



**A WOMEN'S  
LECTIONARY  
FOR THE  
WHOLE CHURCH**

**WILDA C. GAFNEY**



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*For those who have searched for themselves in the scriptures  
and did not find themselves in the masculine pronouns.*

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Lastly, I mourn those who will not see this project, especially those who died due to Covid 19 and its complications. They are legion.

# ABOUT THE COVER IMAGES

I first saw Wil Gafney in chapel at Candler School of Theology in October of 2016, during a service where Leea Allen read an amazing poem “Heart Matters” and Dr. Gafney preached a sermon entitled “Love God Herself,” drawn from Beyoncé’s song “Don’t Hurt Yourself.” I was inspired. I didn’t have anything that day other than a regular piece of paper and my colored pens—this was before I unapologetically carted my markers into services, because I do most of my work in situ—but I drew the image of a woman standing proud, brown face crowned with locks of dark hair, clothed in green, and holding up the world. She speaks to me of triumph.

This was not the last time that Dr. Gafney’s words would inspire my art.

In a Queer and Feminist Theology course I took, we read Dr. Gafney’s article “Don’t Hate the Playa, Hate the Game.” In it, she refocused our attention on the fullness of Delilah’s story, teasing out details and possibilities of connection that reframed both Delilah’s motivations and power. If you haven’t read it, I suggest you do. It spoke to me of honey, and fire, and memory, and love, and retribution, and these things all shaped the piece I created in response: “Remembering the Fire.”

Since then, I’ve been inspired many times over.

When I was beginning a Lenten series, I read Dr. Gafney’s article “Ritualizing Bathsheba’s Rape” and drew, in response, “In the Ashes.” The piece depicts Bathsheba sitting by a fire in ashes, weeping and cradling her dead child while David laments outside. I also did a series of pieces of the women in Saul’s life that were inspired by what Dr. Gafney wrote in her incredible *Womanist Midrash*. Time and time again, I know that if I want to be schooled in a text, brought closer to the nuances and truths contained therein, and inspired by those truths, I will find that wisdom in Dr. Gafney’s works. Without a doubt, the volume you currently hold in your hands contains this wisdom, and I hope you are similarly inspired.

My pieces for the *Women’s Lectionary* were created in the same theme and seek to center and lift up the power that Black Women have in these stories of salvation. I drew “Queen of Heaven” (the cover image for Volumes A, B, and C) in June of 2017 using Tombow Watercolor Markers on Bristol Vellum paper. It shows Mary, enthroned and crowned with all the planets of the solar system and the wonders of the Universe bearing witness, clothed in life and light and holding the Christ Child in her arms. She is the guardian, and the bearer of God—Theotokos; she is the creation honored by the Creator.

The next work, “No Longer Lost” (the cover image for Volume W), speaks of the parable where God is imaged as a woman, the woman who lost her coin and finds

it. She celebrates with all of her neighbors as God celebrates with the host of heaven when the lost ones come home. Surrounding her in these coins are us, connecting, praying, studying, dancing. You can also see the dove, and the lost sheep, and the broom, because some things need cleaning up, not the least of which are our misconceptions and our preconceived notions, which have grown dusty as we have let them sit.

Let the words of the Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney clear up some of those misconceptions and open windows to shed light on truth in a way you have never before seen. Sit with these words. Let them sink in. Feel their power and be empowered by the story of the Good News told in ways you may have never experienced before. May the luminous wisdom of the Word find a home within you, and may it spark your inner fire.

Pauline Williamson, creating as *Seamire*

# ABBREVIATIONS

Alter	<i>The Hebrew Bible: A New Translation with Commentary</i> , trans. Robert Alter
AYBD	<i>Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary</i>
BigS	<i>Bibel in gerechter Sprache</i>
BDAG	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , revised and edited by Frederick William Danker
BDB	<i>Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i>
CEB	<i>Common English Bible</i>
DCH	<i>Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i>
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
Fox	<i>The Five Books of Moses</i> , trans. Everett Fox
GSJPS	<i>A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation</i>
HALOT	<i>Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
IB	<i>The Inclusive Bible</i>
JPS	Jewish Publication Society <i>TANAKH</i>
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
RCL	Revised Common Lectionary
SP	Samaritan Pentateuch

# BIBLICAL RESOURCES

## Original Language Texts

Dead Sea Scrolls  
Hebrew Masoretic Text  
Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament, 28th ed.  
Peshitta (both testaments)  
Samaritan Pentateuch  
Septuagint  
Targums  
Vulgate

## Bibles in Translation

Bishops Bible, 1568  
Common English Bible, 2011  
Dead Sea Scrolls Bible, 1999  
Douay-Rheims Bible, 1582 (NT), 1610 (HB)  
*The Early Prophets: Joshua, Judges Samuel, Kings*, Everett Fox 2014  
*Five Books of Moses*, Everett Fox, 1995  
*A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Tanakh*, 2006  
Geneva Bible, 1599  
*The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, Robert Alter, 2018  
Inclusive Bible, 2007  
Jewish Publication Society Tanakh, 1985  
King James Version, 1611  
*A New English Translation of the Septuagint*, 2000  
New Revised Standard Version, 1989  
Revised Standard Version, 1971  
Tyndale's (incomplete) translation, 1525  
Wycliffe Bible, 1384

## Commentaries

*Hermeneia*  
*Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary*  
*The Torah, A Women's Commentary*  
*The Wisdom Commentary*  
*Women's Bible Commentary*  
*The Yale Anchor Bible Commentary*

# INTRODUCTION

**W**hat does it look like to tell the Good News through the stories of women who are often on the margins of scripture and often set up to represent bad news? How would a lectionary centering women's stories, chosen with womanist and feminist commitments in mind, frame the presentation of the scriptures for proclamation and teaching? How is the story of God told when stories of women's brutalization and marginalization are moved from the margins of canon and lectionary and held in the center in tension with stories of biblical heroines and heroes? More simply, what would it look like if women built a lectionary focusing on women's stories? These were my initial questions when I sat down to draft a proposal for a women's lectionary, a lectionary designed by women—or an individual woman—for the whole church. I do not imagine that my questions and perceptions are the questions and perceptions of all other women. But I do believe that my questions and perceptions invite women, men, and nonbinary readers and hearers to engage the scriptures in new ways and in that engagement, they might find themselves and their questions represented.

The lectionary is a catechetical tool. There are more than two billion Christians in the world according to the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life (Global Religious Landscape). As of 2015, there were nearly 2.3 billion Christians representing slightly more than 31 percent of the world's total population. With Roman Catholics making up an estimated 1.2 billion, and accounting for Orthodox Christians, Anglicans, Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and other Reformed traditions along with some Baptist and congregational churches that use a lectionary, the overwhelming majority of Christians receive their scripture mediated through a lectionary; that would be nearly 1.4 billion persons whose customary exposure to the scriptures occurs through a lectionary. Based on the numbers in the Pew Research Center's May 12, 2015, report, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," as many as 60 percent of American Christians attend services in churches that use lectionaries.

The scriptures are androcentric, male-focused, as are the lectionaries dependent upon them. Those lectionaries are not simply *as* androcentric as are the scriptures, but in my experience as a congregant and priest, women are even less well represented in them than they are in the biblical text. For example, there are at a minimum one hundred and eleven named women in the Hebrew Scriptures—which is itself underrepresented in preaching lectionaries and not always preached upon or even read—and that reckoning does not account for the numbers of unnamed women and

girls. Yet not many of my students or parishioners can name even ten women in the Hebrew Scriptures or even the entire biblical canon. The extant lectionaries do not introduce us to even a tithe of them. As a result, all many congregants know of the Bible is the texts they hear read from their respective lectionary.

