

TELLING THE DEEP STORIES

FREEING THE SOUL AND RELEASING THE SPIRIT

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ABSTRACT

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Pioneer United Methodist Fellowship, in Anthem, Arizona, experiences a project using preaching and teaching as avenues for sharing deep stories. Ethnography serves as the project's methodology. Pioneer United Methodist Fellowship, a new church start, stands on the brink of closing. Pioneer tells a sad and discouraging story.

The project takes seriously sexism in the church as disabling both women and men. The project reimagines Biblical stories and offers images of the feminine nature of divinity. Legendary stories help reinvigorate the imagination, inviting people to share and reflect on their own stories. Reimagined Biblical stories give opportunity for people to reimagine their own story. Sharing meaningful stories frees the soul and releases the spirit because it puts people in contact with pain but also hope. Cathartic experience brings new energy and creativity.

Each chapter begins with a story that illustrates themes in the chapter. The work of Clarissa Pinkola Estés and Louis Ginzberg's *The Legends of the Jews* are two resources frequently used. I capitalize all pronouns used for the Divine Feminine.

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INTRODUCTION

The Story

She ran through the green hills, free from care, enjoying the company of the wild wolves who loved her. Small herds of cows spread over the grassy knolls around their playful path. She tended the herds with a kind of wild abandonment, always aided by her canine companions. Both wolf and cattle belonged to her and peacefully coexisted. Bridget was her name. Her mother came to her one day and said, "Daughter, you can't run the hills any more, the owner of the land forbids it. He demands that you come and live in his castle compound." Bridget, struck by the news, wondered how such an abrupt change was possible, but she obeyed her mother. The two of them walked away, leaving the herds tended by two men, who quickly frightened off the nearby wolves. They soulfully followed Bridget as far as they could. They howled as mother and daughter walked into their new abode. Bridget did not like the castle compound. She had no freedom to move or choose for herself. She was not use to these new ways and quickly took to meddling in the king's business even taking his prize sword.

Weary of her meddlesome ways, the king wanted her married off. The thought of a loveless marriage scared her, and Bridget begged her mother to take her away before this awful thing happened. Her mother had a plan. There was a very wise man, the oldest man alive, who agreed to take Bridget to live with him and others like him. They would teach her the old ways, the ancient knowledge. She would learn how to transform

the spinning world. The mother took Bridget from the castle compound. The king did not attempt to stop them, happy to let go of such a bothersome girl. Off the two went on a long and arduous journey to the land of the ancient wise ones. There, Bridget learned all there was about the power and magic of words, of weaving great stories, of singing and dancing new realities into being. New worlds and old worlds, her stories made all things possible. She grew into womanhood in the midst of such fertility.

Then a new force came into the land, a force from far, far away. It brought a fierce and foreboding group of men who wore long Red Robes. They forced everyone to choose to either adapt to their ways or face certain death. The king chose to adapt to the new ways. Those who lived on his land and tended the herds also adapted. However, the ancient wise ones refused. The weavers of the stories would not sell out, even upon their certain death. Their stories had to survive. Then one dreadful day, the Red Robes came to the place where Bridget lived. The wise ones, knowing their own fate, pleaded to save Bridget's life. Seeing that she was a rare and exceptional woman, the Red Robes agreed to take her and teach her their ways. Though not wanting to go, the wise ones begged her until she reluctantly went. As she rode off, she witnessed the old wise ones' death. The Red Robes brought her to a village and put her in a small indoor dwelling. Forbidden to leave, the Red Robes sternly told her to forget her old stories and songs. They taught her a new story and a new song. The story seemed strange and meaningless. They gave her no room to move, dream, dance, or wonder. She could not use her imagination nor envision new worlds. Worse than the captivity of her body, her soul suffered from the lack of imagination around her. In such imprisonment, her spirit languished.

For a long, long time, she dwelled in this darkness. For reasons beyond explanation, Red Robes came from miles around to see her...celebrating her as a symbol of their dominion and power of persuasion. All the while, her spirit mourned, the place of her imprisonment grew wealthy and large. Unbeknown to all, a secret laid in the heart of Bridget's prison.

Though languishing, her spirit would not die because an eternal fire that burned. Lit not long after Bridget arrived, those who understood her as keeper of the old stories tended the flame. Those who believed in the light of free imagination and spirit, kept the flame burning. For those who could not see, the flame did not exist. Soon, things reformed as things always do. Conflict consumed the people of the Red Robes. Eventually, destruction came to Bridget's prison.

Though Bridget's body perished within those walls, her spirit found freedom. Bridget's spirit sprang from the prison walls. Like the fire of the imagination, it created new visions. These visions swirled like the smoke from the fire, continuing to burn, stoked by those who honored her. Visions drifted mysteriously through the valleys and hung around the green hills. The wolves howled, sensing she was near. Bridget, it seemed, came home once again to her beloved land. Along the refreshing spring water and the ancient paths, new generations of people wandered and felt the presence of something new, yet very old. Perhaps they served as the visions' fertile womb within whom the Goddess Bridget was born anew. Her Divine presence filled people's hearts with stories meant to free their soul and release their spirit. Devotion to her was wider and larger than ever before. Perhaps people felt transformed by her freedom of spirit.

