



A WOMEN'S LECTIONARY FOR THE WHOLE CHURCH

A Multi-Gospel Single-Year Lectionary

WILDA C. GAFNEY



*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

What 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*c*.) 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

The *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 creedal 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

While 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 *Lectionary* 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 *Lectionary*; 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 *Lectionary*. The *Lectionary* 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 W

ADVENT I

Genesis 16:7–13; Psalm 71:4–11; Philippians 2:5–11; Luke 1:26–38

Genesis 16:7 Now the messenger of the ALL-SEEING GOD found Hagar by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸ And the messenger said, “Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, from where have you come and where are you going?” And she said, “From my mistress Sarai am I fleeing.” ⁹ The messenger of the INSCRUTABLE GOD said to her, “Return to your mistress, and subject yourself to her.”

¹⁰ The messenger of the WELLSPRING OF LIFE said to Hagar, “Greatly will I multiply your seed, so they cannot be counted for multitude.” ¹¹ Then the messenger of the FOUNT OF LIFE said to her,

“Look! You are pregnant and shall give birth to a son,
and you shall call him Ishmael (meaning God hears),
for the FAITHFUL ONE has heard of your abuse.

¹² He shall be a wild ass of a man,
with his hand against everyone,
and everyone’s hand against him;
and he shall live in the sight of all his kin.”

¹³ So Hagar named the LIVING GOD who spoke to her: “You are El-ro’i”; for she said, “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing God?”

Psalm 71:4–11

⁴ My God, rescue me, from the hand of the wicked,
from the clutch of the cruel and the ruthless.

⁵ For you are my hope, Sovereign, WORTHY ONE,
my trust, from my youth.

⁶ Upon you I have leaned from birth;
from my mother’s belly, you cut me.
You will I praise for all time.

⁷ As a portent have I served to many,
yet you are my strong refuge.

⁸ My mouth is filled with your praise,
all the day, with your glory.

- ⁹ Do not cast me off in the time of old age;
when my strength is spent, do not forsake me.
- ¹⁰ For my enemies speak about me,
and those who watch my life take counsel together.
- ¹¹ They say, "Pursue and seize them,
God has forsaken them,
for there is none to deliver."

Philippians 2:5 Let the same mind be in you all that was in Christ Jesus,

- ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be seized,
- ⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness;
then being found in human form,
- ⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.
- ⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted Jesus
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
- ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus
every heavenly and earthly knee should bend,
along with those under the earth,
- ¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Savior,
to the glory of God the Sovereign.

Luke 1:26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town of Galilee, Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the name of the virgin was Mary. ²⁸ And the angel came to Mary and said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Most High God is with you." ²⁹ Now, she was troubled by the angel's words and pondered what sort of greeting this was. ³⁰ Then the angel said to her, "Fear not Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Sovereign God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his sovereignty there will be no end." ³⁴ Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have not known a man intimately?" ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit, She will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the one born will be holy. He will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And

now, Elizabeth your kinswoman has even conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for she who was called barren.³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God.”³⁸ Then Mary said, “Here am I, the woman-slave of God; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel left her.

PROCLAMATION

Text Notes

The language of Hagar’s annunciation parallels the promise to Abraham in Genesis 13:16 closely; each is promised that their “seed” (or offspring) will be numerous beyond counting. Hagar is the first woman in scripture granted an annunciation, the unnamed mother of Samson follows in Judges 13:3–7, followed in turn by Mary the mother of Jesus. Hagar and Rebekah (Genesis 24:60) are the only women in the canon credited with their own seed/offspring; the language is usually reserved for men. (Rebekah’s seed is blessed by her matrilineal family; her father Bethuel ben Milcah bore his mother’s name, not his father’s.) Notably, God speaks to Abraham *about* Sarah in Genesis 17:15–16, as do the divine messengers in Genesis 18:9–10, even when she is within hearing; none speak to her.

Hagar’s abuse or affliction, more rightly, Sarah’s abuse of Hagar in verse 11, is articulated with a verb that encodes both physical and sexual violence; the verb is also used of the abuse the Israelites suffered at the hands of the Egyptians. The divine demand that Hagar “subject herself” to Sarah is communicated with a reflexive form of the same verb; she is told to subject herself to more potential violence. Some translate Ishmael’s fate in verse 12 as living “in opposition,” i.e., conflict, with his kin rather than “opposite,” i.e., in their sight or presence; the verb has both senses.

In verse 4 of the psalm, God is named as “lord” (corresponding to lowercase use as is common when addressing men) in combination with God’s unpronounceable Name, YHWH, usually rendered as “Lord GOD” (capitalized for deity). In verse 6 the “God-as-midwife” theme familiar from Psalm 22:9 takes a dramatic turn with God “cutting” rather than “drawing” the baby out. The difference is *gochi* versus *gozi*, a single letter, perhaps indicating recall of the former psalm without access to the text. The cutting itself could range from a cesarean delivery—practiced in ancient Egypt—to cutting the cord as in CEB.