As a biblical scholar, it is my hope to see congregants exposed to the Bible more broadly and deeply and see them equipped to engage the sacred texts of their tradition critically, with nuance. As a Hebrew biblical scholar, it is my hope to see congregations embrace the Hebrew Scriptures as a full and sufficient canon of scripture, revealing God and her word in conversation with, but not subjected to, the Christian scriptures that follow, honoring the ancient texts and *their* contexts. As a professor, priest, and preacher, I am keenly aware that it is the stories of women and girls, female characters and their names (when given), that are most likely to be unknown by congregants and seminarians and, all too often, clergy. A more expansive, more inclusive lectionary will remedy that by introducing readers and hearers of scripture to “woman story” in the scriptures. (Adapted from April D. Westbrook, “*And He Will Take Your Daughters . . .*”: *Woman Story and the Ethical Evaluation of Monarchy in the David Narrative.*)

Biblical women are often generalized as a monolith of oppressed biblical womanhood. In my years teaching in theological classrooms and Jewish and Christian congregations, I find scripture readers unfamiliar with women prophets (the subject of my first book, *Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel*), or the more than twenty named Israelite and Judean queens preserved in the text (addressed in my most recent monograph, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*), or the female assassins who execute their would-be rapists, or many other texts in which women have unexpected power and agency. A significant aim of this project is increased biblical literacy, beginning with scripture’s most neglected population.

Recognizing that the scriptures are an androcentric collection of documents steeped in patriarchy, this lectionary grapples with the gender constructs of the text rather than romanticizing admirable heroines. Indeed, it questions “admirable” constructs of womanhood rooted in birthing and mothering. The extent to which women’s narratives uphold the patriarchal agendas of the scriptures is held in tension with those passages in which women demonstrate agency, wielding power and authority. Sometimes those are the same texts. The degree to which the scriptures are (and are not) liberating for all of their characters and claimants will be, hopefully, more accessible to preacher and reader and other interpreters and exegetes.

Biblical values and norms around gender occupy a central place in biblical interpretation, providing opportunity for preachers to engage them and their impact on the construction of gender norms in the world in which these texts are interpreted. I believe it is crucial to reframe the texts so that women and girls are at the center of

the story, even though they are, to one degree or another, literary creations of pre-modern men. It is important that women who are often second-class citizens in the text and in the world in which the text is interpreted have a text selection and reading paradigm that centers the interests and voices of women in the text, no matter how constructed. The task of preachers is to proclaim a word—of good news, of liberation, of encouragement, of prophetic power, of God-story, and sometimes, of lament, brokenness, and righteous rage. These lectionaries will provide a framework to do that and attempt to offer some balance to the register in which the word has often been proclaimed.

A significant aspect of the work of shaping a lectionary and preaching from it is hermeneutical. I was (and remain) convinced it ought to be possible to tell the story of God and God's people through the most marginalized characters in the text. That is my practice as a preacher. This project, *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church*, intends to do that in a three-year lectionary accompanied by a stand-alone single-year lectionary. The three-year cycle, Years A, B, and C, will feature the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke respectively, with John interwoven, as is the case in the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) and Episcopal Lectionary (similar to the RCL but with the inclusion of deuterocanonical texts not deemed canonical by churches outside of the Anglo-Catholic and Orthodox streams). Year W (for "Women") covers all four Gospels.

Specifically, the *Lectionary* includes:

1. companion texts in the traditional four-fold model, first lesson, generally Hebrew Bible, Psalm (or other Canticle), Christian Testament lesson, and Gospel appropriate to the liturgical season;
2. fresh translation of the lessons for each Sunday, the Principal Feasts, Holy Week, and the Feasts of the Ever-Blessed Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, using gender-expansive language and, in the case of the Psalms, explicitly feminine God-language (see "About the Translations");
3. brief text commentaries on each day's lections and,
4. brief preaching commentaries on each day's lections.

The lectionary *does not* include collects. The lack of collects—prayers that tie together the readings that open the Liturgy of the Word—is intentional, that clergy and lay liturgists might develop their own in conversation with the lectionary.

A final word about gendered language: as a women's lectionary, this project specifically and intentionally makes women visible in these lectionary texts. This will inevitably seem strange to some hearers and readers. Some will find it welcome and a signifier of inclusion. Some will find it discordant and I invite those to think deeply about what that discomfiture signifies. These responses may well be multiplied when

reading and hearing the psalms using feminine pronouns. And some will find the language in these volumes insufficiently inclusive, particularly with regard to nonbinary and a-gender persons. While there is nonbinary language for human and divine subjects, the purpose of this project is to make women and girls more visible. Nonbinary and inclusive language can obscure women and girls. The commitment to the visibility of women and girls is not in conflict or competition with the commitment to visibility of nonbinary persons; this language, my language, like all language, is simply inadequate to express the fullness of God in and beyond the world or even in human creation.

Most simply, these translations seek to offer and extend the embrace of the scriptures to all who read and hear that they might see and hear themselves in them and spoken to by them. Similarly, taking seriously that we are all created in the image of God, these translations seek to display a God in whose Image we see ourselves reflected and reflecting.

# TEXT SELECTION

I crafted lectionaries that centered the telling of the stories of scripture on the stories of women and girls in the text, without regard to whether they are named or voiced in the text or whether their experiences of and with God support the narrative and theological claims made by and on behalf of the text or not. Specifically, I prioritize passages in which women and girls are present whether named or not, whether speaking or not. In addition, I selected passages in which women and girls are present but obscured in plurals and other groupings, e.g., “children,” “Israelites,” “people,” “believers,” etc. As is the case with all lectionaries, some passages recur and others are omitted all together. None of the extant Christian lectionaries offers comprehensive reading of any of the canons of scripture. This lectionary is no exception.

My methodology was broadly as follows:

1. First, I established a female canon within the broader canons of scripture by using Accordance Bible Software to identify passages in which there is explicit language for female persons. I designed a Boolean search to capture as many terms as possible in singular and plural constructions and varied grammatical forms (mother\* <or> daughter\* <or> sister\* <or> wom\*n <or> wife <or> wives <or> widow\* <or>\*maid\* <or> mistress\* <or> lady <or> ladies <or> prostitute\* <or> prophetess\* <or> princess\* <or> queen\* <or> sorceress\* <OR> womb <OR> pregnan\* <or> midwi\*e\*.) My search terms were not necessarily exhaustive, but they were more than sufficient for the task. I used the *Dictionary of Women in Scripture*, edited by Carol Meyers et al., to supplement this list.
2. Then, beginning with the liturgical season and its themes, I identified Hebrew biblical or deuterocanonical texts from the female canon. (Year W does not use the deuterocanonical texts apart from select readings during one or more of the Principal Feasts, such as Judith during the Great Vigil of Easter).
3. Next, I looked for readings that shared thematic language or specific words that related to the liturgical season and first lesson. I saved my Boolean search results in text groups: Hebrew Bible, Psalms, books that make up the New Testament lesson—Acts, the Epistles, and Revelation—and the Gospels. That meant I did not have to search the entire canon each time I worked on a specific reading. One nontraditional aspect of these lectionaries is that I occasionally use the Acts of the Apostles as the New Testament lesson, expanding the options for readings with female characters.