Who knows, maybe we can too, if we but hear the deep stories told of old. (A story reimagined about Bridget of Kildare)

The Area of Concern

Sexism in churches and its effect on women concerns many people. In the newly released *The Shriver Report, A Woman's Nation Pushes Back from the Brink* (2014), a contributing author Sister Joan Chittister writes, "...women make up two-third of the hungry...two-thirds of the illiterate...two-thirds of the poorest...That's not an accident. That is a policy -- one supported by religious institutions that call such discrimination 'women's place and 'God's will'" (Shriver and Center for American Progress 2014, loc. 743).

Where there is sexism, there is also the potential for abuse. Steven R. Tracy wrote an article in the *Journal of Evangelical Theology Society* (2007) called "Patriarchy and Domestic Violence, Challenging Common Misconceptions." Tracy described a survey he conducted in Maricopa Country, Arizona. He studied 1000 battered women. He found that 67 % of them attended church. One third of those attendees sought help from their pastors, but only one third of them received it. He concluded that patriarchy can and does contribute to domestic violence. He called upon Christians to listen to Feminist research and start addressing the issue (JETS, 573-594).

I know of several churchwomen who have not encouraged their daughters or granddaughters to attend church with them. I asked one of them why her daughter did not often come to church. Her reply described a man in the congregation who snapped

the back of women's bras on Sunday mornings. In another church, I asked the same question to another woman who supported the church. She shared her concerns about the lead usher who often lost his temper on Sunday mornings, yelling and throwing things. She said, "That is not the church experience I want my daughter to have."

America has entered a new stage of feminism. It has entered a new world of woman's independence. Recently, the Pew Research Center (2013) has revealed that 40% of households with children have woman as the dominant breadwinner. The Center for Disease Control (2013) reports 40% of babies are born to single women. The Institute of Education Sciences (2013) reports the growing number of women graduating from college and graduate schools. Will the pace of women's progress in general society outpace the church's progress?

Women see themselves today in ways that appear to outpace the church's ability to change its outdated views. Few single mothers want to come to a church where the model for her is one of submission. With today's opportunities for women, the church may ask itself if they provide role models and resources that encourage self-actualizing women. When a family with a young daughter started to come to my congregation, I asked them why they chose the church. The father answered that they wanted a place where their daughter could view strong women. He referred to me in the role of a senior pastor.

As gender equality increasingly becomes society's expectation, and women's power becomes more commonplace, older women are finding themselves straddling an open fissure on the ground on which they stand. Their daughters and granddaughters

engage in society and the church differently than their mothers. This phenomenon has shown itself to me in Bible study groups. Some women still believe in the family where gender defines roles. In a Bible study, I heard a woman say, "I have lived according to the traditional family, and I know others who do as well. It doesn't need to change." A few minutes later, another woman much younger said, "I don't know anyone who lives like that anymore. It has already changed."

Naming the Hurt

We do not always choose the topics that command our attention. Often they choose us, dictated by the age in which we live. Baby Boomers represent a generation that transformed gender roles. In that changing environment, many women have catalogued a plethora of experiences about sexual abuse in the home, in family, in school, in the work place, and in churches. Every woman understands the transformation and its impact, whether or not they agree with it.

Understanding sexism, experiencing the awakening of consciousness, and watching women search for equality indicate a good start. Society and churches can find opportunity to go further. To do so, we may want to acquaint ourselves better about the abusive nature of sexism. It consistently commits violence against women. Sometimes personal experience gives one eyes to see this violence. Rape, stalking, domestic violence make up part of many women's history, along with bullying, less pay for work, the butt of sexual jokes, and physical intimidation.

Being silent about its presence in the church has led to the assumption that if you do not speak up, it does not exist. Not being able to speak up indicates the trauma of it is

still real and continuing. One cannot name the injury when one is still reeling from its pain. Naming the hurt moves people toward healing.

Naming it has happened. The Seventh International Conference on Women held in Beijing, China, exposed the underbelly of sexism to the world. Women from all parts of the world, many from poor and oppressive societies, felt free not only to speak up, but also to find ways to change their lot in life. Naming enables people to take transformative action.

The International Conference on Women resulted in a large ongoing study on the future of women conducted by two researchers. They tracked certain global trends and their effects on risk factors. They used the research as a way to predict possible futures for women. Pamela McCorduck and Nancy Ramsey, in *The Futures of Women: Scenarios for the 21st Century* (1996) used economic, political, religious, and social trends, to examine possible effects on women over future decades. The ongoing study continues to update as global megatrends change. The authors expect to release an updated book soon. The researchers have named conservative Christianity, as well as other conservative religious traditions, as an institution that can violate women's rights and wellbeing. As conservative religion gains influence, women's wellbeing deteriorates (McCorduck & Ramsey, 29, 37). Increasingly media and the public discourse identify Christianity in its conservative, traditional form, so that this naming becomes a label for Christianity itself. It seems bizarre but true that Christian faith is a risk factor for women.

