently to the angel's announcement?
- How is this text like prophetic call stories in the Hebrew Scriptures?
- Does it change your perspective on Mary and Elizabeth to see them as prophetesses?

# Second Sunday of Advent

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## JOSHUA 2:1–21

### Rahab

Rahab, the Canaanite woman at the center of this story, is the second woman listed in Matthew’s genealogy leading to Jesus (Matt. 1:5). Some have characterized this passage as Rahab outsmarting the spies,<sup>1</sup> but really, Rahab outsmarts everyone. First, she outmaneuvers her own king and army. When the king of Jericho sends orders to her to bring out the men (Josh. 2:3), she tells just enough of the truth for it to be believable. Undaunted by the king’s power, she says that the men were there, but she did not bother to learn where they were from, and they left before dark (2:4). Then she gives the king’s men specific instructions on where to pursue them (2:5), making sure the gate shuts behind them (2:7).

Next, Rahab outsmarts the spies. She takes them up to her roof (2:6), where they are both hidden and visible. The flax that Rahab has drying on the roof hides them, but the roof is out in the open and potentially visible to others.<sup>2</sup> While she has them there, she negotiates with them for her family’s life (2:12–13). The spies, who must be in a hurry to get away from the city, respond heartily with “Our life for yours!” (2:14). It is only after Rahab has secured their promise that she lowers them down by a rope, and then she gives them similarly specific instructions on which way to go to avoid their pursuers (2:15–16). The spies’ response seems notably cooler once they have climbed down from the roof—repeatedly characterizing their promise as “this oath that you made us swear to you” (2:17, 20). They also add some requirements: that she have all her family in the house (2:18–19) and that she

put a crimson cord in the window. Perhaps they regret agreeing to her terms so quickly.

Notably, Rahab does not just secure a promise to save herself. In fact, she mentions her family members specifically: "Spare my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death" (2:13). She puts her family members and "all who belong to them" before herself. Rahab is not a solitary woman who is estranged from her family: she is close to them and makes sure that they will be spared. For the preacher, there is room in this message to include not just Rahab's biological family, but also her chosen family.

One could even argue that Rahab outsmarts God. Deuteronomy 7:2 explicitly says that when the Israelites conquer the land, they must "utterly destroy" the people there: "Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy."<sup>3</sup> But Rahab finds a way to make a covenant with these Israelite spies, and she is an essential part of their conquest of Jericho. If she had not hidden the spies, they would not have survived to return to Joshua. In addition, when the spies report back to Joshua, the report they give is directly from Rahab (Josh. 2:9, 24).

At the heart of this text, Rahab preaches. She gives what may be the longest prose speech by a woman in the Bible.<sup>4</sup> Rahab reminds the spies (and the readers) of what God has done for Israel: drying up the sea when they came out of Egypt and leading them to triumph in battle against other kings (2:10). She tells them that the people of Jericho "melt in fear" before them (2:9) and prophesies that God will give them the land. This foreign woman speaks the word of God to the people of God!

Most of the commentaries about Rahab focus on her profession. The reception history about her has sexualized her as a prostitute and speculated about whether the spies had sex with her. Others have argued that Rahab was not a sex worker but instead translate her occupation in verse 1 as "innkeeper."<sup>5</sup> The flax and the crimson cord also lead to the idea that Rahab worked with textiles.<sup>6</sup> Considering all the other things that Rahab does in this text—outwitting armies, protecting her family, and speaking truth about God—it is unfortunate that she has been reduced to "Rahab the prostitute."

- When you have heard the story of Rahab before, what parts of the story did the tellers focus on? What did they leave out?
- How can preachers hold the tension between this story and the command to utterly destroy the people of Canaan in Deuteronomy 7:2?
- Is Rahab's profession important? Why or why not?



**LUKE 1:39–45****Mary Visits Elizabeth**

Mary has just learned that she is pregnant, and she goes with haste to visit her relative Elizabeth (Luke 1:39). This text does not say why Mary is going to see Elizabeth, but it probably is to see the sign that the angel told her: that Elizabeth in her old age has conceived a son (1:36). The text also does not say how Mary feels about the message the angel gave her. She may have doubts about what has happened. In the moment, everything seemed so clear. Mary heard the angel and responded, “Let it be with me according to your word” (1:38). But afterward, Mary may wonder: Since she was the only one there when the angel appeared—maybe it was a dream? Mary takes a risk by going to Elizabeth’s house. What if Elizabeth does not believe her? Or shames her for being pregnant before marriage? But Elizabeth is also pregnant through miraculous means: if anyone can understand what Mary might be feeling, it’s Elizabeth.

