

Preaching the Women of the Old Testament

Who They Were and Why They Matter

Lynn Japinga

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*To past and present members and pastors
of Hope Church, Holland, Michigan,
a gracious, welcoming, open-minded congregation.*

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Introduction

It is All Saints' Day at a Roman Catholic elementary school. The students are dressed up as saints and biblical characters. The boys dress as the twelve apostles, Joseph, Jesus, and Pontius Pilate. No two boys wear the same costume because they have learned about so many male religious figures. The girls are all dressed as either Eve or Mary because these are the only two female religious figures they know. The student who described this event wondered why she had not learned about women in the Bible who could be role models or examples for her faith.¹

After reading the story of Deborah, another student wondered why she did not learn about her in Sunday school. "It would have made me and other girls grow up so much more determined and powerful." She had been taught that women were either sinful like Eve or pure like Mary. She wondered why neither society nor religion could find a more realistic view, which acknowledged that women could be both virtuous and sinful.²

More than a century earlier, Elizabeth Cady Stanton also wondered why preachers did not talk about Deborah. "We never hear sermons pointing women to the heroic virtues of Deborah as worthy of their imitation. Nothing is said in the pulpit to rouse them from the apathy of ages, to inspire them to do and dare great things. Oh, no! The lessons doled out to women, from the canon law, the Bible, the prayer-books and the catechisms, are meekness and self-abnegation; ever with covered heads (a badge of servitude) to do some humble service for man."³

Every semester in my Christian Feminism course, my students and I spend several class periods talking about women in the Bible. The students are surprised to find stories of rape, incest, prostitution, and

murder. They are equally surprised to find positive stories about strong, talented, and faithful women. Some have regularly attended church and Sunday school or religious schools, and they wonder why they have never heard these stories before.

The obvious answer is that the stories are not being told. A quick scan of over two hundred sermons by contemporary preachers included only five that featured a biblical woman.⁴ Why don't preachers preach and teachers teach more about biblical women?

Lectionary preachers might claim that women rarely appear in the lectionary. It is true that many stories about women are either omitted or truncated; but it is also true that approximately twenty texts about women are used in the three-year cycle of Old Testament lessons. There are also occasions when the prescribed text could easily be expanded to include a woman's story.

Sometimes preachers and teachers bypass the stories about women because they think men will not be interested in them. Ironically, they assume that the women who make up two-thirds of most congregations are endlessly fascinated with yet another sermon on Abraham or Moses. If women can learn from the lives of men, why can't men learn from the lives of women?

Those unfamiliar with these stories often assume that they are uninteresting and not worth preaching. They might think that all biblical women do is have babies, whine, and manipulate men. My experience with these stories has been just the opposite. Students and parishioners find them fascinating. The stories may be strange and difficult, but they are also surprisingly relevant to contemporary issues of warfare, poverty, and justice. They provide a welcome alternative to yet another sermon on the Prodigal Son or the Good Shepherd.

Another reason for caution is that many of the biblical stories that include women are about sex, violence, or sex *and* violence. Some texts may not be suitable for Sunday morning, but there are other opportunities to present them, particularly in educational settings where conversation can occur. The rape of Tamar may not be appropriate for first-graders, but it is certainly relevant for everyone older than thirteen. Preachers might ask themselves why they are so reluctant to deal with sex and violence in the Bible. Our culture is permeated with sex and violence, and many parishioners are eager for some kind of biblical perspective on these issues. If the Bible can talk about sex and violence, perhaps preachers should be willing to do so as well.

The preacher who chooses to explore these texts faces some significant challenges. First, people know very little about women in the Old

Testament, and what they think they know is often wrong. The preacher often needs to deconstruct what people think they know about the text, particularly the stories about Eve, Bathsheba, Delilah, and Jezebel.