Seeing the horrific side of sexism may spur Christians to hold themselves accountable for their negative influence on women's wellbeing. None of us wants to see

something horrific. In the same way that keeping people in poverty is an act of violence, so is keeping women from full equality. To see the violence in both poverty and sexism requires the ears to hear the story. We can learn to hear about the traumatic effects of sexism. Because people never tell the story of abuse in the parlor room, one must move to the safety and comfort of the kitchen. Can the church move from supporting sexism to offering a safe place where stories are shared and healing happen, or will women continue to grow suspicious of the church?

Development of a New Sight

The Barna Group has been doing research in church demographics for a while. Perhaps the canary in the mine came into their view first. Women started to back away from the church and take their families with them, according to the Barna Group (Barna Group 2011). They documented what local churches already knew: young families stopped coming in the doors.

Further understanding of this phenomenon continued with Diana Butler Bass in *Christianity beyond Religion: The End of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (2012). By gathering a variety of the church research over the past decades, she focused on the plight of American churches and described it in clear language. On any given Sunday, only 14-22% of Americans go to church (Bass, 816). Although many factors contributed to this decline, sexism may be an important one. Citing many other abysmal statistics might lead one to believe that this is a pessimistic book. Far from it. It cheerfully describes the Awakening of a new spiritual reality, finding expression outside

the traditional church (Bass, 3391-3301). Bass talks about an Awakening due to a change in perspective and outlook that spiritually moves human beings (Bass, 3412).

As people move out of the church, many secular men and women, receive spiritual sustenance from New Age practices. These practices often accept alternative image of the woman as independent and images of the divine as feminine. Such practices include meditation, chanting, aura readings, channeling, and practice of native spirituality. Surprisingly, some of the people involved in these practices also continued in the church. A second-generation church organist told me that she goes to church because of both her friends and her job. Raped as a teenager, abused by two husbands, she found help not from pastors, but from spiritual resources outside the church. In this particularly church, many women found their spiritual care in New Age practices much more than inside the church.

People have shared with me their stories about experiencing abuse in the church. A laywoman confessed to me that the church custodian often asked her to sit on his lap. She hated herself for obliging. She then talked about her abusive father. This custodian's behavior brought those unresolved memories back. She eventually moved away from the church. A laywoman and clergywoman shared with me their concerns about the bullying behavior of a clergy colleague. One said, "I can't believe he was put in such a position of authority. How do we deal with him?" A colleague suddenly took early retirement. A stalker preyed on her while she served a church. Although she repeatedly asked for help, she received none. She had to stop ministering to protect herself and her family. In another church, male lay leadership prevailed. When the

pastor tried to recruit women into leadership roles, she soon heard why they would not serve. As one woman said, “I don’t like the way some of the men treat women. I don’t want to have to work with them.”

While conversing with a male colleague about the lack of resources available to pastors dealing with sexism, he asked, “Where are the role models?” That question began a quest to look for role models and tell their story as pastoral practice.

The Role of Deep Story

In the early 1990’s I read Clarissa Pinkola Estés book *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (1992). It opened up the world of women’s power through the myth and folklore. As a senior Jungian analysis, she suggested adding a new archetype to Carl Jung’s line up: the Woman Who Runs With the Wolves who writes the meaningful stories from the bones of the past... the myths, the legends, the tales that transform the psyche. In her recent book, *Untie the Strong Woman* (2011), she named the power behind the archetype, The Divine Feminine. She told stories of people’s experiences with Her.

In this dissertation, I used Estés term Divine Feminine as she does, as archetype in myth and human psyche and as content of religious experience. I broadened it to include theological talk about God as Mother, and historical references to goddess in the ancient world. Located in archetype, in religious experience, in theology, and in history, the Divine Feminine is the feminine aspect of a singular deity of Ultimate Concern for people. In my quest to find stories with role models for a new generation of women, my search took me to these locations. The stories I found connected them.

Where New Growth Takes Root

I began to include religious tales about women and feminine qualities of divinity in my ministry. The dialogue they provoked showed that people had interest in them. One woman with great enthusiasm said, “Are they teaching this in church now? If so, I need to go back.” Another woman said, “Where do you preach? I want to go to your church.” Another said, “I can’t believe that I am finally hearing a pastor say these things.” A man said, “Where did you get these stories?” I saw spiritual awakening and hunger for history, definition, and understanding of the feminine divine images.

I also began to integrate some new resources into my preaching and teaching. The resources, not generally used in churches, included Nag Hammadi texts, Dead Sea Scroll texts, *Legends of the Jews*, Jewish mystical text, and apocryphal works. People responded positively. Even the more conservative and traditional people willingly opened their minds to new resources for instruction and inspiration. They could see and understand the viability of them. I saw congregations start to change in part, I believe, because of these resources and the new story they told.