Before Elizabeth even sees Mary, she cries out with prophetic speech. Elizabeth is a loud, joyful prophet. The Greek phrase means “megaphone,”<sup>7</sup> and some scholars suggest that this reflects the loud cries of giving birth. But Elizabeth is still three months away from childbirth. She cries out loudly because she is filled with the Holy Spirit—the feminine presence of God within her. Elizabeth recognizes the child leaping with joy in her womb as a sign from God.<sup>8</sup> The first thing Elizabeth says is that Mary is blessed (1:42). Elizabeth does not say that Mary *will be* blessed: she already *is* blessed. Elizabeth also says that the child in Mary’s womb is blessed, but that comes second. This must be reassuring for Mary. Elizabeth has no way of knowing that Mary is pregnant other than a message from the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth confirms what the angel said to Mary, and the confirmation comes with a blessing.

Elizabeth is also the first person to name Jesus as Lord (1:43).<sup>9</sup> This will be echoed later when Jesus calls Mary Magdalene to be the first person to preach the gospel after his resurrection.<sup>10</sup> In both cases, women are the ones to speak the truth about who Jesus is and who he will be. Finally, Elizabeth says, “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord” (1:45). Mary is blessed because she believes. In Greek, the word “fulfilled” can also mean the consummation, perfection, or the event that verifies the promise. The baby that Mary carries is the fulfillment of the prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures about a Savior who would come to save his people.<sup>11</sup>

Here, the fulfillment is bodily: both Elizabeth and Mary are filled with babies. These powerful women are called by God to have these sons, and they approach their births with fear and joy. Jesus’ ministry will be embodied and

about bodies: Mary will give birth to him, he will grow and heal the sick, and he will die and be resurrected. It is no accident that Elizabeth feels this message in her body. God's word is embodied, and it is through bodies that God's word is fulfilled. Preachers can celebrate with Elizabeth and Mary the ways that God has spoken to and through them, directly and through their bodies.

- Why does Mary go to visit Elizabeth? What do you think she is thinking and feeling on her way there?
- How is Elizabeth like the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures?
- What are some other ways that God's word is embodied?

## Third Sunday of Advent

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**RUTH 3:1–18; 4:13–17**

### **Ruth**

The harvest is ending, and Naomi knows that she and Ruth need more security. Until now, the women have relied on Ruth's daily gleanings, but that source of food will end with the harvest. So Naomi devises a plan for Ruth to marry Boaz.<sup>1</sup> Naomi's plan is risky: she is sending Ruth into a situation where she could be humiliated or even raped.<sup>2</sup> But these women know that Boaz is a good man. They know this because Ruth has been gleaning with the other young women who work for him (Ruth 2:8), and women talk to each other about whether a man is trustworthy.

This passage is filled with innuendo and sexual language, which may be one of the reasons the Revised Common Lectionary skips over Ruth 3:6–18. Naomi's goal is for Ruth to entice Boaz: she tells Ruth her to wash and anoint herself and put on her best clothes.<sup>3</sup> Naomi then instructs Ruth to go to the threshing floor, wait until Boaz has eaten and drunk and is lying down, and uncover Boaz's feet (a euphemism for genitalia).<sup>4</sup> When Ruth does this, Boaz is terrified: he wakes up startled and demands to know who she is.

Instead of waiting for Boaz to tell her what to do, as Naomi told her, she proposes! She tells Boaz to "spread your cloak over your servant" (3:9), a phrase that was symbolic of marriage in the Israelite tradition. She also invokes the levirate law by saying, "You are next-of-kin [to me]" (3:9). In effect, she is telling Boaz that, as the closest male relative, he must marry her, and their first son will be considered the offspring of her deceased husband (cf. Deut. 25:5–6). Ruth is asking Boaz to act as her "kinsman-redeemer," a

word that is used in the Bible for both this kind of relative and for God (e.g., Ps. 69:18).

It is unclear what happens between Ruth and Boaz that night. Boaz sends her away at first light to protect their reputations. But he does not send Ruth away empty-handed. When Boaz gives Ruth grain, he provides food for her and Naomi and gives Ruth the hope of being filled with a child. Then Boaz uses levirate law to his advantage. He knows that there is a closer relative who could serve as kinsman-redeemer, and Boaz goes to him and asks if he wants to buy a field from Naomi. According to levirate law, if a person falls into difficulty and sells a piece of property, the next-of-kin shall redeem what the relative has sold (Lev. 25:25). But in this case, the field would come with a widow—Ruth. When the closer relative realizes that Ruth's first child would inherit the field, he forfeits his claim,<sup>5</sup> leaving the field (and Ruth) to Boaz.