Second, preachers and commentators throughout history and down to today have read their own assumptions (and, often, their own prejudices) into the text. For example, in his commentary on the story of Sarah and Hagar, John Calvin describes Hagar as a stubborn, rebellious slave girl who did not appreciate the privilege of being pregnant with Abraham's child. Naughty Hagar ran away when she did not get her way. She was the sinner in the story. Yet Old Testament scholar Phyllis Tribble finds in the same text a very different story about a young woman who was forced into a sexual relationship with a man old enough to be her grandfather. She ran away because Sarah abused her. Tribble recognizes that Hagar was not the sinner but the sinned against.⁵

How do two authors draw such different conclusions from the same text? In part, interpretation is based on the author's social context. Calvin wrote in a time when slaves and women were supposed to know their place in the world and accept it without questioning. When Tribble wrote four centuries later, she was acutely aware of those who were oppressed because of their race, class, and gender. Preachers and commentators try to interpret the text in a way that makes sense in their own contexts.

We humans constantly seek to explain the mysteries and uncertainties in our lives.⁶ Biblical interpreters (commentators, teachers, preachers, readers) encounter texts that are strange, mysterious, offensive, contradictory, and weird. Jephthah killed his daughter, but he is named as a hero of the faith in Hebrews 11. God tolerated Lot's slow and reluctant departure from Sodom but turned Lot's wife into a pillar of salt when she looked back on her burning city. David forced Bathsheba into a sexual relationship and then had her husband killed to cover up her pregnancy, but David is considered the best Israelite king. These texts beg for more explanation, but the text itself does not explain; so commentators look for a way to resolve the tensions. Jephthah's daughter died willingly. Lot's wife disobeyed. Bathsheba seduced David.

Sometimes the Bible praises a character whose behavior is heinous, and then commentators tell a story that justifies their actions. Samson was an angry man who did not live up to his potential, but commentators blame Delilah for bringing this "good" man down. At times even God's strange behavior seems to need justification. Why did God tell Abraham to send Hagar away? She must have been a bad woman. Interpreters often want to tell a story in which God's actions always make sense and

biblical characters do not commit heinous acts. They want the Bible to correspond with their vision of morality and justice. They want to believe that the biblical heroes are indeed heroes. They want to believe that bad people are punished and good people are rewarded. So if Rachel has no children, it is because God has closed her womb. If Dinah was sexually assaulted, it was her fault. Unfortunately, the Bible's vision of morality and justice does not always correspond with ours.

Many of the stories we tell ourselves in order to make life less mysterious and threatening turn out not to be true—and thus wind up being destructive. The same is true in the way preachers have approached biblical stories. When interpreters misread the story of Eve and blamed women for sin, they contributed to centuries of sexism, leading society to view women as inferior and dangerous. When commentators criticize a biblical woman like Miriam for speaking out or taking initiative, their words have a chilling effect on contemporary women readers. The stories we tell ourselves about the Bible have extraordinary power, but they are not always correct.

In this book I explore the stories that have been told about the women in the Old Testament. In preparing it, I read a number of commentaries⁷ and often found helpful explanations and wise insights. A few commentators, however, told stories that said more about their own agendas and anxieties than about the texts themselves. They blamed women for men's sins. They made sweeping generalizations about female nature based on one woman's behavior. They filled in the gaps of the stories with elaborate imaginative description. Most of these emphasized women's weakness and sinfulness.

In the chapters that follow, I frequently quote from these commentators because they offer such vivid examples of how *not* to interpret the text. From Martin Luther to John Calvin to Abraham Kuyper to the journalist Edith Deen, I will show how readers of the Bible have too often offered problematic—and sometimes toxic—interpretations of the women of the Old Testament.⁸ All of these commentators were people of their time who wrote out of their own cultural and theological contexts. There is much to respect and appreciate in their work, but there is also much of which to be wary.

I am not without my own biases in my interpretation of these texts, and the stories I tell are also shaped by my own concerns. In the interest of transparency, here are some of the lenses through which I view the texts.

- People in the Bible are rarely entirely good or entirely sinful. They have mixed motives. The heroes of faith demonstrate tragic flaws; the sinful,

messy people demonstrate moments of grace and goodness. Even the people who seem profoundly bad (Delilah and Jezebel) might be honored as heroes by their own people.