Power of New Roots

I state the problem and opportunity like this: sexism in Christianity may cause the church to lose members because the traditional root of male authority cannot nourish folks who have awakened to a new view of women and feminine images of divinity. Yet, spiritual awakening, nourished by feminine images of divinity, grows and bears fruit outside the church. Can Christianity find access to the new images of women and the

feminine images of the divine among its own roots? The answer is yes because those stories exist in Scripture and history, but it takes the perspective offered by legends, folklore, non-canonical texts, and ancient culture to bring it into focus. Though many people consider legends and non-canonical text invalid as a source of teaching Scripture, they may help people find different glasses by which to view Scripture that makes these different images prominent. They are a useful tool.

The archetypal stories told by Estés and women's process of healing offers a model. People's souls are bound and their spirits limp from lack of nourishment require in today's context. The Biblical root system contains elements of the new images of the Divine, appearing feminine, but we do not draw from their nourishment. Rediscovering those roots and taking in their nourishment will free the soul and release the spirit.

Traditional Christian interpretations of Biblical stories are not only predominately male, but also extremely myopic and narrow. Can Scripture offer stories of women as independent and self-actualizing, as a primary driver, not a secondary recipient? Those stories can alter images of divinity giving it more feminine characteristics. The stories and images can transform stories of both women and men.

The underpinning of this project speaks and hears The Word in Scripture that offers feminine images of the divine and that reimagines Bible stories that promote people to reimagine their own story. Their telling can bring transformation to the local church and gives it new viability in a new century.

CHAPTER ONE

NARRATIVE OF OPPORTUNITY

The Story

They call him Coyote, this scarecrow of a man who the villagers regularly laugh at. He likes playing the fool. That is enough for him. He is the man that people tolerate because he plays the comic in their harsh lives.

Now, the villagers have a festival every fall before corn harvest. Though honored all year long, the Maize Goddess receives most worship at this time. They feast and dance near the large fields of mature corn because the power of the Earth Goddess, the Mother of them all, reigns supreme there.

Very early in the morning the villagers gather near the fields, bringing their wagons full of children and cakes, drums and flutes. They build large fires and the women start to cook. Each person wears their most brightly colored shirts and wraps themselves in shawls with designs of maize woven into them. As the sun sets, the food is ready and people feast. The Fool, as always, watches as others work. His appetite grows eager to do what he is best at: having fun.

As the stars come out so do the drums. As the beat begins, the flutes merge with them in melodic timbre. Soon people's feet begin to tap. One by one, people get up and move to the Maize dance, celebrating their inclusion in the family of Mother Earth. On

the outskirts of the dancing circles, the cornfields ready for harvest stand mighty and full. Standing closest to the fields, Coyote dances by himself. He dances faster than anyone else does. He dances with crazed abandonment.

As dawn approaches, the music slows and the dancers finally stop. The people wearily load their wagons and head back to their homes, preparing for the arduous task of harvest. As Coyote watches each family leave, he hears the thump, thump of the wagon moving over the rocky road. He hears, the clank, clank of the pottery bowls rattling inside the wagons. He hears the wind stirring the tall corn into an orchestra of strings. His foot starts to tap with the beat. His arms wave with the wind. As the last wagon pulls away, the Fool breaks into a state of ecstasy. The dance of the Mother does not stop. The dance of life continues. The Fool enjoys Her embrace the most (retelling the story of *Coyote*, Estés, 2010 b, disc 2).

Genesis of Pioneer United Methodist Fellowship

If one travels about twenty-five miles, north on Interstate 17 out of Phoenix, Arizona, one would come to the rural community of New River, just south of Black Canyon City. In this unincorporated edge of Maricopa County, people live the pioneer life of Arizona, wanting very little interference from regulation or authority. Its houses pop up wherever one chooses to build. Water comes from personal wells. The roads are made of dirt, never maintained, often unusable, and the potholes are something about which people brag. Its desert landscape remains untarnished, with large cactus dotting the foothills that break into the skyline.

In celebration of the Arizona pioneer life style, the community developed a Pioneer Village as a tourist attraction, with buildings and costumes celebrating frontier life. In this Village stands a small chapel, capable of holding only 20 people. Seventeen years ago, a United Methodist woman who lived in New River had an idea. Tired of driving so far to attend church, she asked the people in charge of the Pioneer Village if she could hold services at the chapel on Sundays where the tourists could enjoy worship. They agreed. She found a cowboy singer and preacher to conduct the worship. Several New River folks attended regularly. However, many visitors thought the worship was not real, but just part of the virtual reality of Pioneer Village.

These earliest participants liked having a UM worship nearby, but attendance was held to seven or eight regular people. Because of low attendance, the congregation decided to move worship to the small senior center in New River. However, they kept the namesake of their original place of worship, Pioneer.