4. Sometimes a specific passage in a Gospel, Psalm, or Epistle would suggest itself. Other times, I would move through the lesson categories looking for connective language. Most often the selection sequence was Hebrew Bible followed by a psalm then the Gospel and the New Testament lesson last.

Text selection was one of the most time-consuming aspects of the project, second only to translating the text. I was greatly facilitated in this world by collaboration circles, in person in Atlanta, Chattanooga, Chicago, Dallas, Fort Worth, Pasadena, Richmond (VA), and in Kapaa, Kilauea, and Wailua, Kauai (HI) in addition to international trips to Managua (Nicaragua) and a continuing education event for clergy on a Central and South American cruise where the *Lectionary* was one of the teaching topics. There is also an ongoing digital collaboration through a closed Facebook working group.

My conversation partners included sixty-three participants from across the United States, United Kingdom, Scotland, Canada, and New Zealand in one setting, Episcopal parishes in Kauai and Pasadena during separate one-month residencies, and a series of individual and small group consultations, some seventeen collaborations, some of which were composed of multiple sessions. Denominations represented included: African Methodist Episcopal, Anglican, Baptist (of various sorts), Disciples of Christ, Episcopal, the Fellowship of Affirming Ministries, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Unitarian Universalist, United Church of Canada, United Church of Christ, United Church of Scotland, and United Methodist.

I deliberately engaged potential users of the *Lectionary*, including clergy, seminarians, and lay leaders, with a range of gender identities and expressions. I also held a specific session for queer-identifying and nonbinary readers and hearers of the text focusing on the use and implications of binary language, even in service to womanist/feminist work, in an increasingly postbinary world.

I am beyond grateful for the contributions, questions, and suggestions of all of these conversation partners, including their assessment for wording and translation choices in addition to text pairings.

# USING A WOMEN'S LECTIONARY

**T**he *Women's Lectionary* is designed for congregational and devotional life. It will also serve well in theological classrooms in preaching, worship arts, liturgy, and spiritual formation. The *Lectionary* is also suitable for clergy lectionary study groups. Individuals and congregations will have a number of options for use. Each set of readings is accompanied by text and translation notes and a preaching commentary. In addition, the *Lectionary* comes with a list of the divine names and titles used for God in these translations that might be used in public liturgy and private prayer. There is also an index of all of the passages of scripture in the lectionary, making them available for individual study. Suggested practices for public reading follow in the "About the Translations" section.

## CONGREGATIONAL USE

The gender-expansive translations throughout the *Women's Lectionary* and explicit feminine God language in the psalter provide an opportunity for Christian education and formation on matters of biblical authority and translation issues, oft neglected conversations in congregations (beyond credal statements).

- Adopt the *Lectionary* fully, Years A, B, and C for three years using these lessons in this translation.
- Adopt the *Lectionary* for a single year, using Year W for representation from all four Gospels. This would be especially suitable for churches that do not use a multiyear lectionary.
- Adopt the *Lectionary* to replace a year in the three-year lectionary currently in use.
- Adopt the *Lectionary* readings using another translation of the scriptures for public proclamation. (This may be a useful option in a congregation that might balk at hearing feminine pronouns used for God in scripture proclamation.)
- Use the *Lectionary* for substitute readings for the same day and liturgical season in a particular year (for example, when the Episcopal or RCL lessons are unsatisfactory).
- Use the *Lectionary* for Bible study, whether preaching from the *Lectionary* or not. The preaching prompts may be used as conversation starters.
- Use the list of divine names and titles for God to enrich the theological language of the community in liturgy, corporate, and personal prayer.

## DEVOTIONAL USE

The *Lectionary* is designed for oral reading; read it out loud. Use the *Lectionary* for devotional reading, daily or weekly, whether your congregation uses the *Lectionary* or not. The four lessons can be read together every day of the week in their liturgical setting or spread out over the course of the week. The index can be used to identify individual passages for study and the list of divine names in the appendix can be used to augment the vocabulary of prayer.

## THEOLOGICAL EDUCATIONAL USE

As a resource in the theological classroom, the *Lectionary* offers a much-needed alternative to the long-standing Episcopal and Revised Common Lectionaries for the study of liturgy and worship planning, offering a relevant and expansive vocabulary at a time when many clergy, congregations, and denominations are looking for liturgical alternatives and some are considering revisions of prayer books and hymnals for this very purpose.

These translations make a specific contribution to the oft-neglected but necessary conversation about the nature, function, and scope of biblical translation beyond the standard rubric of formal literalism and dynamic flexibility.

# ABOUT THE TRANSLATIONS

*Gender matters. Gender matters in the text, in the world, in the world of the text, and in the world of the translator. Gender matters to me and to countless numbers of women hearers and readers of the biblical text for whom it is Scripture. Gender matters significantly to those who have been and are marginalized because of gender, especially when it is done in the name of God, appealing to the Scriptures. And gender matters to men. Gender matters to hearers and readers of the Scriptures who are privileged to share the gender of the dominant portrayal of God, the majority of biblical characters, the majority of biblical characters who have speaking parts, the majority of translators of biblical texts, and the majority of interpreters of biblical texts.*

—Wilda Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*, 289

**W**hile prompted in part by my experience of hearing the scriptures read and proclaimed in nearly exclusively masculine language, multiplied in effect by equally, if not more, male liturgical language, this *Women's Lectionary* is a lectionary for the whole church. Androcentrism, sexism, and misogyny in the scriptures, in their translation and in their preaching and liturgical use, hurts men and boys and nonbinary children and adults as much as it does women and girls. Exclusively masculine language constructs and reinforces the notion that men are the proper image of God and women are secondary and distant. Further, the simple reality that men and boys have always heard their gender identified with God cannot be overlooked as a source of power and authority and security in terms of their place in the divine household and economy. Many, if not most, women and girls have not heard themselves identified by their gender as and with the divine and for those who have had that experience, it has been profoundly moving, rare, and even sometimes profoundly disturbing. The translation choices employed in the *Women's Lectionary* offer an opportunity to hear the scriptures in public and private settings in a different timbre, a feminine vocal register. Specific translation choices are annotated in the text notes that follow each set of readings.

The *Women's Lectionary* is a multilayered work. In addition to the compilation of entirely new lectionary readings for the three-year cycle and composite single year, the production of entirely new gender-expansive translations and in the Psalms, explicitly feminine translations distinguish this lectionary. Gender-expansive means

expanding collections of people, e.g., Israelites, children, nations, and even “people” to reflect gendered subgroups such as “the women, children, and men of Israel.” (These translations generally place women before men in translation.) In every place where it can be reasonably inferred a group is composed of persons of more than one gender, I reflect that in the translation. Where gender neutral or inclusive language is used, it is used for male subjects; for example, “child” is used preferably to “son.”

In genealogies, gender expansiveness means that lineages are presented matrilineally. For example, rather than “the God of Jacob,” the *Lectioary* uses “the God of Rebekah’s line.” When supplemental language is added to establish the maternal genealogy, it is placed in brackets, i.e., “[Rachel-born] Benjamin.” In each case, the original reading and translation choices are clearly identified in the text notes. For this project, explicitly feminine language is preferable to inclusive and neuter language, which obscures and erases women and girls. In addition, singular neuter gender and inclusive plurals do not disrupt the learned gender patterns, as many readers and hearers interpret them through their previously learned gender pattern and experience them as male. There is also some nonbinary language for human beings and God throughout the *Lectioary*; erasure of any gendered minority is contrary to the aims of this project.