- There are examples of sin and grace in these stories, but not always where we expect to find them. Rahab has often been dismissed as a sinful prostitute, but she was the vehicle of grace. Tamar (Gen. 38) has been labeled as a naughty woman who seduced her father-in-law, but she was actually the righteous one. Interpreters have often focused on the sin of sexual impropriety, while the text itself is more concerned with injustice.
- There are signs of strength and courage in these stories but they are not always immediately obvious. In the cultural context of the Old Testament, women were not educated and often not permitted to learn the Torah. They had few resources and little formal power or authority. Simply to take initiative or to speak up demonstrated a great deal of courage, even though it seems a minimal effort to modern readers. When Rizpah sat with dead bodies it was a powerful example of courage.

Reading Stories of Old Testament Women Today

Some commentators and preachers try to make sense of the text by discerning a moral lesson in the story. The story then becomes either an example of good behavior or a warning to avoid bad behavior. This strategy usually oversimplifies the story and underestimates the vast cultural difference between the Bible's time and ours.

It is more helpful to focus on discerning God's action in these stories. How is God being gracious? How is God bringing about *shalom*? How does God redeem human brokenness? How does God work through human beings to bring about God's purposes?

Some texts about women are so ugly and devoid of good news that they are difficult to read and interpret. Some feminist critics have even said these stories should not be proclaimed as the Word of the Lord. Perhaps the better approach is to ask where we find the Word of the Lord in such stories of human brokenness and sin.

At my church, following the reading of the Old Testament lesson, the reader says, "The Word of the Lord," and the congregation responds, "Thanks be to God." When I have preached on a difficult text, I'm sure that my intonation added a verbal question mark. "The Word of the Lord?" Can it be the Word of the Lord if it seems to approve of Jephthah killing his daughter or Hosea beating Gomer?

What does it mean to say that the text is the Word of the Lord? Some people claim that all parts of Scripture are inspired and infallible, but some biblical stories are horrible examples of human sinfulness. The “Word of the Lord” in this case is “Do not do it this way!” These stories are not meant to be imitated but rather challenged and critiqued. I believe that all the stories of the Bible, even the ugliest, should be taken seriously. They deserve our attention, our conversation, and our criticism. We can challenge and critique the stories without fear, because we care about the texts and respect them, even if we cannot agree with or affirm them. Wrestling with the texts shows that we trust them and God enough to talk back.

One way to approach the most difficult stories is to ask how we might write a new ending for them. One of my students played the role of Martha in Lillian Hellman’s play, *The Children’s Hour*. Her character shot herself out of despair at the end of the play. In a panel discussion after the play, I asked her how she dealt with the unremitting sadness and lack of hope and redemption. She said that she tried to write a new ending to the play. How might things have been different? Who could have intervened to change the course of action? Where might grace have been found?⁹

Those are wise words for difficult biblical stories as well. In the story of the rape of Tamar, for example, what might the characters have done differently? Rebekah tricked Isaac to get the blessing for her favorite son Jacob, but then Jacob left home and she never saw him again. How might that story have been changed?

The biblical stories function as a mirror to say something true about human experience, both in the ancient world and in the twenty-first century. They can be horrifying and depressing. People dominate, hurt, and abuse each other, both then and now. The stories also show people being courageous and graceful and resisting evil.

A final word on how to read and use this book: The extracted paragraph at the beginning gives the location of the story in the Bible. It also provides some information for preachers about whether the story is in the lectionary. I then briefly retell the story, usually in some dialogue with the commentators. Some texts, especially those that are more positive stories about women, have not sparked much discussion in the commentaries. Finally, I make some suggestions about possible themes or approaches for preaching the story. These are certainly not exhaustive and preachers and teachers will find many other ways to apply the text.

The book may also be useful for Bible study groups. The suggestions for preaching should then be read as suggestions for discussion about ways the text might be applied.

Chapter One

Eve

Eve appears in Genesis 2:18–4:2, and 4:25, although she is not named until 3:20. Parts of this story are used in the lectionary in Lent 1A, in 5/10B, and as the alternative reading in 22/27B.

Eve is second only to Mary the mother of Jesus as the most written about woman in the Bible, but authors come to radically different conclusions about her. She is described as both the culmination of creation and as an afterthought. She is portrayed as a flawed, stupid woman easily tricked by the serpent, as a seductive, conniving woman who tricked her innocent husband, and as an intelligent woman in search of wisdom.