In Mary’s linguistic and cultural world, in Hebrew and Aramaic, the Spirit is feminine; the Syriac text uses a feminine verb for the Spirit in Luke 1:35. Also in her world, there was no distinction between servant and slave. Mary is not saying she will wait on God hand and foot in verse 38; she is giving God ownership of her body, ownership slaveholders claimed without consent. This volume uses “slave” normatively, reflecting the troubling language in the scriptures and their contexts.

Preaching Prompts

This first lesson in each Sunday of Advent in this volume is an annunciation story: Hagar, Sarah and Abraham, the mother of Samson, and Hannah. Annunciations communicate an understanding of God involved in history and deeply involved in the lineage—ancestral and descendent—of God’s people. Mary’s annunciation and the story of Jesus’s first advent stand on that foundational understanding.

In traditional readings these women are all but reduced to biological functions, a function which not all women have or choose to perform. Yet there is space in that “all but” to see that even in a very reductionistic text these women are more than incubators. They are theologians and divine conversation partners and, in Hagar’s case, a philologist. They are also evidence that God is concerned with those who are at the bottom of all the hierarchies: women, the enslaved, foreigners, and, as so often is the case, persons in more than one category (all for Hagar), whose overlapping identities result in intersectional oppressions.

Jesus, as the incarnation of God, continued to identify with those on the margins and those excluded by the margins, “taking the form of a slave” according to Philipians 2:7. He did so scandalously, between a woman’s thighs and, as Cornel West says (paraphrasing Augustine), far too close to the orifices for urine and feces. The psalm makes clear this is not a new arena for the divine Midwife, who does not simply passively “catch” babies who largely birth themselves, but she actively intervenes to ensure a live birth, cutting what needs to be cut. Perhaps she will also deliver Mary when her time comes.

Mary takes on the language of enslavement, subjecting herself to God and God’s will, where Hagar seems to have come into bondage as a child, if not from birth. Yet there is a question in the mind of some readers as to whether Mary actually had the option to consent given Gabriel tells her what *will* happen to her, to her body. It is unclear what would have happened had she demurred. Yielding herself to God, Mary joins the ranks of those deemed “servants,” slaves of God: Moses, David, Paul, James. Through her yielding the first Advent comes to us, through her model and that of Hagar, we prepare for the second Advent.

ADVENT II

Genesis 17:15–22; Psalm 78:1–7; Romans 8:18–25; Luke 1:39–45

Genesis 17:15 Thus God said to Abraham, “Now as for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, for Sarah is [now] her name.¹⁶ And I will bless her, and indeed of her will I give you a son. And I will bless her, and she will become nations; rulers of peoples shall come into being from her.”¹⁷ Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, “Can

a child be born to one a hundred years old? And can Sarah, ninety years old, give birth?”¹⁸ Then Abraham said to God, “If only Ishmael could live in your sight!”¹⁹ God said, “Nevertheless your wife Sarah shall give birth to a son for you, and you shall call his name Isaac. And I will establish my covenant with him, an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.²⁰ Now as for Ishmael, I have heard you and I will bless him and make him fruitful and I will make him exceedingly, exceedingly numerous and he shall be the father of twelve chieftains, and I will make him a great nation.²¹ But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall give birth to for you at this season next year.”²² And when God had finished speaking with him, God ascended from Abraham.

Psalm 78:1-7

- ¹ Give ear, my people, to my teaching;
incline your ear to the utterances of my mouth.
- ² I will open my mouth in a proverb;
I will utter riddles from of old.
- ³ Which we have heard and known,
and which our mothers and fathers have told us.
- ⁴ 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.
- ⁵ 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.
- ⁶ In order that a coming generation, children yet to be, might know,
and will rise up and tell their daughters and sons.
- ⁷ Then they will put their confidence in God,
and not forget the works of God, but will keep her commandments.

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.¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the daughters and sons of God;²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope²¹ 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.²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now;²³ 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.²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Luke 1:39 Mary set out in those days and went to the hill country with haste, to a Judean town. ⁴⁰ There she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ Now when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² Elizabeth exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ From where does this [visit] come to me? That the mother of my Sovereign comes to me? ⁴⁴ Look! As soon as I heard the sound of your greeting in my ear, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Now blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of those things spoken to her by the Holy One."

PROCLAMATION

Text Notes

Genesis 17:20 uses the word *nasi'* to describe the children of Ishmael; its semantic range includes "prince," "leader/ruler," and "chief." As princes they would be rulers of individual principalities, not the offspring of more senior monarchs (generally indicated by *sar*, the root of Sarah's name). I have adopted Robert Alter's "chieftain" to maintain the distinction for lexical fidelity.