Because so many readers pray the psalms devotionally, I wanted to offer an opportunity to hear those compositions speaking to, by, and about women and girls primarily and to encounter God in explicitly feminine language so readers of all genders will have the experience of praying to God in the feminine gender. Therefore, these translations of the psalms use feminine pronouns for God primarily, supplemented by nonbinary pronouns.

Following the practice of translators before me, I have adopted the practice of choosing descriptive expressions for the name of God and other divine names and titles. Given the most commonly used title for God in the Hebrew Scriptures, LORD (with the large and small caps indicating it is a substitutionary word for God’s unpronounceable Most Holy Name represented by the letters YHWH) is the common male human slave holding title; it is not used for God in the *Lectioary*. The *Lectioary* preserves the ancient biblical and rabbinical practice of substituting something that can be said for that which cannot. (In some places the Hebrew Masoretic text uses Elohim, “God,” as a substitute). In rabbinic and subsequent practice, *HaShem*, “the Name,” is a common substitution; there are others.

Dr. Joel Rosenberg of Tufts University translated selected psalms for the Kol Haneshamah Reconstructionist prayer book. He renders the divine name using choices such as “THE ETERNAL,” “THE ONE,” and in Psalm 29, “THE ONE WHO CALLS over many waters.” I was deeply impacted by these translations during the time I spent as a member of the Dorshei Derekh Reconstructionist minyan of the Germantown Jewish

Centre in Philadelphia and adopted and expanded the practice in my own translations for teaching, preaching, and publication. The translations in *Lectionary* draw from a robust list of options for naming God listed in an appendix. Some examples include: ARK OF SAFETY, DREAD GOD, FIRE OF SINAI, ROCK WHO GAVE US BIRTH, SHE WHO IS HOLY, etc. The list numbers more than one hundred and twenty. I preserve “Lord” for human beings, as that is the origin of the title, respectful address, and functionally the title refers to a slaveholder or other hierarchical role.

Similarly, in the Second Testament, I also reserve “Lord” for human beings—apart from Jesus. There are two sets of divine names and titles for the Christian Testament in the appendix. For Jesus I use: Anointed, God-born, Messiah, Rabbi, Redeemer, Savior, Son of Woman, Teacher, and Woman-Born. Son of Woman and Woman-Born both derive from the expressions previously and commonly translated as “son of man” (in the KJV) and more recently as “Mortal” or “the Human One” in translations like the NRSV and CEB. The underlying Greek expression, *huios tou anthropou*, means “son [male offspring] of a human” (“person of either sex” according to the standard authoritative BDAG lexicon); it also means “humankind” collectively. Whether one speaks or writes from a human, biological perspective or a theological one, the humanity of Jesus stems from his mother. Grammatically, Son of Woman and Woman-Born are both correct. Inasmuch as generic “man” is no longer used to represent humanity in totality, an argument can be made that Son of Woman is more theologically correct. The expression *huios tou anthropou* is not *de novo* to the Second Testament; it occurs in the First Testament in both Hebrew as *ben adam* and the same Greek expression in the LXX. *Ben adam* means son (and generic child) of humanity. In the First Testament and deuterocanonical books, I use woman-born where it is a human title signifying mortality. In at least one occurrence, in a poetic text, I translate it as “children of earth and Eve,” given that the root of *adam* is *adamah*, “earth” (soil).

There is a second list of divine titles for God (apart from Jesus) used in the Second Testament. Those names and titles are: Creator, Creator of All, Dread God, Faithful One, Father, Holy One, Living God, Majesty, (our) Maker, Most High, One Parent, Provider, Shepherd-Of-All, Sovereign, and Weaver (of lights). While I do preserve “Father” in some places, I employ it much less frequently than it occurs in the text. I reserve it for places where the parentage of Jesus is being addressed specifically. As it pertains to God’s whereabouts and way of being in this world and the world beyond this one, I eschew “king” and “kingdom” in the *Lectionary*. As with all human attempts to describe God, monarchal language is inadequate; it is particularly unsuitable in that it stems from a rather brutal human system of governance that is unnecessary in the space where God is. Instead, I utilize “reign” and “realm” individually or in combination and “majesty.” (The latter is feminine in Greek and functions

as a divine title in Hebrews 1:3 and 8:1.) When translating from the Hebrew Bible and deuterocanonical texts, I use “ruler” preferentially.

I take special care with translation choices for the Christian Testament because of the long history of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism in biblical translation and interpretation and, in some cases, in the texts themselves. This lectionary intentionally excludes texts that blame Jews for the death of Jesus. The expression “the Jews” in Christian literature, including scripture, and in broader Christian discourse is very often negative. In the Greek New Testament, *Ioudaioi* can mean Jews, Judeans (people from Judea), or Jewish Christians in distinction from Gentile Christians. I use Judeans preferentially. In addition, because “scribes” can be easily misunderstood as simple copyists, I translate them as “biblical scholars” to make their underlying expertise more readily apparent.

Because scripture is read and heard and understood contextually, I am mindful of the ways in which the Scriptures have been read and heard and understood in the broader Western and specifically American contexts. Across both testaments and the writings in between, slavery is ubiquitous, including on the lips of Jesus. While many translations use “servant” preferentially, I find that to be dishonest given that the persons so named were owned, controlled, raped, impregnated, bred, sold, maimed, and killed. Even when the bondage was of short *durée* or to pay off a debt, the lord and master had complete control of the subjugated person’s body and sometimes retained their children after their liberation. So while it is certain to produce discomfort in the reader and hearer, I preserve “slave” and invite the reader and preacher to wrestle with that term and its influence on and in crafting and defending the American slavocracy. Minimizing the footprint of slavery in the scriptures weakens the link between them and subsequent slaveholding societies and the churches that unite them and us. Readers are welcome to replace the word “slave” with “servant” knowing that doing so writes over the degree to which the scriptures are slaveholding texts with no imagination of the possibility of abolition. I would encourage congregations to talk about that language and why they will or will not retain it.

Also bearing in mind the American context in which these translations were produced and the related contexts in which they will be read, I chose to disrupt the traditional biblical language of light and white to mean good and dark and black to mean something negative or even evil. While there is no concept of race in the Hebrew Bible or Christian Testament and people and nations are not assessed based on skin color and physical characteristics, that language has been mapped onto human bodies in the postbiblical world, justifying dehumanizing treatment, including slavery and legalized discrimination, including in the Church. Not all dark/black language in the biblical text is negative. Where it indicates something positive or holy, I retain it; for example, “God dwells in thick darkness” throughout the Scriptures.

In sum, the translations in the *Lectionary*:

- Identify original language and translation choices in accompanying text notes.
- Indicates quoted material from the First Testament in the Christian Testament using italics.
- Identify supplemental expansive translations with brackets.
- Expand people groups to make the presence of women and girls explicit.
- Use feminine and nonbinary pronouns for God in the Psalms.
- List genealogical information maternally.
- Use expansive descriptive language for the name of God instead of “Lord.”
- Limit use of “Father” to texts addressing Jesus’s parentage.
- Replace “kingdom” with “reign” and “realm” or with “majesty” (ruler is used preferentially in the Hebrew Bible).
- Use “Judeans” rather than “Jews” preferentially where appropriate.
- Maintain slave language rather than weaken or minimize with “servant.”
- Modulate “dark/black” negative language as “shadow” and “bleak/ness.”