The story of Eve is simple enough to be told in a children's picture Bible, but complicated enough to mystify commentators and theologians. The simple story sounds like this: God created the first man, Adam, out of the dust. Adam was lonely, even after God created the animals for him, so God took one of Adam's ribs and made a woman to be his helper. They lived happily until the serpent convinced her to eat the forbidden fruit, and she tricked Adam into sharing it. God drove them out of the Garden of Eden and cursed Adam with hard work and Eve with painful childbirth and subordination to Adam.

This version of the story has several errors, but it has still been used to define the roles of men and women in life, marriage, and the church. The author of 1 Timothy wrote: "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor" (1 Tim. 2:12–14). In the second century the philosopher Tertullian warned young Christian women not to flaunt their

beauty because it tempted men. He wrote: “Do you not know that you are [each] an Eve? *You* are the devil’s gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that [forbidden] tree. *You* destroyed so easily God’s image, man. On account of your desert—that is, death—even the Son of God had to die.”¹

These interpreters conclude that because Eve was second to be created and first to sin, all women are intellectually and spiritually inferior to men. Some feminists have told the story in the same literal way and concluded that the Bible cannot be a good book for women if it teaches that they are the “second sex.”

The story is actually more complex and nuanced. Genesis 1–3 is not intended to be a science textbook or a verbatim transcript of what actually occurred at the beginning of time. It is a story or poem that people recited to explain the origins of the world and humanity. In fact, Genesis 1–3 contains two different and conflicting creation stories. They should not be read as literally true in all their details.² Still, the details of the text should not be dismissed as irrelevant because the stories are embedded in our culture. Even people who do not read the Bible are vaguely aware of Adam and Eve and the apple.³

In a ground-breaking essay first published in 1972, Old Testament scholar Phyllis Trible offered a detailed retelling of the Genesis 2–3 story. She focused on the nuances of the Hebrew text itself, without the influence of the story that said women were secondary and sinful. She saw that God created a human being (*adham*), out of dust (*adhamah*). Later, after deciding that the “earth-creature” needed a partner, God put the *adham* to sleep, took out a rib, and built another human being. Both were made in God’s image. The woman was not fragile or weak or less intelligent than the *adham*. She was the culmination of creation, not an afterthought.⁴

Trible also noted that the relationship between the two was an equal partnership, not a leader and a follower or a master and a servant. The Hebrew word for help, *ezer*, usually refers to God’s strength and power, as in “Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth” (Ps. 124:8). If God was the help that was stronger than the *adham*, and animals were the help that was weaker, the woman was a help equal to him. She was not there to do his chores or raise his children, but to be an intimate partner, who saved him from loneliness. She was his equal, with the same mind, rationality, soul, spiritual sensitivity, and connection with the creator.⁵

The man delighted in the woman and they were naked, but not ashamed. They had a relationship of trust, openness, and mutuality.

Whether Adam and Eve were real people or not, the author says that in the beginning, human bodies and sexuality were good and valued.

Unfortunately, this openness and mutuality did not last. A serpent, one of God's own creatures, suddenly appeared and engaged in a conversation about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The woman said they would die if they ate from the tree. The serpent assured her that they would not die, but the tree would make them wise. She wanted to be wise, and the fruit was appealing; so she ate it and gave some to the man.

Some commentators conclude that Eve was gullible, stupid, naive, and easily seduced by the serpent. Ironically, they also say she was smart enough to trick Adam into eating the fruit since he was not present for the conversation with the serpent. Perhaps he was pulling weeds somewhere else in the garden. If he had been there, he would have nipped that conversation in the bud and saved Eve from a major mistake.

This is a popular interpretation, but it is not supported by the text. Eve gave the fruit to her husband *who was with her* (3:6). If Adam was intellectually and spiritually superior to Eve, why didn't he challenge the serpent? Why didn't he refuse to eat the fruit? Phyllis Trible pointed out that the man does not appear very intelligent or spiritually discerning in this story.⁶ The woman was thinking, questioning, and wrestling with the meaning of God's command. Adam said nothing, and when she gave him the fruit, he ate it without question.