Both Mary and Elizabeth have venerable names: Mary, Miriam, goes back to the prophet Miriam, who led the people through the sea. (Exodus 15:20 presents Miriam leading the women and calling for the men to follow them in verse 21—the "them" there is masculine/common plural.) Elizabeth is a form of Elisheba, mother of Israel's priestly line, wife of Aaron (Exodus 6:3) and Elizabeth's own foremother. Her question is nearly inarticulate, "and from where this to me," in keeping with the joyful shock of the passage.

Preaching Prompts

Underlying annunciation stories is a reading that valorizes women chiefly for fertility and treats them as little more than incubators. An updated reading might focus on the symbolism of children for a world that continues under God's care no matter the present circumstances—remembering that the scriptures are produced and collated under wave after wave of oppression. In a transgenerational reading, all who produce and nurture children participate in God's work in the world and are recipients of the promise of God's care and keeping.

While the texts and traditional interpretations privilege some children, characters, and lineages above others, God's promise to Hagar, her son, and their descendants is an act of fidelity that transcends deeply rooted regional and ethnic conflicts. No matter how fractured the relationship—and there would be bloodshed—Israelites and Ishmaelites (Edomites) remain bound together as kin.

Psalms 78 offers such a transgenerational reading; through these women and men and their children and descendants, God builds families, communities, and peoples, all the family of God. In this family, as in many on a much smaller scale, there are divisions and hostilities, enmities and ruptures that also cross generational lines and lineages and trouble the relationship between God and humanity. Romans 8 speaks to those divisions and the living hope of the world, itself very much alive, for healing and reconciliation.

To this world of fractured and unreconciled peoples, God sends a holy child as the embodiment of reconciliation. This singular extraordinary child is sent to a family (Mary and Joseph), an extended family (Elizabeth and Zechariah), a series of communities (Bethlehem, Nazareth, Capernaum, and more), a people (Israel), and all peoples (Gentile and Jew representing the fullness of humanity).

Elizabeth's greeting comes from scriptures she well could have known: Judges 5:24 and Judith 13:18. They invite speculation on her contact with them orally or in writing. Women's literacy was not unheard of in the ancient world. Like Jezebel, royal women were most likely to be literate. Elizabeth's proximity to the temple and its liturgies and her own priestly lineage may have increased the likelihood of literacy. Both forerunners of this greeting are associated with bloody violence: Deborah's war against the Canaanites and Jael's execution of Sisera, and an Assyrian siege and Judith's execution of Holofernes. Further, both Judith and Jael are in sexually scandalous situations: attempted rape and assignation and seduction. Mary's own pregnancy is scandalous, hinting at sexual infidelity. Elizabeth's words provide transgenerational support and comfort.

As Advent readings, these texts call us to attend to our place in this lineage, this family, this community, this people, and prepare for the return of this holy child who will complete the work of reconciliation and restoration.

ADVENT III

Judges 13:2–7; Psalm 115:9–15; 1 John 3:1–3; Luke 1:46–56

Judges 13:2 Now there was a certain man from Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, and his name was Manoah. His wife was barren; she had never given birth.³ And the messenger of the HOLY ONE appeared to the woman and said to her, "Look now, you are barren, having never given birth, you shall conceive and give birth to a son."⁴ Now please be on guard not to drink wine or strong drink, and you shall not eat anything unclean.⁵ For look! You shall yet conceive and give birth to a son. No razor shall be upon his head, for a nazirite to God shall the boy be from the womb. And he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines."⁶ Then the woman came and spoke to her husband saying, "Someone from God came to me,

and their appearance was like that of a messenger of God, incredibly awesome; I did not ask the messenger from where they came, and their name they did not tell me. ⁷ Yet they said to me, ‘You shall conceive and give birth to a son; do not drink wine or strong drink, and do not eat anything taboo, for a nazirite to God shall the boy shall be from the womb unto the day of his death.’”

Psalm 115:9–15

- ⁹ Israel, trust in the HOLY ONE OF OLD!
Their help and their shield is she.
- ¹⁰ House of Aaron, trust in the HOLY ONE OF SINAI!
Their help and their shield is she.
- ¹¹ You who revere the HOLY ONE, trust in the HOLY ONE!
Their help and their shield is she.
- ¹² The FAITHFUL ONE remembers us; she will bless;
she will bless the house of Israel;
she will bless the house of Aaron.
- ¹³ She will bless those who revere GOD WHO IS HOLY,
both small and great.
- ¹⁴ May the GENEROUS ONE add to, increase, you all,
both you and your children.
- ¹⁵ *May you all be blessed by the AGELESS ONE,*
Maker of the heavens and the earth.

1 John 3:1 See what kind of love has our Maker given to us, that we should be called children of God; and we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know God. ² Beloved, now are we God’s children and it has not yet been revealed what we will be. We do know that when God is revealed, we shall be like God, for we shall see God just as God is. ³ And everyone who has this hope in God purifies themselves, just as God is pure.

