

Women of the Bible (introduction)

Exodus 1:15—2:10

Luke 8:1-3

New sermon series for winter, which will take us through the season of

Lent up to Palm Sunday: the women of the Bible. We're going to highlight a number of Old Testament and New Testament women over the next few weeks.

We will talk about some of the women who follow Jesus, or have encounters with Jesus. And, we will study Old Testament women like Ruth, Esther, and Hannah.

We will look at some women who weren't identified by name, but whose story needs to be told, and their faith highlighted. And we'll look at one parable that Jesus told, in which the example of perseverance in faith is a woman.

The goals of this series are, first, to remember that many, many women played an important role in the story of God's people and in God's redemptive actions—both old covenant and new covenant. Because the Bible was written during patriarchal times, men are the focal point of most of the stories, and yet there is a great deal that is said about the role women played in God's salvation story too, and we often miss their part of the story *because... we haven't been taught to look for it.* Even as 'progressive' as we think we are today, we still read the Bible with eyes and minds that are trained to focus mostly on the male characters. So perhaps this sermon series will provide a little corrective vision.

This leads to another goal for this series: to help fill out the entire salvation story. Without looking at the role women played throughout history, we have an incomplete story. We need to talk about Esther and Ruth, especially, to discover that without them, the story is over before we even get to the New Testament! We need to talk about Mary Magdalene's role in the ministry of Jesus, and even how she may have influenced his life and teaching. Heidi will be preaching on Mary Magdalene in a few weeks. Jesus' mother Mary clearly influenced him.

Finally, this series (like any sermon series from any part of the bible, I would hope) will teach us how to live more faithfully and lovingly, as part of God's redemptive purposes in the world today. These women will show us remarkable spunk, and courage in the face of challenging circumstances, savvy, generosity, and a willingness to defy authority for the greater good; they'll teach us persistence, and of course faith in God, as we heard from the Exodus reading—all of those characteristics were on display in these women who knew God was up to something bigger, when they hid and protected baby Moses.

And along that line, of *all of us* trying to live more faithfully and lovingly, there will not be any criticism of men in this series. The goal is to elevate *everyone*. It's just that women's stories haven't been elevated the way we've needed them to be. In fact, starting next week when we study Ruth and Naomi,

we will see that the men in the story were just as courageous and honorable as the women.

Jesus never pitted genders against one another, and neither did the apostle Paul, as we'll see. We need each other, and we need to honor each other in order for everyone to thrive.

On to our text for this morning from Luke, as we begin with an overview...

What occurs right before this reading is, Jesus is at a Pharisee's house, and while reclined at table a woman begins to anoint Jesus' feet with her tears, and dry his feet with her hair. The Pharisees complain about it ("If he knew that she was a sinner he wouldn't let her do that") and Jesus tells a little story about forgiveness. Then, Luke tells us this:

Luke 8:1-3

Soon afterwards Jesus went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

This is the word of the Lord!

As I've said a few times over the years, context is everything when studying the Bible. Literary context, grammatical and language context, and so forth. But

especially cultural and historical context. Since the gospels and letters of the New Testament were written a couple thousand years ago, and even centuries before that when the documents of the Old Testament were written, without looking at the cultural and historical context in which the stories occur, it's nearly impossible to interpret a passage meaningfully, and practically.

So this morning I want to put our study of the women of the Bible in context—a little bit, at least, for now. This will apply mostly to the New Testament context, but some of it applies to the Old Testament as well.

And I'd like to begin by rewinding, briefly, to the Greek culture of 4 or 5 centuries before Jesus and the early church, to look at the view of women in emerging western culture. Western culture and society began, and was built upon, the ideas of the ancient Greek philosophers, so, to begin, here are a couple quotes from two of those famous philosophers:

Plato (5th century BC): "Do you know, then, of anything practiced by mankind in which the masculine sex does not surpass the female on all points? The one gender is far surpassed by the other in everything, and one must say the woman is weaker than the man." Really, Plato? Must one say that?? Here is Aristotle (4th century BC): "The male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male the ruler, and the female the subject." Alrighty, then...

And these are but two short quotes out of volumes of foundational teachings—not just from these guys but from other philosophers and leaders.

So here we have two towering figures in Greek philosophy who were influential in developing Western culture as we have known it—and this was their view of women. So, from the very beginning of western civilization, one strand of the DNA that formed western culture and society was the view that women are, by nature, inferior in everything.