Why was this so sinful? Were they disobedient? Arrogant? Proud? Or were they more like toddlers who were irresistibly drawn to touch the forbidden object? Was God an angry tyrant who set them up for failure?

These questions have intrigued theologians for millennia, but the text does not answer them. The point of the story is that everything changed. Adam and Eve obtained knowledge, but it was not what they expected. The first thing they knew was that the nakedness that once delighted them now made them ashamed. They feared the judgment of God and each other, so they sewed fig leaves together in a pitiful and itchy attempt to cover themselves.

Their fear of exposure involved more than their bodies. They no longer felt comfortable encountering God in an easy, familiar way, so they hid. God came looking for them, saw their fear and shame, and asked if they had eaten from the tree. The man blamed the woman and indirectly the God who had given her to him. She was no longer a partner; rather, she was the source of his downfall. The woman blamed the serpent.

The consequences were devastating. To the woman, God said, "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth

children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen. 3:16). This verse has been used to justify male dominance, privilege, and even violence toward women. It has been used to exclude women from leadership in church or government, because they must be subordinate to all men, not just their husbands. Women have been denied the right to vote, speak, and to be educated because of this verse.

Again, it is important to read the text carefully. The “curse of Eve” has been used to describe menstrual pain, labor pains, and the subordination of women, but God does not actually curse her. Still, life for women will change. They will experience painful labor, multiple pregnancies, and death in childbirth, but instead of refusing the sexual contact that produces pregnancy, they will desire men. This desire will cause emotional pain as well as physical. How often does a woman love a man who does not love her in return or is abusive to her?

The man experienced consequences in his vocation. The ground was cursed (though not the man), so the gardening that was originally pleasurable would be compromised by drought, tornados, and insects. Work would be hard.

Both shared equally in the most damaging effect of the fall. They lost the mutuality they shared in the beginning. All their relationships were distorted: with God, with their work, with their bodies, and with each other.

The creation that was so good in the beginning was now compromised by sin and brokenness. The two humans did not die immediately, but their lives were different and difficult. Adam and Eve experienced pain and loss. Their son Abel would be murdered by his brother Cain, who was then banished. They would never know the same kind of intimacy with God or each other as they had known in the garden. But there would be children, work, and a future of sorts. God would not abandon them. Life would continue in a different way.

Preaching

This text is challenging to preach for a number of reasons. At best it is overly familiar. What can be said that is fresh and interesting? At worst, the story carries a lot of baggage. It has been used to tell women that they are inferior beings who brought sin into the world. It has been used to promote a hierarchical (complementarian) view of marriage, which severely restricts women’s roles. In recent years, the trite phrase “God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve” has been used to dismiss

homosexuality as unbiblical. Reading this text in worship might provide evidence to skeptical listeners that the Bible is outdated, irrelevant, and even foolish. These are valid concerns, but there are a number of ways to approach the text that listeners might find more helpful.

Liberating Eve. A sermon might simply tell the story and note the misreadings of the text. Despite what many people have heard all their lives, this text does not say that women are secondary, inferior, or the cause of sin. The preacher might invite people to tell a new story about Adam and Eve that is more rooted in the text itself. It is also true, however, that the story that has been told about Adam and Eve is often influenced by deep (and not necessarily rational) fear about the power of women.⁷

Very good and very broken. This story illustrates the reality that the world and human beings were created to be very good. A sermon might explore what it means to be created in God's image, and whether that image is the same for men and women. Glimpses of that original goodness still exist, but all of creation has been bent or damaged. A sermon might explore the meaning of sin and the fall, although neither word appears in the text. Such a sermon could help people see themselves more clearly as capable of both wondrous good and horrifying evil.⁸

Ab, the humanity. Rather than emphasize the poles of good or evil, a sermon might focus on what it means to be human. We are limited, and much is beyond our control. We live with fear and doubt. We are lonely, sometimes in the midst of relationships. We have deep longings, for intimacy, for achievement, for clarity, for belonging. We want to make a difference. We want to be valued and appreciated. We want to be remembered. As we age, we realize our humanity and mortality in different ways. We get sick. We lose some of our abilities. We feel life closing in rather than opening up.⁹ The realities of fear, loneliness, and loss are often labeled as sinful attitudes that religious people must rise above, but they are not sinful so much as they are part of being human. A sermon offering grace rather than shame for being human would be a great gift.