It is my hope that this lectionary will enrich the experience of hearing and reading scripture and invite readers and hearers into deeper study of the scriptures, their translation, and interpretation. It is also my hope that liturgy, the work of the people in service to God, will be a place where all people can experience themselves as fully created in the image of God whose words they hear through the scriptures, and in prayer and preaching.



# THE LESSONS WITH COMMENTARY

## Year A

### ADVENT I

***Genesis 1:1–5; Psalm 8; Romans 8:18–25; Matthew 24:32–44***

**Genesis 1:1** When beginning he, God, created the heavens and the earth, <sup>2</sup> the earth was shapeless and formless and bleakness covered the face of the deep, while the Spirit of God, she, fluttered over the face of the waters. <sup>3</sup> Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. <sup>4</sup> And God saw that the light was good; so God separated the light from the bleakness. <sup>5</sup> Then God called the light Day, and the bleakness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, day one.

#### ***Psalm 8***

- <sup>1</sup> WOMB OF LIFE, our Sovereign,  
how exalted is your Name in all the earth!
- <sup>2</sup> Out of the mouths of children and nursing babes  
your majesty is praised above the heavens.
- <sup>3</sup> You have founded a stronghold against your adversaries,  
to put an end to the enemy and the avenger.
- <sup>4</sup> When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars you have established,
- <sup>5</sup> What are we that you should be mindful of us?  
the woman-born that you attend to them?
- <sup>6</sup> You have made us a little lower than God;  
you adorn us with glory and honor;
- <sup>7</sup> You give us mastery over the works of your hands;  
you put all things under our feet:
- <sup>8</sup> All sheep and oxen,  
even the wild beasts of the field,
- <sup>9</sup> The birds of the air, the fish of the sea,  
and whatsoever walks in the paths of the sea.
- <sup>10</sup> WOMB OF LIFE, our Sovereign,  
how exalted is your Name in all the earth!

**Romans 8:18** I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the daughters and sons of God; <sup>20</sup> for the creation was subjected to futility, not of

its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the daughters and sons of God. <sup>22</sup> We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; <sup>23</sup> and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup> For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? <sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

**Matthew 24:32** Jesus said, “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. <sup>33</sup> So also, when you see all these things, you know that the Son of Woman is near, at the very gates. <sup>34</sup> Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. <sup>35</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

<sup>36</sup> “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Most High God. <sup>37</sup> For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Woman. <sup>38</sup> For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, <sup>39</sup> and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Woman. <sup>40</sup> Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>41</sup> Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>42</sup> Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Redeemer is coming. <sup>43</sup> But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, the owner would have stayed awake and would not have let the house be broken into. <sup>44</sup> Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Woman is coming at an unexpected hour.

## PROCLAMATION

### Text Notes

In Genesis 1:1, God and God’s verb, “create,” are grammatically masculine. In Genesis 1:2, the Spirit of God and her verb are grammatically feminine. While this project generally eschews masculine God language with few exceptions, I preserve it here with the feminine language erased by virtually every translation to note God’s introduction in the scriptures transcends the singular masculine gender to which God is often reduced.

This Psalter names God in varying forms when rendering the divine Name. In rabbinic practice, God’s most holy name most commonly rendered “Lord” is not spelled out—the theoretical spelling is uncertain—it is substituted with a term of reverence that varies in classical literature and liturgical practice: *Adonai* (Lord) and *HaShem* (the Name) are the most common. Following that practice and influenced by developments in liturgical language in Christian and Jewish contexts, the God

language here reflects the immediate context. (See the translation of Joel Rosenberg in the *Kol HaNeshamah* seder [prayer book] of the Reconstruction movement in Judaism.) In Psalm 8:5 the text says “a little lower than God,” but previous generations of pious translators used “angels” instead.

In the Epistle the inclusive “children” is expanded to “daughters and sons” to make the daughters of God visible and not merely assumed. Two words are used: the masculine plural “sons” functioning as an inclusive plural in verse 19 and the neuter plural “children” in verse 21.

The expressions previously traditionally translated as “Son of Man” in Psalm 8:5, today’s Gospel, and throughout the text in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek all mean “descended/born of humankind.” In each language the expressions include descent from women, as the terms for humanity are inclusive. With regard to Jesus, “Son of Woman” is particularly apt. The title in verse 33 is transposed from verse 30 to concretize the pronoun, “he.” “Lord,” a hierarchical title used for slaveholders, men with status, and God in the New Testament derives in part from the pious practice of substituting a title for God’s name. Its use for Jesus signals his authority and identifies him with God. Here “Redeemer” as the divine title makes explicit the theme that permeates these readings.

## Preaching Prompts

All of God’s creation is good and beloved; this extends to the earth and her creatures and all of God’s children, daughters and sons—and considering the gender-full first human—nonbinary siblings alike. As Advent prepares the Church to receive an incarnate God, the emphasis on the goodness of creation is a powerful reminder that human flesh, particularly womanflesh, is part of that good and beloved creation. Love and longing characterize these texts. God longs for the redemption of the world as, and more than, creation longs to be redeemed. This is an Advent longing. Though we long for the culmination of our redemption, we wait with hope and patience, not knowing the day or hour when Christ will return in the glory that crowned creation at its birth. These Advent readings see women created in the image of God, as the font of the coming incarnate redemption rather than the cause of the world’s brokenness. The use of feminine and masculine God-language in the biblical text provides an opportunity to expand our own. Though binary language is the vernacular of the text, the introduction of a God who transcends a single gender category reveals the limitations of those categories for God and for those created in her, hir, his, zir, our, their image.

# ADVENT II

*Isaiah 54:1–8; Psalm 113; Hebrews 11:8–13; Luke 1:5–17, 24–25*

## **Isaiah 54**

- <sup>1</sup> Sing childless woman,  
never-given-birth-woman;  
Woman, break out a song and rejoice, woman,  
never-in-labor-woman.  
For more are the children of the devastated woman  
than the children of the espoused woman,  
says the Giver of Life.
- <sup>2</sup> Woman expand the place of your tent, woman  
and the curtains of your sanctuary, woman,  
extend them—do not hold back, woman!  
Woman, lengthen your ropes, woman,  
and woman, secure your stakes, woman.
- <sup>3</sup> For right and left you will break through, woman  
and your seed, woman, will inherit nations,  
and in devastated cities they will dwell.
- <sup>4</sup> Do not fear, woman  
for you will not be ashamed woman;  
do not feel humiliated woman  
for you will not be disgraced woman.  
For the shame of your youth woman,  
you will forget woman,  
and the stigma of your widowhood, woman,  
you will never remember, woman.
- <sup>5</sup> For your spouse woman,  
is the One who made you woman.  
SOVEREIGN-COMMANDER of winged warriors  
is God's name.  
The Holy One of Israel  
will redeem you woman—  
who is called God of all the earth.
- <sup>6</sup> For like a wife abandoned and abject in spirit—  
The Faithful God has called you woman—  
For you were a rejected young bride,  
says your God, woman.