Luke 1:46–56

- ⁴⁶ “My soul magnifies the Holy One,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God’s own womb-slave.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is God’s name.
⁵⁰ God’s loving-kindness is for those who fear God
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ God has shown the strength of God’s own arm;
God has scattered the arrogant in the intent of their hearts.

- ⁵² God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
- ⁵³ God has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
- ⁵⁴ God has helped God's own child, Israel,
a memorial to God's mercy,
- ⁵⁵ just as God said to our mothers and fathers,
to [Hagar and] and Sarah and Abraham, to their descendants forever."
- ⁵⁶ And Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months and then she returned to her home.

PROCLAMATION

Text Notes

Though Hebrew does not have a distinct word for “wife,” English and religious conventions generally find “his wife” preferable to “his woman.” Therefore I use “wife” selectively and “woman” whenever possible. (The same holds true for “man” and “husband.”)

The Hebrew “messenger,” *mal'ak* in verse 3, can refer to humans or supernatural beings who deliver messages or speak on behalf of someone else; see Numbers 24:12; Deuteronomy 2:26; Joshua 6:17, etc. for human examples. The figure of the messenger of the Holy One often functions as God in disguise (or perhaps, in drag), evident as the character switches between speaking in third person on God's behalf and in first person as God (compare verses 3–4 with verses 22–23). I use the pronoun “they” for the messenger, though Hebrew does not have a neuter gender to signal the otherness of the being, beyond human categories like gender. The expression “man of God,” here “someone from God,” indicates prophets throughout the Hebrew Bible. The divine messenger in this passage in Judges seems to be the sole exception.

The pair of words traditionally translated “clean” and “unclean” are separate words and not an antithetical pair. *Tahor* is to be ritually acceptable and has to do with preparation, which might include a ritual bath. *Tamei* is better translated “taboo,” not in an appropriate state for ritual, but not impure and not sinful (see Illona Rashkow, *Taboo or Not Taboo: Sexuality and Family in the Hebrew Bible*).

The alternating shifts in voice in Psalm 115:9–11 make sense when it is read antiphonally as marked, an initial line in the imperative (which is a second-person form) followed by a line in the third-person function as an aside. As the rest of the passage also works well responsively, for continuity I have marked it so as well. Verse 14 uses the same verb meaning both “to add” and “to do again” twice in a row. The duplication makes more sense as different words, hence, “add to, increase.”

Preaching Prompts

The scriptures discuss women's fertility with language that equally applies to agriculture, reflecting limited understanding of human reproduction and profound ignorance of women's contribution to conception, imagining women's bodies as fertile or infertile fields. (The human ova was not discovered until 1876.) Curiously, Israelites never suspected male "seed" of being unviable, though they had surely seen diseased and other unviable plant seed.

The woman in Judges 13, rendered nameless, follows Hagar and Sarah in receiving a divine promise of progeny (Hannah, Mary, and Elizabeth will follow her). She joins a smaller list of (temporarily) barren women—Sarah, Hannah, and Elizabeth—whose barrenness God dramatically reverses. Curiously, only this woman has her name stripped from her. There is a robust rabbinic tradition supplying a variety of names for her, including other women's names in the scriptures with minimal or no narrative development, i.e., Zlelponi and Hazlel in *Bemidbar Rabbah* 10:5, Hazlelponi bat Yehudah from 1 Chronicles 4:3 in *b. Baba Bathra* 91a, where she has a daughter, Nashyan.

She will be a nazirite so that Samson will be a nazirite "from the womb." Women could and did take nazirite vows, Numbers 6:2ff, though subsequently, Numbers 30:1–13 permits husbands and fathers (when the daughter lives with them) to annul women's vows with no negative consequence for breaking the vow.

In the larger narrative, Samson's mother, like Hagar before her, knows with whom she has communed and is presented as sage and sensible while her husband is a buffoon. Yet her sensibility about the things of God is disclosed in a narrative dependent on her fertility and does not represent the experiences of the overwhelming majority of women living with infertility. That these stories employ a common ancient trope for introducing legendary heroes does not take the sting out of scripture proclaiming these miracles to only a very select few. In response, the psalm offers an opportunity to talk about the blessing and blessings of God in broader terms, and the Epistle calls us all, equally, into the family of God as children together where we are not valued on what we do, have done, or are capable of doing.

Mary's Magnificat is not thanksgiving for fertility in the place of barrenness. Her miraculous pregnancy relates her to women like Samson's mother, literarily, in introducing a significant child, but also distinguishes her as her conception will be unique in the Hebrew Scriptures (though not in its world). Her thanksgiving is about what this child will do with his life, not whether he will create life. As an Advent reading, this lesson calls us to that life and that work while we await his return.