

Mothers of the Promise

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Fourth Sunday of Advent

God of Grace,

Appear to us today.

Come, Lord Jesus.

We long for peace.

We long for love.

We rise each day in hope.

We wait for you.

You are the bringer of hope.

You are the bringer of love.

You are peace.

Come to us, Lord Jesus.

Amen

During this Advent season our scripture readings have come from a different lectionary from the Revised Common Lectionary, which we generally use. The lectionary we've been using for these four weeks is titled *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church*, compiled by the Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney, who is a Black woman, though you might not guess that from her first name, Wil.

So, during these four weeks of Advent, we've been hearing stories of women. On the first Sunday our reading from Genesis 16 was the story of Hagar, Sarah's slave, who was stopped in her escape by a messenger of God who told her she was pregnant and would give birth to a son, who she would name Ishmael. The gospel reading that day was from Luke 1, the Annunciation of Mary, in which the angel Gabriel tells her that she will conceive and give birth to a son, who she will name Jesus.

On the second Sunday of Advent, we read from Genesis 17 the end of the story that begins with God's making a covenant with Abraham. This is where God renames Abram to Abraham, promises to make him the ancestor of a multitude of nations and that kings shall come from him, and tells him that the covenant he

is to keep is that all the males of his community, including the slaves, will be circumcised when they are eight days old.

And then, in the passage we read that Sunday, God continues, "As for your wife, Sarai," God then tells Abraham that her name will henceforth be Sarah and she will be the mother of nations and of kings. Abraham suggests to God that it might be more reasonable for all this to happen through Ishmael, but God says, no, Sarah will give birth to a son, to be named Isaac, and, though Ishmael also will be blessed with many descendants, God's covenant will be with Isaac.

From the gospel that second Sunday, continuing in the first chapter of Luke, we heard the story of Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth.

Last Sunday, the third Sunday of Advent, we started with a story from Judges of another woman who had not been able to conceive. Again, a messenger of God appeared and told her that she was pregnant and would bear a son, who would be raised for service to God. This child is Samson, who is destined to begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines.

The gospel reading was the powerful Magnificat of Mary, which in our lectionary translation begins, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior."

For today's readings, we've actually departed from *A Women's Lectionary*, where the Hebrew scripture passage would be 1 Samuel, Chapter 1, telling of the conception of and instructions regarding the child Samuel. This is substantially the same as the story of Samson. Instead, we read in Chapter 2 the prayer of Hannah, Samuel's mother, which has strong echoes of Mary's Magnificat.

And, the *Women's Lectionary* gospel reading today would be the story of the angel's appearing to Joseph in a dream and telling him, "It's okay, Mary's child was conceived by the Holy Spirit and will save his people from their sins." But

instead, we heard the genealogy of Jesus, from Chapter 1 of Matthew's gospel.

We will return to reading from the Revised Common Lectionary on Epiphany Sunday, January 5th.

If you open your Bible and read the first chapter of Matthew, you'll see that it's different from the genealogy we read this morning. The first sixteen verses of Matthew name the paternal genealogy of Jesus, all the generations of fathers and sons, from Abraham the father of Isaac down to Jacob the father of Joseph, who was the husband of Mary, "of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah." In the first several verses, some of the mothers are named, for example, "Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar" and, later, "David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah," Interesting that the wife of Uriah is not here called by her name, which is Bathsheba. Also not mentioned is the fact that King David arranged for the murder of Uriah so that he could have Bathsheba.

The version of Matthew 1 that we heard this morning "translates" the text and its begets by naming the wives and mothers. This version was written by Ann Patrick Ware, of the Women's Liturgy Group of New York. I'll read again the beginning of it.

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.

Megan McKenna says this about the genealogy in her book titled *Not Counting Women and Children: Neglected Stories of the Bible*.

"Jesus' genealogy traces Jesus' Davidic lineage through

Joseph, who is called 'the husband of Mary.' The genealogy overlaps with the very human realities of these people, going all the way back to Abraham. It shows the presence of God with these people, chosen through the covenant and the promises of the Messiah and the hope of justice and peace in the kingdom to come. ...

The genealogy is in itself a shorthand record of the history of the patriarchs and kings in their long wait for the one who is to come, and everything in history, the bad and the good and the mediocre, is woven into the reality that brings forth Jesus, the Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham, the adopted son of Joseph, the son of Mary."

In terms of taking a closer look at the women, the genealogy we read today is a good start. And, during these Advent weeks, we've heard stories from the Bible in which women are the main characters. However, it's clear that the most important people are the sons, and let us note that the great majority of those famous sons were warriors and kings of a very ordinary kingdom.