<sup>7</sup> For a brief space I abandoned you woman,  
but in great mother-love I will gather you woman.  
<sup>8</sup> For a minute moment  
I hid my face briefly from you woman.  
But in eternally bonded love  
I will mother-love you woman.  
Your Redeemer, Woman, has spoken.

### **Psalm 113**

<sup>1</sup> Hallelujah! Give praise, you slaves of the MOST HIGH;  
praise the Name of the WISDOM OF THE AGES.  
<sup>2</sup> Let the Name of the HOLY ONE OF OLD be blessed,  
from this time forth forevermore.  
<sup>3</sup> From the rising of the sun to its going down  
the Name of the AUTHOR OF LIFE is praised.  
<sup>4</sup> SHE WHO IS WISDOM is high above all nations,  
and her glory above the heavens.  
<sup>5</sup> Who is like the MOTHER OF ALL our God, who sits enthroned on high,  
yet bends down to behold the heavens and the earth?  
<sup>6</sup> She takes up the weak out of the dust  
and lifts up the poor from the ashes.  
<sup>7</sup> She sets them with the rulers,  
with the rulers of her people.  
<sup>8</sup> She makes the woman of a childless house  
to be a joyful mother of children.

**Hebrews 11:8** By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance, so he set out, not knowing where he was going. <sup>9</sup> By faith he lived as a stranger in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were joint heirs with him of the same promise. <sup>10</sup> For he was waiting for the city that having foundations, whose architect and builder is God. <sup>11</sup> By faith even though Sarah herself was barren, she received power to knit together seed in spite of length of life because Abraham considered God faithful who had promised. <sup>12</sup> Therefore from one person—and that one practically dead—descendants were born, “as the multitude of the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the shore of the sea.” <sup>13</sup> In faith died these all without receiving the promises, but from a distance they saw and welcomed them. They acknowledged that they were strangers and sojourners on the earth.

**Luke 1:5** And it was in the days of Herod king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the lineage of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was

Elizabeth. <sup>6</sup> Both of them were righteous before God, living according to all the commandments and righteous requirements of the Sovereign God blamelessly. <sup>7</sup> Now they had no child because Elizabeth was barren, and they both were advanced in age.

<sup>8</sup> And it happened that when Zechariah was serving as priest and his order had the service before God, <sup>9</sup> according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to offer incense and he entered the sanctuary of the Holy God. <sup>10</sup> The whole assembly of the people was praying outside at the time of the incense offering. <sup>11</sup> There appeared to Zechariah a messenger of the Living God, standing to the right of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> Now Zechariah was shaken when he saw the messenger and fear overwhelmed him. <sup>13</sup> But the messenger said to him, “Fear not, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to a son for you, and you will call his name John. <sup>14</sup> You will have joy and gladness, and many at his birth will rejoice, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Sovereign God. Wine and strong drink he must not drink. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb. <sup>16</sup> He will turn many of the women and men of Israel to the Holy One their God. <sup>17</sup> He will go before the Holy God with the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to prepare for the Redeeming God a people made ready.”

<sup>24</sup> After those days Elizabeth his wife conceived, and she hid herself for five months. She said, <sup>25</sup> “This is the Holy God’s doing; God has done for me when God looked favorably on me and took away my disgrace among humankind.”

## PROCLAMATION

### Text Notes

My previously published translation of Isaiah 54 above makes visible all of the grammatically feminine words describing and addressing the woman in the passage. There are three to seven of these forms in each verse of the chapter (save the verse in which God speaks in the first person after this lesson). “Sovereign-Commander of winged warriors” in verse 5 communicates that the “hosts” of heaven were understood to be a divine army; later some understood them as angels. Others also identify them with the stars and planets. The verb *racham* conveys feelings that emerge from the *rechem*, the womb in verses 7–8, echoing the relationship between the body part and associated feeling in headache, heartsick, etc. It will be translated as womb-love or mother-love throughout this volume.

Depending on the translation one chooses, either Sarah or Abraham is the subject of Hebrews 11:11 (because Greek verbs are not gendered like Hebrew verbs). In keeping with the aims of this project, women and girls are centered in translation and interpretation.

In Luke 1:15 the Greek presents John’s rule of life “from his mother’s womb.” Both the NRSV and CEB omit mother and womb and use “from before his birth.”

This is not only an erasure of Elizabeth, but it disembodies birth, very much at odds with the coming Incarnation. For this reason, I translate both Hebrew Greek verbs for childbirth as “to give birth,” rather than “to bear.” Lastly, the language around her seclusion is quite strong; “she hid herself;” a potentially powerful sermon prompt.

## Preaching Prompts

These lessons offer an opportunity to talk about God’s promises and faithfulness to and through women in the vernacular of the Hebrew Bible: marriage and children. While the emphasis on pregnancy and birth is a crucial component of the Advent journey, these experiences do not characterize all women and can be heard as essentializing or even stigmatizing in addition to being painful for some. These texts offer space to talk about what God’s love and fidelity look like beyond that limited theological frame as we hold Christ’s second Advent in conversation with the first.

Some will find the repetition of the word “woman” in Isaiah 54 challenging, which in turn provides opportunity for reflection and discussion: Does it matter that the poet crafted this text using explicit feminine language repetitiously? How and why does that choice affect how the passage is heard when read in conversation with another translation? Focusing on Sarah in Hebrews does not negate how androcentric the list and larger text is. Who is missing from the list and how might they talk about God’s fidelity? Luke demonstrates that the Advent of Jesus is a community affair: Elizabeth, Zechariah, John a divine messenger, and God—all before we get to Mary, Joseph, and the Holy Spirit—facilitating a conversation about our work toward the next appearance of the incarnate God in our world.

## ADVENT III

***Ruth 4:11–17; Psalm 78:1–8; Galatians 4:1–7; Matthew 1:1–16***

**Ruth 4:11** All the women and men who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, “We are witnesses. May the FAITHFUL GOD grant that the woman who is coming into your house be like Rachel and Leah; the two of them built up the house of Israel. May you prosper in Ephrathah and establish a lineage in Bethlehem; <sup>12</sup> and, may your house, through the children that the FOUNT OF LIFE will give you by this young woman, be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar gave birth to for Judah.”<sup>13</sup> So Boaz took Ruth as his own for a wife. He came to her and the SOURCE OF LIFE granted her a pregnancy, and she gave birth to a son. <sup>14</sup> Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the FAITHFUL GOD, who has not deprived you this day of next-of-kin; and may the child’s name be renowned in Israel!” <sup>15</sup> He shall be to you a restorer of life and a provider in your latter years; for your daughter-in-law has given birth to him, she who loves you, she who is more to you than seven sons.” <sup>16</sup> Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and she fostered him. <sup>17</sup> The neighbor-women gave him a name, saying, “A son

has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.”

**Psalm 78**

- <sup>1</sup> Give ear, my people, to my teaching;  
incline your ear to the utterances of my mouth.
- <sup>2</sup> I will open my mouth in a proverb;  
I will utter riddles from of old,
- <sup>3</sup> Which we have heard and known,  
and which our mothers and fathers have told us.
- <sup>4</sup> We will not hide them from their daughters and sons;  
we will recount to generations to come  
the praiseworthy deeds of SHE WHO SPEAKS LIFE,  
and her might, and the wonderful works she has done.
- <sup>5</sup> She gave her decrees for Rebekah’s descendants  
and placed teaching among Sarah’s offspring,  
which she commanded their mothers and fathers  
to make known to their daughters and sons.
- <sup>6</sup> In order that a coming generation, children yet to be, might know,  
and will rise up and tell their daughters and sons.
- <sup>7</sup> Then they will put their confidence in God,  
and not forget the works of God, but will keep her commandments;
- <sup>8</sup> And not be like their ancestors, a stubborn and rebellious generation,  
a generation whose heart was not steadfast,  
and whose spirit was not faithful to God.