Then, a huge change came to the area. Del Web built an award winning planned community right in middle of the New River area. People of New River fought the development, but could not stop the outward expansion of the metropolitan area of Phoenix. The development called Anthem received national awards as a planned community. It represented everything contrary to New River values: planned, regulated, and organized with an eye to the future. It included bike paths, walking trails, open areas, a large swimming pool and waterpark, and a huge recreation center with a climbing wall, a gym, classrooms, and tennis courts. This was a community built for the twenty first century.

Designed to include both high-end homes in gated communities with golf courses, and more affordable housing outside the gates, the amenities were for all to use. It boasted of being family friendly, with several elementary schools, a high school, and several private schools. Shopping centers and later churches finally filled out the original plan. Houses sold quickly. The walls around Anthem excluded what remained of New River. Now, Anthem dominated the area. New River was barely a bump in the road.

Although the original Pioneer folks hated Anthem, they finally decided to move worship to a storefront located there. Having now developed a relationship with the Desert Southwest Conference, a part time lay pastor served the basic ministerial role. He would be the first of a long list of lay pastors. In a fast growing community, the fellowship started to grow in the storefront. About six years ago, Pioneer decided to move to a new elementary school in hopes of attracting young families. The school was located in a community just south of Anthem called Tramanto.

Tramanto was the third part of this community to develop. It sat at the crossroads of Interstate 17, going south to Phoenix and north to Flagstaff; and Carefree Highway, going to Lake Pleasant to the east and Carefree to the west. Because of the success of Anthem a mile to its north, it made sense for Phoenix to annex Tramanto. It started developing the area, starting at the northern boundary of Tramanto. The pace of development moved very quickly even through the recession.

Residents identified with Phoenix and always drove south for services. Tramanto could afford to ignore Anthem as Anthem had ignored New River since Phoenix had not yet annexed it. However, though worship moved into the elementary school in the

newest and fast developing area, not everyone was happy. The congregation lost participants. It also lost the storefront location that, though rented, had a permanent place to conduct business. The spurt of growth it saw at the storefront evaporated. It never regained that momentum.

In the meantime, the Conference continued to supply Pioneer with part time lay pastors. The fellowship could never grow large enough to support a full time Elder with benefits. Therefore, it limped along the best it could. The faithful ones endured while others came and went. Development was truncated. Other churches in the area did grow, however. Though no mainline protestant churches were established, several evangelical churches grew large in both Anthem and Tramanto. In the past five years, a large Roman Catholic Church and a Mormon church completed construction in Anthem. The only other large church in Anthem was a Missouri Synod Lutheran. Several small Bible churches meet in the New River area. The church landscape was generally traditional and conservative. None of them accepted women pastors except for Pioneer.

Changing the Story

My story with the community began before my story with Pioneer. I bought a home in Anthem when I was serving a church 20 miles away. I loved the community. Even during the time of a church appointment further out of town, I kept my home in Anthem as a primary residence.

Then for family reasons, I asked the Conference to appoint me near to my home, and they assigned me to Pioneer. I had no opportunity over the seven years I lived in

Anthem to become familiar with the Fellowship. I knew vaguely that Pioneer was there, but it was off most people's radar. If my affiliation with the Conference had not informed me about Pioneer, I would never have known it existed at all. I remember one of its lay pastors, who asked me how to build up the congregation. I thought I understood the difficulty she faced. Every church faced the same problem. However, I never appreciated the depth of the problem at Pioneer until the first month I conducted worship with them: average attendance was 22 people and most of them were over 70. How was that possible in such a new and growing area?

Trained to visit the people, I went around to people's homes and talked to each of them personally. I quickly discovered that the congregation came from all three communities equally: New River, Anthem, and Tramanto. Each of these communities had very different characteristics from the other. The differences appeared in the personalities of the congregants I visited.

The compelling memory of these conversations form the common story I heard about Pioneer, with every version sadly told. The discouraging story had little happiness, no success, and dwindling hope. One person said, "We are not taken seriously by the Conference." Another person says, "Before you came we only got lay pastors. They tried their best, but they cannot help us. Besides they never stayed long." Still another said, "People are so discouraged. No one wants to take a lay leadership position. No families want to come because there are no kids." Another person said, "We have moved around too much. No one knows where to find us. We have no place to meet through the week." Yet another person said, "We have no leadership and no one seems to care."

The people told these stories with great sadness, which really struck me. The sadness seemed to stem from something other than the issues they raised. Then I heard the profounder story. “The Conference wants to close us.” “The Conference will never close us.” “The Conference will close us in a year or two.” Another person says, “Why do they want to close us down? Why don’t they help us instead?” The original members refused to let the Conference close them. Newer members were willing to let it go and believed that it would close soon one way or another. Pioneer dangled in the wind, barely hanging on.