Flesh of my flesh. The story demonstrates the power of intimate relationships rooted in commitment, trust, and vulnerability. We experience such joy when we find a person with whom we can be fully ourselves. To be naked with a partner and confident of being loved, admired, and respected is all too rare in a society that often shames people both for being sexual and for their imperfect and inadequate bodies. Marriage and family can be a place to celebrate the goodness of love and relationships.

Marriage can also be the place where human brokenness is most profoundly evident. Intimate relationships are hard work, and they require a

high degree of vulnerability and trust. It can be terrifying to be so close to another person, in part because our own fears and flaws become so evident. The preacher might use this story to reflect honestly about the joys and struggles of marriage. The text does not give advice about specific gender roles, but it raises broader questions of how flawed people live together. What are realistic expectations of marriage?

Adam and Steve. As churches debate the issue of same-sex marriage, it may be helpful to turn to this text. This story speaks of a man and a woman, but the dynamics of relationship are also true for two men or two women. It is human nature to long for a person with whom we can have a relationship of trust and intimacy, and yet we also struggle with our own insecurities. We waver between our desire for independence and connection. This text tells a story about what it means to be a human being in a relationship, with all its potential for brokenness and healing, sadness and joy.

The world was created to be very good, but we all know that the world is now a broken place. It is not the way it was meant to be. We live in a world with glimpses of goodness and overwhelming signs of evil. And yet, it is still God's world, and God is still creating, still gracious, still inviting human beings into relationship.

Sarah and Hagar

Sarah/Sarai appears several times in Genesis 11–23. Hagar is mentioned in Genesis 16 and 21. Sarah is identified as a role model in Hebrews 11:11 and 1 Peter 3:6. Hagar is named in Galatians 4:21–29, while Sarah is referred to as the “free woman” but is not named. The lectionary includes multiple stories about Abraham¹ but only two highlight the women. The lectionary omits the initial story of Sarah and Hagar in Genesis 16, but includes Genesis 18:1–15 on 6/11A and Genesis 21:8–21 on 7/12A.²

The story of the Israelites began when God made a covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12). God promised to bless Abraham with land and children if Abraham would trust God and move to a different place. Abraham did so, and became known as a heroic figure with strong faith in God. No matter how faithful he is, a man cannot father a great nation alone. Without Abraham’s wife Sarah and the other matriarchs who followed her, the nation of Israel would not exist.

God repeatedly appeared to Abraham (Gen. 12, 13, 15) and promised to give him land and offspring, but God did not address Sarah. It is possible that Sarah knew nothing about the divine promise that depended on her fertility. She did know that she had failed at the most essential task of womanhood in her culture: she had no children. Infertility was devastating, but it was even more painful because Sarah believed that God had prevented her from having children (16:2). Sarah had a plan. She took Hagar, her Egyptian slave girl, and gave her to Abraham. In that culture a woman could give a slave to her husband to impregnate and then raise the child as her own.³ Abraham agreed without hesitation, but Hagar was

not asked whether she wanted to spend the night with a man old enough to be her grandfather. Her desires did not matter.⁴

Hagar conceived but then “looked with contempt” (16:5) on her mistress. She was not respectful and subservient.⁵ She may have resented being forced into an unwanted sexual relationship, but she took pride in the fact that she was pregnant while her old barren mistress was not. Sarah resented Hagar and her fertility despite the fact that she initiated the process. Sarah blamed Abraham for her troubles with Hagar,⁶ but Abraham abdicated all responsibility to Sarah, who “dealt harshly”⁷ (16:6) with Hagar until she fled into the wilderness.

Hagar had been forced into a sexual relationship and physically abused, but she found the self-respect to stand up for herself. She refused to accept mistreatment. She ran away from domestic danger, but found that the wilderness was also dangerous for a young pregnant woman with no resources.