Then add to that the Jewish thinkers and theologians, and the Jewish rabbis, who added a *theological* layer onto that by using their Scriptures and traditions to prove that women were inferior.

For example, let me read a prayer from an old liturgical fragment that is currently kept in a storeroom of historical documents in Cairo, Egypt. The prayer reads: "I bless Hashem ("the Name") who has created me a human and not beast, a man and not a woman, an Israelite and not a gentile, circumcised and not uncircumcised, free and not a slave." Jewish men from certain quarters prayed that prayer every morning. Some scholars have suggested that the apostle Paul was alluding to this prayer when he made this bold declaration in Galatians 3:28 that "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for all are one..."—all are equal—"in Christ Jesus."

For centuries, there was not a favorable cultural climate for women. Now it must be said that by the first century, the Romans—who had by then conquered the Greek empire, and assimilated much of Greek culture, yet who were more pragmatic and forward-thinking—had made some progress on the rights and role of women. 1st century Roman law permitted a woman to hold public office, to hold and transact property, to make a will (separate from her husband's), to give testimony in court, and other such things. That's progress, and it probably reflects the Romans' pragmatic & economic approach to society, even if, philosophically, they still didn't hold women in very high regard. Yet even with this progress, the Jewish religious establishment saw this progress as going *against* God's design, and continued to hold fast to the belief that women were inferior to men, and in some quarters even believed women to be religiously unclean by nature. Remember, women were relegated to a separate space in the temple away from the men, and their testimony in a religious court was always considered invalid. Perhaps this is why the disciples didn't believe the women's report about the empty tomb at first on Easter morning; they thought it was "an idle tale" as Luke puts it in his account.

And it's into this context that Jesus appears. And he not only has a number of women followers, as we heard, he raises them up as significant players in the

spreading of the gospel, which was unheard of in that day for a Jewish rabbi. This is Jesus, who also uses women as prominent figures in his parables. For example, “the kingdom of heaven is like a woman who works yeast into dough;” and, “the kingdom of heaven is like a woman who searches for a lost coin”—here, in both instances, Jesus uses a woman *as the God figure* in the story.

And not only that, Jesus affirms a woman with a hemorrhage who touches him *in public*, which according to Jewish law would have rendered him unclean, and would have sent her to the brig. His reaction is astonishing: instead of shaming her like a good rabbi should have, he tells her that her faith has made her well and blesses her to go in peace. And he in no way considers himself unclean because of the contact and encounter with her.

Jesus converses with a Samaritan woman in public (that’s a double border crossing there: she’s a despised foreigner, and she’s a... she), and Jesus even uses a feminine/maternal image to describe himself when he laments over Jerusalem (Matt. 23): “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God’s messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together *as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings...*”

To say the least, these actions and images would’ve been startling to many hearers, and scandalous to religious leaders.

Well, then comes the apostle Paul who, in spite of the reputation he has of being anti-women, names several women as leaders in the early church (like Phoebe for example, who he calls a minister); he greets women in all his letters, at least two women he calls prophets in the early church, and whenever he names a husband and wife as a couple, he puts the woman's name first, reversing cultural convention. For example, Priscilla and Aquila. I think this is Paul's way of saying, sort of subversively, that women are equal partners in Christ.

It needs to be said that the apostle Paul had a difficult task, of holding two realities together: of, on the one hand raising up women to equal status in Christ, in a culture that did not support it. And on the other hand, of not causing deep offense to new converts to Christ, or spiritual seekers who were listening in. You know, of not being so offensive to culture that the gospel couldn't get a hearing—especially among Jewish listeners.

Paul's greatest concern for the newly developing church, is the unity of the church, the body of Christ. He is concerned about the church's health and well-being and its mission, which means that while he is affirming everyone's equal standing in Christ, he sometimes makes cultural concessions in the name of maintaining order and unity in the nascent emerging church, which otherwise

would've come apart at the seams, or have been overcome by chaos, and then would not have gained a hearing for the gospel in its cultural context.

What Jesus brought, and proclaimed, in the gospel of the Kingdom, was so groundbreaking and mind-blowing that the first generation or two had a hard time adapting to new gospel realities, and this is a lot of what Paul struggled with in building up the early church. This is why his letters are so filled with admonitions to bear with one another, be patient with one another, forgive one another, and be accepting of one another, etc. He was not just encouraging them to have warm fuzzies for each other! He was saying, “I know this is hard, trying to break with cultural norms. But you need each other; you need to support each other; please stay unified, for your sakes, and for the sake of the gospel.”