**Galatians 4:1** I say that as long as heirs are minors, they are no better than slaves, though they are the masters of all; <sup>2</sup> but they remain under guardians and trustees until the time set by the father. <sup>3</sup> So also for us; while we were minors, we were enslaved by the constitutive elements of the world. <sup>4</sup> But when the fullness of time had come, God sent God’s own Son, born of a woman, born under the law, <sup>5</sup> to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption like children. <sup>6</sup> And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of God’s own Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” <sup>7</sup> So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

**Matthew 1:1–16 (alternative)**

A genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of Miriam, the daughter of Anna:  
Sarah was the mother of Isaac,  
And Rebekah was the mother of Jacob,  
Leah was the mother of Judah,  
Tamar was the mother of Perez.

The names of the mothers of Hezron, Ram, Amminadab,  
Nahshon and Salmon have been lost.  
Rahab was the mother of Boaz,  
and Ruth was the mother of Obed.  
Obed's wife, whose name is unknown, bore Jesse.  
The wife of Jesse was the mother of David.  
Bathsheba was the mother of Solomon,  
Naamah, the Ammonite, was the mother of Rehoboam.  
Maacah was the mother of Abijam and the grandmother of Asa.  
Azubah was the mother of Jehoshaphat.  
The name of Jehoram's mother is unknown.  
Athaliah was the mother of Ahaziah,  
Zibiah of Beersheba, the mother of Joash.  
Jecoliah of Jerusalem bore Uzziah,  
Jerusha bore Jotham; Ahaz's mother is unknown.  
Abi was the mother of Hezekiah,  
Hephzibah was the mother of Manasseh,  
Meshullemeth was the mother of Amon,  
Jedidah was the mother of Josiah.  
Zebidah was the mother of Jehoiakim,  
Nehushta was the mother of Jehoiachin,  
Hamutal was the mother of Zedekiah.  
Then the deportation of Babylon took place.  
After the deportation to Babylon  
the names of the mothers go unrecorded.  
These are their sons:  
Jechoniah, Shealtiel, Zerubbabel,  
Abiud, Eliakim, Azor and Zadok,  
Achim, Eliud, Eleazar,  
Matthan, Jacob, and Joseph, the husband of Miriam.  
Of her was born Jesus who is called Christ.  
The sum of generations is there: fourteen from Sarah to David's mother;  
fourteen from Bathsheba to the Babylonian deportation;  
and fourteen from the Babylonian deportation to Miriam, the mother of Christ.  
(“A Genealogy of Jesus Christ” was compiled by Ann Patrick Ware of the Women's Liturgy  
Group of New York, who has graciously put this text in the public domain for all to use.)

## PROCLAMATION

### Text Notes

The variety of names for God chosen to express the unpronounceable Name reflect the actions of God throughout. In Ruth 4:14 it is not entirely clear that it is the child whose name will be renowned. There are too many pronouns and not enough nouns with which to clearly identify them. The other option is that God's name will be renowned in verse 14. It is clear that the next verse refers to the child.

In verse 5 of the psalm, Rebekah and Sarah replace Jacob and Israel and "teaching" conveys the fullest sense of Torah, rather than "law."

In general, this volume will preserve "Father" in the Gospel when Jesus says it or it pertains specifically to his Sonship/paternity. Likewise, this volume will not white-wash slavery in the text and its world by softening it to servitude. That the enslaved could be beaten, killed, raped, and forced to breed more enslaved persons makes clear that slavery and its vocabulary is the appropriate translation for the assorted terms across the canon. The implications of slave language as normative in the text is something with which readers and hearers must wrestle honestly, particularly in light of the transatlantic trafficking of human persons and legacy of the American slavocracy, including in churches and denominations (discussed further below).

### Preaching Prompts

On the third Sunday in Advent, as in Lent, purple (or blue) softens to rose or pink for Rose Sunday, on which it is appropriate to reflect on the ever-blessed Virgin, the tender love of God, and other maternal themes. Naomi's fostering of Obed as her son, replacing those lost to death through Ruth's marriage to a kinsman, can be read in this light if done carefully without romanticizing the relationship between Ruth and Boaz. That relationship is about survival, particularly Naomi's need for security in her latter years. Ruth is at best a willing pawn given her survival is at stake. However, it should not be forgotten that Ruth and her sister-in-law were abducted into Naomi's family on her watch. (The verb that details their unions is an abduction verb and not the regular marriage expression used of Ruth and Boaz.)

Ruth and the Gospel use genealogy to demonstrate the faithfulness of God to Israel through the house of David. Patricia Ware's reframing of the Gospel makes women and their pregnancies and births more visible in the "begots." Yet motherhood remains a challenging category with which to elevate women. Not all women will mother, wish to mother, or were even mothered well. And women who do mother are so much more than their children and their mothering. These lineages point to a coming messiah, a divine visitation whose incarnation sanctifies all human bodies as God-space.

Slave language in the Gospels and Epistles is ugly. It is tempting to soften it to servant, woman servant, maidservant, etc. The blood more than six million Africans spilled in the Middle Passage cries out with the blood of every other enslaved person across time and space. We must confront slavery in the text and in the churches and institutions built on it and its rhetoric. We can retain the image of being adopted by God without a straw comparison to an enslaved person—who cannot even be considered a child according to Paul’s rhetoric—to establish our relative worth.

The psalm calls for us to teach the truth of our histories and experiences to our children. And we should without white washing the androcentric, patriarchal, and slaveholding culture of the text—even when grouped around the presence of women.

## ADVENT IV

### *Susanna 31–44; Psalm 34:1–9; Titus 3:4–7; Matthew 1:18–25*

(There are two versions of the story of Susanna, the older Septuagint version, LXX, and the one Theodotion revised, traditionally used by the church. Both are below.)

**LXX Susanna 31** Now Susanna was an exquisite woman, very much so.<sup>32</sup> Scoundrels commanded her uncovered, so that they might sate their lust on her beauty.<sup>33</sup> Those who were with her—her mother, father, five hundred enslaved women and men, and her four children—and all who knew her wept.<sup>34</sup> Then the elders and judges rose before the people; laid their hands on her head.<sup>35</sup> But her heart trusted in the Holy One her God, and she lifted her head and wept speaking within herself. “Holy One, everlasting God, you who know all things before their beginning, you know that I have not done what these men are maliciously alleging against me.” The Holy One heard her plea.

<sup>36</sup> The two elders said, “We were walking around in her husband’s garden,<sup>37</sup> and as we were going around the walkway, we saw this woman reclining with a man. And while we stood, we saw them having intercourse together.<sup>38</sup> They did not know that we stood there. Then we agreed among ourselves, saying, ‘Let us find out who they are.’<sup>39</sup> We approached and recognized her, but the young man fled, covered up.<sup>40</sup> Now, we seized this woman; we asked her, ‘Who is the man?’<sup>41</sup> and she would not tell us who he was. These things we testify.” And as they were elders and judges of the people, the whole assembly believed them.<sup>44</sup> Now look here! There was an angel of God as she was being taken off to be executed.