An angel of the Lord found her and called her by name, unlike Abraham and Sarah who repeatedly referred to her as a “slave-girl.” The angel instructed her to return and submit to Sarah. This is not the recommended solution to domestic violence, but it may have been the only realistic and safe choice. Perhaps to soften this heartless command, the angel offered the good news that Hagar would have many offspring. The angel told Hagar to name her son Ishmael, which meant “God hears.” The child would live a conflicted life, but both he and Hagar would have a future. This was a rare and remarkable divine promise to a slave woman who did not belong to the chosen people.

Hagar’s response is equally extraordinary. She gave God a name, “El-roi” or the “God of seeing,” because she had seen God and remained alive. Usually God names God’s self, because the one doing the naming has a kind of power over the one who is named. Hagar was the only person in the Bible who named God.

More than a decade later, God again appeared to Abraham with the promise of land and offspring (Gen. 17). God explicitly promised that Sarah would give birth to a son. When Abraham heard that his elderly wife would conceive, he “fell on his face and laughed” (17:17).⁸ Abraham wondered whether God was referring to Hagar’s son and said, “O that Ishmael might live in your sight” (17:18). God promised to bless Ishmael, but insisted that Sarah’s son would have the special relationship with God.

In Genesis 18, God and two divine messengers appeared to Abraham and said that Sarah would have a son. Sarah was listening in on this

conversation from her tent, and, like Abraham, she laughed. The men asked Abraham why she laughed. Finally, the Lord spoke to her directly. “Oh yes, you did laugh.” Was that said in a shaming tone that suggested she was a doubting, faithless woman? Or was it said matter-of-factly, recognizing the shock and the strangeness of the announcement? Did God understand that she might be a little stunned by this? Maybe God laughed with her.⁹

Finally after all the years of waiting, Sarah conceived and bore a son. She was elated and announced: “God has brought laughter for me” (21:6). Sarah had given up hope, and yet as an old woman, she nursed a baby named Isaac, which means laughter.

A few years later, when Isaac was weaned, Sarah’s joy had turned to suspicion, competition, and anger. Sarah saw Ishmael playing with Isaac. Commentators are not sure whether this was innocent play, or if Ishmael was mocking or harming Isaac. Sarah told Abraham to fix the problem. Abraham hesitated, but God told Abraham to do whatever Sarah said.¹⁰ God again promised that Ishmael would also become a great nation.

Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness with only bread and water.¹¹ He did not provide a camel, tent, servant, or supplies, even though he was a wealthy man. Their meager provisions were soon gone. Hagar could not bear to watch Ishmael die, so she laid him under a bush and wept. Once again, Hagar was cared for by an angel, who showed her a well of water. This sad story had a happy ending. Ishmael married an Egyptian wife and had many sons. God was present with them and Hagar and Ishmael prospered.

The text says no more about Sarah except that she died at the age of 127. When Abraham died at the age of 175, Isaac and Ishmael buried him with Sarah. The two sons with competing mothers shared their grief over the loss of their father.

Preaching

A long and winding road. This text is often preached as an uplifting story about the faith of God’s chosen people. Abraham and Sarah trusted God through a long period of infertility until God intervened and provided a son.¹² The story is much more complicated. Twice Abraham put Sarah at risk (Gen. 12 and 20). They waited decades for the promised baby, only to hear that Abraham should sacrifice him (Gen. 22). Abraham and Sarah were flawed and inconsistently faithful. They did not immediately understand the nuances of their call, and they made mistakes, but God continued to speak to them. Their uncertainties make them more human and relatable.

Blaming the women. Preachers and commentators often sympathize with

Abraham, but criticize Sarah and Hagar. John Calvin chastised Sarah for using a surrogate mother because it demonstrated her lack of faith and patience. He had even harsher words for Hagar: "In Hagar, an instance of ingratitude is set before us; because she, having been treated with singular kindness and honor, begins to hold her mistress in contempt." Hagar deserved punishment but refused to accept it. "Therefore, the woman [Hagar] being of servile temper, and of indomitable ferocity, chose rather to flee, than to return to favor, through the humble acknowledgment of her fault."¹³ It is difficult to envision how Calvin could consider it a "singular kindness and honor" for Hagar to be raped! He criticized Sarah for bringing a third person into the marriage bed, but assumed Hagar should consider it a privilege to be brought there.