And let's also remember the women who are known for their own actions, on behalf of themselves and their people, women such as Ruth, Mary Magdalen, and the Samaritan woman at the well. No doubt their stories are read in *A Women's Lectionary* at other times of the year.

In most of our Western Christian traditions, the Samaritan woman at the well isn't named. But in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, she's known as Photine, which means "luminous one," or as Saint Photina of Samaria. In that tradition, just like Mary Magdalene, she is even given the title of "Equal to the Apostles."

We are still firmly in the grip of a patriarchal system – in our scriptures and in our present lives. But there is good news. The good news is that this system is not the reign of

God, nor of Jesus. The kingdom of God – and I use the word *kingdom* on purpose, although we usually substitute “kin-dom” – the kingdom of God that Jesus taught is vastly different from any kingdom his disciples knew, and also from any kingdom or government or political system that we know today. Jesus upended and overturned the systems of patriarchy, violence, enslavement, all the oppressive systems we humans have invented.

And what is this kingdom of God?

In Matthew 11, Jesus says, “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Matthew 11:4-5). This is the message that Jesus sent to his cousin John, by way of John’s disciples, when John was imprisoned by Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee and a son of King Herod, the one who was king of the Jews at the time of Jesus’ birth.

John, of course, was that miracle child of Mary’s cousin Elizabeth. And it’s interesting that the gospel reading for last Sunday, in the Revised Common Lectionary, about which Marjory wrote an insightful reflection for Inward/Outward, was the story from Luke 3 about John baptizing people in the River Jordan, and it begins with John greeting the crowds coming for baptism, saying, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”

Picture, for a moment, your Baptist minister standing waist-deep in the church baptismal font, or your Catholic priest, receiving the adult converts for baptism during the Easter Vigil – picture them saying, “You brood of vipers!”

Perhaps the real miracle here is that Jesus, the pacifist, the healer, the one who explained the kingdom of God with parable after parable – comparing it to seeds, yeast, hidden treasure, banquets given for all the excluded and marginalized people –

this Jesus, who blessed and broke bread and gave it to hungry people, and became our bread – perhaps the miracle here is that, after this Jesus was executed, his followers were so certain that he was the promised one, the Messiah, Emmanuel, God-with-us, the true king of God's kingdom – they were so certain of this that they had to connect him with the kingdom legacy from their scriptures.

Kristin Du Mez says, "Christianity is a faith centered on the incarnation, the greatest paradox. It is about divesting of power, not claiming power. Of emptying oneself. Of sacrificial love."

Kristin Du Mez is a professor of history and gender studies at Calvin University, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The daughter of a Dutch immigrant, she grew up in the Christian Reformed Church. In an essay she posted to Substack this morning,* she writes about a Christmas carol that dates to the seventeenth century and is not familiar to most of us who didn't grow up in that church. It wasn't until the late 1960s that the words were translated into English by Klaas Hart, a Dutch immigrant to Canada. Hart was a pastor in the Netherlands who became active in the Dutch resistance during the Second World War. After the war he served Christian Reformed churches in Ontario, Canada.

Come and Stand Amazed

A modern rendition can be found on YouTube.
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Friz6gPe9M>)

*Come and stand amazed, you people,
See how God is reconciled!
See his plans of love accomplished,
See his gift, this newborn child.*

See the Mighty, weak and tender,
See the Word who now is mute.
See the Sovereign without splendor

See the Fullness destitute.

*See how humankind received him;
See him wrapped in swaddling bands,
Who as Lord of all creation
Rules the wind by his commands.*

*See him lying in a manger
Without sign of reasoning*

*Word of God to flesh surrendered,
He is wisdom's crown, our King.*

*O Lord Jesus, God incarnate,
Who assumed this humble form,
Counsel me and let my wishes
To your perfect will conform.*

*Light of life, dispel my darkness,
Let your frailty strengthen me;
Let your meekness give me boldness,
Let your burden set me free.*

*Oh, Emmanuel, my Savior,
Let Your death be life for me!*

May it be so. Amen.

*[*https://kristindumez.substack.com/p/christmas-in-a-time-of-christian?utm_source=post-email-title&publication_id=847650&post_id=153206310&utm_campaign=email-post-title&isFreemail=true&r=21ttm&triedRedirect=true&utm_medium=email](https://kristindumez.substack.com/p/christmas-in-a-time-of-christian?utm_source=post-email-title&publication_id=847650&post_id=153206310&utm_campaign=email-post-title&isFreemail=true&r=21ttm&triedRedirect=true&utm_medium=email)*