**Theo Susanna 31** Now Susanna was exquisite, very much so, beautiful and shapely.<sup>32</sup> Scoundrels commanded that she be uncovered—for she was covered—so that they might sate their lust on her beauty.<sup>33</sup> But those who were with her—her parents, her children, and all of her relatives—and all who saw her began weeping.

<sup>34</sup> Then the two elders stood up in the midst of the people; they put their hands on her head. <sup>35</sup> Now she wept, looking up to heaven, because her heart trusted in the Holy One. <sup>36</sup> Then the elders said, “We were walking in the garden alone; this woman came in with two enslaved girls and shut the garden gate and dismissed the enslaved girls. <sup>37</sup> And a young man, who was hiding, came to her and reclined with her. <sup>38</sup> We were in the corner of the garden; we saw the lawlessness, we ran to them. <sup>39</sup> And although we saw them having intercourse, we were not able to overpower him because he was stronger than we, and when he had opened the gates he ran away. <sup>40</sup> We seized this woman, we asked who the young man was, <sup>41</sup> and she was not willing to tell us. These things we testify.” They were elders of the people and judges; the assembly believed them and they condemned her to death.

<sup>42</sup> Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice and said, “O everlasting God, you are the one who knows hidden things, who knows all things before their genesis, <sup>43</sup> you know that they have testified lies against me. See here! I will die, though nothing they have wickedly said against me have I done!”

<sup>44</sup> And the Holy One heeded her voice.

### **Psalm 34:1–9**

- <sup>1</sup> I will bless SHE WHO IS GOD at all times;  
her praise shall ever be in my mouth.
- <sup>2</sup> I will glory in SHE WHO IS STRENGTH;  
let the humble hear and rejoice.
- <sup>3</sup> Proclaim with me the greatness of SHE WHO IS EXALTED  
and let us exalt her Name together.
- <sup>4</sup> I sought SHE WHO SAVES, and she answered me  
and delivered me out of all my terror.
- <sup>5</sup> Look upon her and be radiant,  
and let not your faces be ashamed.
- <sup>6</sup> I called in my affliction and SHE WHO HEARS heard me  
and saved me from all my troubles.
- <sup>7</sup> The messenger of SHE WHO SAVES encompasses those who revere her,  
and she will deliver them.
- <sup>8</sup> Taste and see that SHE WHO IS DELIGHT is good;  
happy are they who trust in her!
- <sup>9</sup> Revere SHE WHO IS GOD, you that are her saints,  
for those who revere her lack nothing.

**Titus 3:4** When the graciousness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, <sup>5</sup> God saved us through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to God’s mercy. <sup>6</sup> This Spirit God poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, <sup>7</sup> so that, having been justified by God’s grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of life eternal.

**Matthew 1:18** Now this is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah happened: When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to have a child in her womb from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Joseph her husband was a just man and unwilling to shame her; he wanted to divorce her secretly. <sup>20</sup> But when he deliberated this, suddenly an angel of the Most High God appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for in her is conceived a child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup> All this happened to fulfill what had been spoken by the Most High God through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> “Look now! The virgin shall conceive a child in her womb and give birth to a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel,” which translated means, “God is with us.” <sup>24</sup> When Joseph got up from sleep, he did as the angel of the Most High God commanded him. He took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> yet did not know her sexually until her birthing of a son and named him Jesus.

## PROCLAMATION

### Text Notes

The story of Susanna is part of the longer Greek tradition of Daniel. The first Bible of the Church included the Septuagint, LXX, accounting for the different sequence of books than the Hebrew Bible and contributing to the number of books resulting in the eighty-book canon of the Episcopal Church shared broadly by other Anglican, Orthodox, and Catholic Christians. The older LXX and the version most commonly used, Theodotion, are above. In the LXX version above, I have added the details of Susanna’s retinue in verse 33 from their earlier mention in verse 30.

Biblical Hebrew does not have a word that means simply “divine winged being,” what many conceive when they read or hear the word “angel.” Instead, Hebrew uses a word, *mal’akh*, that means “messenger,” whether the one bearing the message is human or divine. Further, these messengers are distinct from cherubim and seraphim—consider them different species; they are never interchanged—and as in the story of Jacob’s ladder, do not have wings. Greek *aggelos* has the same sense of human or divine messenger, and none of the angels of the New Testament are described with wings. There is one distinct angel among the host of heaven, the angel of God (or the Lord) in other translations, here in Psalm 34:7, the angel of Wisdom. Many scholars understand this angel to be God in disguise so that she can be among her people without her holiness harming them. (I say it is God in drag.)

Curiously, “child” is missing from verses 18 and 20 of the Gospel. *Apolusai* has the sense of legally ending a contract or marriage, hence “divorce” in verse 19. Often softened to “quietly,” the literal meaning of *lathra* is “secretly”; see Herod calling the magi secretly in the next chapter.

Matthew 1:23 quotes the LXX version of Isaiah 7:14; in the two Greek texts the young woman is a virgin, *parthenos*, and contemporaneously pregnant having a child

“in womb,” *en gastris*, and will give birth, future tense. This is at odds with the Hebrew text in which the young woman, *almah*, is not specified as virginal, cultural expectations notwithstanding. Further, in Isaiah in Hebrew the young woman is pregnant at the time of Isaiah’s speech: he uses the adjective “pregnant,” not a verbal form. Christian translations often change the text to support traditional teaching.

## Preaching Prompts

The presence of angels all around links these texts and makes them particularly suitable for Advent 4. They also offer space to talk about the ways in which the biblical text and its interpreters are so often fixated on women’s bodies and sexuality as well as sexual assault and sexual harassment.

The LXX lesson leaves the reader in suspense. What will happen to the falsely accused Susanna? Will she be executed for adultery? The suspense is deliberate, designed to draw the reader and hearer to the very real consequences faced by Mary with her pregnancy. As with Mary, Susanna is not alone; she is attended by an angel of God. Instead of an angel, in Theodotion’s version, the lesson ends with God hearing Susanna cry. Each version gives the reader-hearer the assurance that God attends her daughter and each gives reason to hope that God will intervene. In each we are left with a woman in need of deliverance and dependent on God for that salvific act.

The psalmist offers testimony to those who like Susanna and Mary find themselves in desperate straits and is similarly attended by an angel in her moment of difficulty, verse 7. Susanna’s ultimate deliverance, though beyond the lesson, foreshadows the deliverance presented in Titus, a gracious and loving act of a gracious and loving God.

The Gospel treads lightly around the consequences should the betrothed but not married young woman be found to be pregnant, particularly when her intended denied paternity, tantamount to an accusation of adultery. In spite of the stoning provision in the Torah, there are no stories of women or men actually being stoned for adultery in spite of its fairly regular occurrence in the scriptures (not until Jesus breaks up an attempted stoning later). We cannot say with certainty that she would have been stoned, but it was a possibility. Her shame would have made it unlikely for her to marry and therefore be socially and economically vulnerable, relegated to the margins of society.

It is in this context that Jesus is born and named “The Holy One Saves.” God’s saving work did not begin with Jesus; we see it borne witness to throughout the scriptures. Jesus is the continuation and embodiment of that salvation.