Sarah has been criticized as impatient, jealous, and manipulative because she did not trust God and because her attempt to "help" God endangered her family.¹⁴ Her actions are actually understandable in light of cultural expectations. She was desperate to have a baby, not because she had a character flaw or a pathological desire for motherhood, but because she was nothing without a son. Sarah's real sin was that she mistreated Hagar. She took Hagar and gave her to Abraham. Then, when Hagar conceived, Sarah was angry and abusive. She used Hagar when it suited her purpose and then sent her away.

It is easy to criticize Sarah, but she treated Hagar as she had been treated. They were both trapped in a patriarchal culture. Neither woman had much autonomy, although Sarah had more freedom than Hagar. If they had worked together, and cared for each other, both of their lives might have been better.¹⁵ Instead, they competed and undermined each other. Sarah was the victim of oppression, but she was also the oppressor. She took and gave Hagar in the same way that she had been taken and given by Abraham. Hagar is not the sinner in this story but the sinned against.¹⁶

One of the painful realities of the feminist movement has been that while middle-class white women recognized their own oppression, they did not always recognize the ways they oppressed women of other classes or ethnic groups. White women in the South mistreated the slave women who worked for them. Middle-class women hired African American or Hispanic women as domestics, at times without providing adequate pay or respect.¹⁷ A sermon might explore the way that white privilege shapes relationships and assumptions. What is a responsible and just way to deal with power and privilege? How can women be in solidarity with one another?

A way out of no way. A sermon might focus on the experience of Hagar. She is at times dismissed as a bit player who only appears because Sarah lacks faith, but there is more to Hagar's story. She receives multiple signs of divine grace, even though she is a poor, enslaved woman who is not one of the chosen people. The grace comes later, however, and preachers must first deal honestly with the fact that the story of Hagar is what Phyllis Trible calls a "text of terror." Hagar and Ishmael were not treated well in this story by Abraham and Sarah or by God.

Hagar had a difficult life, but in the end God provided the resources she needed to survive and to make a way out of no way.¹⁸ Many women in the world identify with Hagar and her experience of poverty, oppression, violence, and homelessness. African American women in particular have been drawn to her experience of both suffering and God's presence in her life. This story can be good news for the people of this world who are struggling and feel that they have been abandoned.

Creative baby-making. The story of Sarah and Hagar could be used in an educational setting to discuss the ethics of reproductive technologies. In what ways are these technologies helpful and gracious ways to help infertile or same-sex couples have children? In what ways might those technologies be harmful? If a couple is infertile, should they simply accept that as God's will for their lives? Is conception in a petri dish contrary to "nature"? How much money should they spend trying to conceive? The story of Sarah and Hagar does not provide direct answers to these questions but offers a way to discuss them.

One family, three faiths. This story might be used to explore the relationship between the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Ever since the Crusades in the Middle Ages there has been tension between these religious groups. Each faith has claimed that God blesses only them and that they alone deserve power and privilege in the world.¹⁹

God chose Abraham and Sarah and the Israelites not because of their worth and not because God loved only them; God chose to bless the rest of the world through the Israelites. The full story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar (not simply the truncated lectionary version) shows clearly that God did not reject or punish Ishmael. In Genesis 16, God told Hagar that Ishmael would be a great nation. In Genesis 17, God told Abraham that although Isaac was the promised child, God would bless Ishmael and make him a great nation too. God chose to have a particular relationship with the Israelites, but God did not reject the rest of the world. Rather, the Israelites would be the means by which God would finally redeem the whole world.

This has not been easy for contemporary religious people to understand or to live out. At their worst, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have claimed an exclusive relationship with God. Each has attempted to give the other faiths a secondary status or no status at all. Extremists in each group have terrorized the others. The story of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Hagar, and Ishmael suggests a different reality. Divine blessing of one nation does not require divine cursing of others. God has enough grace and goodness for all.