Up to this point, Pioneer stubbornness prevented its closing. They could not keep pastors. They could not keep people. They told a sad story not just to me in the privacy of their homes, but on Sunday mornings to each other loud enough for others to hear. “We can’t attract young families.” “Nobody wants to teach Sunday school.” “Visitor’s come, but they don’t come back.” “We can’t get anyone to help set up.” “We can’t grow.” “The conference wants to shut us down.” The people’s despondency was remarkable. People seemed frightened, timid, weak, and angry. When I asked them what I could do for them, they all generally agreed, “Preach and teach. We don’t get many ordain clergy here.”

Yet in spite of it all, some people in the fellowship knitted shawls for the sick, collected food for the homeless, and had an ongoing albeit small choir that not only sang every Sunday, but also joined other churches to perform Cantatas for Christmas and Easter. They continued to set up every Sunday for worship in a school gym, an arduous task for any congregation, and always had a Sunday school for children, even if no

children attended. The work for these ministries rested upon the shoulders of just a few. They were the original people, the ones with the original vision, the Pioneers of New River.

Faced with such a traumatic situation, I did what every experienced pastor does: I counted on my experience. Since I had been involved with teaching and preaching from nontraditional stories with good results, I believed that I could rely on those tools. As I talked to people who later became part of the Lay Advisory Committee, they eagerly requested I bring my A game to preaching and Bible study. These basic ministerial functions from an Elder never existed at Pioneer. Because of the extraordinary weakness at Pioneer, I had to hit the ground running.

I planned a Bible study specifically with reimagined stories of women and new images of the Divine. The reimagined Bible stories claimed unusual status for women. I planned sermon series shaping new perspectives on Old Testament stories and New Testament stories about Jesus. Both the study and the sermons I grounded in scholarship and taught through story telling. A person who later served on the LAC said to me, “Pioneer people love stories. They will have many of their own to tell.” Her comment encouraged me. Pioneer floundered like a fish in shallow water. The plan would bring them to new and spiritual waters where they could thrive. The project used the basic tools of a minister, preaching and teaching the Word reimagined as the Word from God as Mother. I believed that this other side of the Gospel story could bounce a dying church away from its apparent fate. Could telling the story with images of the feminine produce the level of transformation required? The people at Pioneer wanted a new story

to tell and live out. I could retell the Gospel story in a new form. I could make it one they could identify with, but which would serve as the fulcrum to change their sad story to one of hope.

The one fact I knew for sure was that Pioneer was a patient in the ER. Was it too weak? Could anything really make a difference? Clearly, the people were traditional, not willing to adapt to new ways. Yet, they had consciousness of their own sad story, which motivated them to try something new. Desperate people will venture beyond their comfort zone to save themselves. I sensed a willingness to go into the wilderness. When I talked to two people who later served on the LAC, they expressed great enthusiasm for the preaching and teaching ideas. “The people of Pioneer are hunger. They will love it.” Most importantly, the people put their faith in my leadership. I wanted them to succeed.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL ROOTS AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

The Story

Dirt poor, but still the women bore children. The people burdened society. More mouths to feed. They drained the resources of their adopted country. The promise, made to Asenath, daughter of powerful Potiphar, was not sustainable for so many people. They had to pay their own way. Work projects for the poor were the solution. Make them work for the divine Pharaoh who fed them and gave them a homeland.

So, work they did... these people of the immigrants. They did public work projects, building the cities of the Pharaohs. Yet, through all the hard work, they still procreated. The number of them scared Pharaoh and he did not trust them.

Working them harder and harder did not seem to alter their fecundity. What would work? Pharaoh had an idea: split them up, the men from the women. There was the solution. Make the men go out into the fields to get the straw from which they make their bricks. It served as an easy birth control method. A leader lived among the Hebrews, the priestess Miriam. She listened to the complaints of her people. None sounded as loud and anxiety ridden as the complaint about the new directive. "Must the men leave?" "How can Pharaoh split up our families?" "Our sons and daughters need their fathers." "This isn't right." "This isn't human." The men had no choice but to follow the directive. Into the fields they went. The men hardly ever came home now,

and when they did, they were exhausted. A blanketed stare in men's eyes told the truth: their soul paralyzed and their spirit gone.

Miriam had an idea, an idea to brighten the eyes of the men and give hope to the hearts of women. One morning she told the women to gather three things: a mirror, a blanket, and a piece of dried fish. When all assembled, Miriam led the women into the fields. Each woman found her man. As the man sat on the blanket and ate the fish, the woman looked in the mirror, combed her hair, and wiped dirt from her face. She groomed herself and as she did, she flirted. Flirtation worked. It did not take long before the blanket covered the pair in the climatic aftermath of their desire.

The number of new births rose even higher. Miriam, as the lead midwife, thanked the Great Mother who both arched over the sky, and bellied up from the earth. The blessing of desire came from Her. Miriam and her people celebrated.