So, in light of this, especially the cultural context of the time, if we look at the entirety of the apostle Paul’s ministry, and certainly Jesus’ ministry, it *actually represents progress for its time*. It’s a forward movement in its time. Some of it looks and sounds backwards to us *today*, but God—through Jesus, and through Paul, was actually moving people forward at that time in their view of women, and of many others in that culture, like children and slaves, non-Jewish believers, tax collectors, etc.

We heard in our reading from Luke that women not only followed Jesus, but they provided for his ministry out of their own financial resources. Many women provided homes and hospitality for Jesus and for the early church (which only met in houses back then) and several leaders in the early church were women. Read Romans 16 and see how many women the apostle Paul names as being important and influential in the development of the early church.

Now, having said all of this, there was pushback. Women's prominence did not go unchallenged. Just about every variety of early Christianity that advocated the legitimacy of women's leadership was eventually declared heretical, and much evidence of women's early leadership was either erased or suppressed by the destruction of documents, or by changing the text of original documents so they said something contrary to what was originally written.

For example, we have at least one Biblical instance where a woman's place in leadership was obscured by turning her into a man! In Romans 16:7, the apostle Paul sends greetings to a woman named Junia. He says of her and this other person named Andronicus that they are "my kin and my fellow prisoners, prominent among *the apostles*, and they were in Christ before I was." Now, concluding that women could not be apostles, early textual editors and

translators transformed Junia, a female, into Junias, a male. The chair Bible has a footnote about that.

In other cases, a woman's story was rewritten and alternative traditions were given. In the case of Mary Magdalene, starting in the 4th century, theologians in the west associated Mary Magdalene with prostitution, and they named her as the woman caught in adultery in John 8, even though John doesn't name the woman in that account, and it was assumed that Mary was the woman at the well who had "5 husbands" and so forth, even though, again, the text doesn't say that. The gospels never say that Mary was a prostitute, or even that she was a person of ill repute. Our text from Luke today tells us that Jesus healed her from demonic torment, but that doesn't say anything about her character. Many men were likewise cured in that day, and many of *us* could claim healing from psychological challenges of some kind. It doesn't make us bad people. It makes us beloved of God. But because women were thought to be, by nature, unclean or unworthy, alternative stories and traditions were often told about them.

Again, as we look at several of the women of the Bible over the next few weeks, one of the goals is to gain fresh perspective on the story of salvation, and gain some corrective vision because many people are still influenced *today* by

some of the damaging alternative traditions and bad interpretations of the Bible from long ago.

And, I would hope that we would be able to see these women as real, everyday human beings, like us, who struggled with many of the same things we all struggle with, yet who sometimes risked their lives and their reputations for the sake of others, and for God's purposes, whose compassion and wisdom often saved the day.

And I hope, as we go along, to connect some dots to women's stories and leadership *today*. Because, as I mentioned, as progressive as we think we are today, we still have work to do here and around the world, in overcoming barriers and correcting damaging worldviews and Biblical interpretations that keep women in a place of being disempowered and even violated in some places. And I hope to highlight some of the ways that a lot of good work is being done about that, here and around the world in our time.

With that in mind, let me leave you with a few sentences from the book titled *Half the Sky* by Sheryl WuDunn and Nicholas Kristof. The title of the book is taken from the Chinese proverb, "Women hold up half the sky." The book documents the great inequality and injustices against women around the world, especially in the developing world, and then tells story after story of the courage

and resilience of women, and how to maintain hope and continue to build just societies. Here is one little piece from the introduction:

“Concerns about terrorism after the 9/11 attacks triggered interest in women’s issues amongst an unlikely constituency: the military and counter-terrorism agencies. Some security experts noted that the countries that nurture terrorists are disproportionately those where women are marginalized. The reason there are so many Muslim terrorists, they argue, has little to do with the Koran, or with Islam, but a great deal to do with the lack of robust female participation in the economy and society of several countries. As the pentagon gained a deeper understanding of counterterrorism, and as it found that dropping bombs often didn’t do much to help, it became increasingly interested in grassroots projects such as girls’ education. Empowering girls, some in the military argued, would disempower terrorists.”

Half the Sky was written 16 and half years ago, so I don’t know where this stands today (at the Pentagon, specifically), but that’s really cool, and... it’s really smart: where girls and women are educated and empowered, society flourishes and we are all better off.

We’re going to sing a new song based on Galatians 3:28. It’s a baptism song, and speaks of the ground being levelled, as all are one in Christ Jesus.