Ruth and Boaz marry, and one of the blessings of the people is the hope that their house will "be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah" (4:12). This links to another woman in Jesus' lineage and is a reminder that for these people, Tamar is a hero. Ruth has a son named Obed, who is part of Naomi's line under levirate law (he is considered the son of her son). Obed is the father of Jesse, who is the father of David, and the ancestor of Jesus.

Throughout this text, there are examples of people investing in each other. Ruth has followed Naomi to a strange land, and she trusts Naomi enough to put herself in a dangerous position on the threshing floor. Naomi knows that Boaz is a good man and that he will follow the law and take care of Ruth. Finally, Boaz recognizes the goodness in Ruth and Naomi, and he acts quickly to resolve the situation and marry Ruth. Each person chooses to turn toward another, and all of it builds toward God's plan.

- How have you heard the story of Ruth told before? Is the sexual language in this text surprising?
- How does it change the story to omit 3:6–18, as the Revised Common Lectionary does?
- What are some parallels between Ruth and Tamar?

## LUKE 1:46–55

### Magnificat

In response to Elizabeth's prophetic speech, Mary bursts into song. Like Elizabeth, Mary is filled with the Holy Spirit and speaks prophetically about who God is and what God has done. Mary's message takes the form of a psalm, which echoes many writings in the Hebrew Scriptures (cf. Ps. 34:1–3).<sup>6</sup> For

most of the psalms, the gender of the psalmist is unknown; this text provides a psalm explicitly by a woman. Like many of the psalms, this song begins with praise. Mary cries out that her soul magnifies the Lord and her spirit rejoices in God (Luke 1:46–47).

Mary's song is an interesting place to substitute feminine pronouns for God. If God is without gender, Mary should be able to say, "She has looked with favor on the lowliness of her servant" (cf. 1:48). How do female pronouns change the sense of who God is? How does it change the meaning to hear, "Her mercy is for those who fear her"? Using feminine pronouns here is a reminder of a God who says, "Now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant" (Isa. 42:14). This is the God who will comfort us as a mother comforts her child (Isa. 66:13) and hide us in the shadow of her wings (Ps. 17:8).

Mary is aware of all the generations before her and the generations to come. As many commentaries point out, Mary's song mirrors Hannah's song in form and content (1 Sam. 2:1–10).<sup>7</sup> When Mary recalls the promise that God made to her ancestors (Luke 1:55), she evokes the generations of women before her in Jesus' lineage in Matthew 1:1–17: Tamar, who took on the role of head of the tribe to continue the family line (Gen. 38:18–26); Rahab, who risked everything for a new world (Josh. 2:8–13); Ruth, who boldly asked a good man to marry her (Ruth 3:9); and Bathsheba, who rose from tragedy to power (1 Kgs. 2:20). All these women have played their part in leading to the fulfillment of God's promise.

When Mary says, "From now on all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:48), she is speaking of *this* moment. It is from this time forward that all will call her blessed, not the moment of Jesus' birth. The generations that will call her blessed include all the women who come after her. Anna, the prophet who waits at the temple to see the baby Jesus (2:36–37). Mary and Martha, the sisters who take care of Jesus' needs and listen to his teaching (10:38–42). Mary Magdalene, the first person whom Jesus calls to preach after his resurrection (John 20:17). And the women of the early church: Priscilla, Chloe, Lois, Eunice, Junia, and many more.

Mary's song is good news for the poor and bad news for the powerful. She says that God "has brought down the powerful" and "lifted up the lowly" (Luke 1:52); God "has filled the hungry" and "sent the rich away empty" (1:53). The God whom Mary knows turns the expectations of the world upside down. This is not something that will happen at some future date: Mary says that God has already done this.<sup>8</sup> Mary speaks into being a world in which oppressed people are free from systemic injustice.<sup>9</sup> These are not nice or gentle words. Mary prophetically announces social, political, and economic upheaval and a complete reversal of the power structure.

- How is Mary's song like the psalms?
- What stands out to you when you substitute feminine pronouns for God in this text?
- How does Mary connect the women of the Hebrew Scriptures to the women of the early church?

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