Pharaoh did not celebrate. His anxiety heightened as news of the escalating birth rate among the Hebrew reached his ears. He called the midwife, Miriam. He wanted to recruit her to help him with his new plan, a plan of a desperate King. If separation will not stop them, then, killing them would. He planned for the midwives to kill the boy babies at birth. Pharaoh did not want to anger Isis or Hathor so he dare not kill girls. No, only the boy babies would die, and midwives would do the killing. Blood would stain their hands. Miriam deceived Pharaoh. Miriam agreed with his order, but she weaved a plan. She told her midwives not to help with the deliveries, but to instruct the women to go into the fields, dig a hole, and let the baby drop naturally. The hands of Great Mother Earth would tenderly catch them.

Thus, the women continued to give birth though far away from the midwives. The Hebrew people continued to grow in numbers. Furious, Pharaoh called forth Miriam. Unafraid, she confronted him and his wrath. How was it possible? Was she not killing the boy babies? She calmly explained to him that the Hebrew women were strong and independent. They did not need the midwives. They had the babies on their own, far into the fields. There was no opportunity for her or any midwife to carry out the orders.

The people continued to grow in life and love, until they found deliverance from the bondage of Egypt. After leaving Egypt and looking for their place in the world, they remembered the time of Miriam's leadership. When they created a holy place for worship, they called for offerings. In remembrance of their faithful actions, and as symbols of desire and fertility, women offered up their mirrors. The artisans took these family heirlooms. They broke them down into pieces and molded together into a large washbasin. Stationed at the entrance of the Holy place of worship, all would remember that they could stand there because of the Great Mother and Her priestess. These are the particulars of great rapture (retelling of the Story of the Mirrors, Zornberg 2001, 17-80).

New Discoveries/New Perspectives

As Diana Butler Bass says, Christianity may be undergoing an Awakening (2012). The awakening may come in part from innovative thinking. New discoveries like those of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi texts can spark innovation in theology. These ancient writings, along with new appreciation of old texts already in hand, could promote new stories about Christianity. The texts have the capacity to generate creative thinking that changes paradigms.

Some new paradigms are coming into public view. Series on cable TV have introduced the American public to these and other discoveries, such as the Gospel of Judas, and on the alternative ways people can conceive Christianity. A public that generally was unfamiliar with anything but the canonized Bible, orthodox creedal beliefs, official religious history, or traditional Biblical interpretation, have had their minds opened.

Often, old rhetoric straps church people from considering new discoveries and innovative thinking that explore theological options. Christianity is by its nature traditional. It counts on the root of tradition for its beliefs and for its interpretation of Scripture. Innovation that breaks from some of that tradition simply remains anathema to what took centuries to sculpt out of stone. Little in a stone is organic. If doctrine represents essential minerals, then dogma is the stone that forms around them. A living organism can also form around minerals. A church created to be a living thing, would open to the transformative ways of living processes better than a stone. The living processes include taking in new nutrients and adapting to new ways as the environment changes. So exploratory theology can fulfill the mandates of doctrine, but not form the stone of dogma.

Sometimes religious innovation finds better acceptance outside than inside the church. People freely search for new spiritual paradigms. Diana Butler Bass, in *Christianity Religion: The End of the Church and the Beginning of a New Spiritual Awakening* (2012) writes, "People are searching for something new. That something new, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith said a half century ago, is actually something quite old

"faith, the profoundly personal response..."(Bass, 1552). She goes on to say that, many people are satisfied with new spirituality or with agnosticism. Even a smaller group is content with their traditional religion (Bass, 1552).

The church could claim a role in shifting paradigms by presenting the new sacred scriptures to people. Most church people that I have encountered know about the existence of the Dead Sea Scrolls, but few have heard of Nag Hammadi, even though many early Christians considered them sacred. Though some researchers questioned the significance of these discoveries early on, more and more people claim their theological ground for today's world. People often learn for the first time of the existence of alternative scriptures. Hearing new stories in them opens doors to change in perspective. Could exposure to these alternate versions that come from ancient texts shake people loose from their hold on worn out images and rhetoric? Many of these heretical Gospels do offer different versions and faith perspective. It is not that their version is better or more authoritative than the canon, but rather that they offer a change of perspective with new images that may speak to a new generation of women.

Sometimes, it takes standing outside to shake up what is happening inside. For example, these discoveries altered how many scholars understand Gnosticism, the basis of identifying heresy. Yet the average church member still understands that term to be derogatory, dangerous, and even sinful. Too many people still believe what early defenders of the faith believed, that heresy is Gnostic. In most annotated or study Bibles, references to heresy and Gnosticism contains this thinking. Information in study Bibles serves as the way many church people learn about the Bible and these seem slow to

update, especially in regards to matters of heresy. What is available to folks, then, is not always amenable to innovation. Careful use of non-canonical sources held as sacred by some offer a radical departure of perspective to those resistant to viewing new ideas.

An avenue for churches to take in utilizing alternative views is interfaith dialogue. Many churches today have some kind of intellectual or worship exchange with a Jewish group for example. Few Christians, though, appreciate how Jewish Rabbis interpreted our shared Holy texts or the resources they use to do so.

The Legends of the Jews (1998) a multi volume collection of stories gathered through the centuries about the people in the Torah, is a large resource. An incredible life work of Louis Ginzberg, it has been a resources available for a century, yet not broadly used by Christian preachers and teachers. The remedy comes from entering into more conversation with Jews on their use of these alternative texts as well as using them as a preaching and teaching resource. The resource draws from Biblical interpretation by Jewish scholars over many, many years. They speak to the Old Testament, much like Nag Hammadi texts speak to the New Testament. Because they both have such a close affiliation with Canon, they carry more gravitas than just any resource. The resource speaks about the Bible characters and stories that people already know. A ready-made audience eager to hear these augmented stories may lay among Bible study groups.

Because most church study groups have moved out of the stage of the Inquisition, Bible study groups are less like to cry “heresy” and more apt to ask, “Where does this come from?” and “Is it true?” In other, words can they believe it? These questions lead to wonderful dialogues about the nature of truth and belief as well as the

history of traditional Biblical interpretation versus the interpretation outside orthodoxy.

It offers a great introduction to hermeneutics and history.

The real question is not what is true, but rather, how does one interpret the content of all historical documents? Finding truth is a hermeneutic process. Each set of eyes have different parameters, identifiable, and alterable. Some of these eyes belong to suppressed social and racial groups who see the promise of freedom, the promise of food, and the promise of salvation, as commitments made to real life situations of bondage, starvation, and victimization, and they offer innovative interpretation. How far they go in retelling Biblical stories will depend on how far they are willing to stray from the Golden Mean of tradition.

Part of the discovery in this new age unearths the Divine Feminine within our historical ranks. Several scholars have contributed to this dig.

As a woman scholar, Elaine Pagels has written extensively on the Nag Hammadi texts. Her work serves as an example of how knowledge of these texts can lead to a different understanding of Gnosticism and of ancient Christianity. In *The Gnostic Gospels* (1989), she systematically shows how these texts offer a different view of the Christian Gospel that is not as far-fetched or extreme as the traditional church would have us believe. For example, Gnostics believed that it was not believers relationship with the clergy that constituted the true church, but “the level of understanding of its members” (Pagels, 106). While considering the opportunity for theology of the Divine Feminine, Pagels admits, “The God of Israel shared his power with a female divinity” (Pagels, 48), and that “gnostic sources continually use sexual symbolism” (Pagels, 49).

Judith R. Baskin in *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (2002) starts with the premise that Jewish literature fundamentally asserts women as being created for the good of men and that they are subsequently different from men (Baskin, 1). She writes that this view “was layered on the rib of the biblical text as a requisite accompaniments to the written word, so the rabbinic sages deliberately constructed women as ancillary beings, shaped on the rib of the primordial man to fulfill essential social and sexual function in an androcentric society” (Baskin, 1-2).

She argues in her book, however, that within the rabbinic literature exists the minority view preserved and honored (Baskin, 2). Baskin points to a particular source for her book that she finds supports this minority view. “The *Aggadah* includes legendary expansions of biblical stories, allusions to popular folk-lore, personal and historical anecdotes” (Baskin, 4). She believes that “aggadic literature frequently preserves a more nuanced and complex view of women and their activities” (Baskin, 4). Further, Baskin opens up the discussion about the realm of imaginative story. She writes, “This volume differs in the emphasis on non-halakhic rabbinic exegesis, a literary genre which not only maintains the constant potential to enter the realms of the imagination and even fantastic, but can add ethical dimensions to halakhic rulings” (Baskin, 6).

Raphael Patai in *The Hebrew Goddess* (1990) moves even further into the forest of the Divine Feminine. He asserts that he is not interested merely in the feminine language for God i.e. as Holy Spirit or as Wisdom. He writes, “If they were omitted from the present volume, it was because they did not share, or shared only to a minor degree, those traits which transform a numinous entity into a goddess, that is, into a truly divine

being believed to possess a will of her own and to be capable of acting independently of any other divine power” (Patai, 277-278).

He argues that there were three goddesses who fit this description in the Biblical text and worshipped by the early Hebrews: Asherah, Astarte, and the Queen of Heaven (Patai, 36). After the time of Nehemiah, however, one goddess emerges. He writes, “She underwent...an astounding metamorphosis...In one of her manifestations she...rebuilt the sanctuary as a female Cherub, she became the manifestation of God’s presence, the Shekhina—a feminine name” (Patai, 32). In Kabbalism “she emerged as a distinct female deity, possessing a will and desire of her own, acting independently” and “she assumed another name as well more fitting to her new and high status...the Matron, Lady, or Queen” (Patai, 32). At the end of his introduction, Patai wonders if the Hebrew goddess is dead or “merely slumbering, soon to awaken” (Patai, 33).

Clarissa Pinkola Estés does not believe the goddess is dead. In her book *Untie the Strong Women, Blessed Mothers Immaculate Love for the Wild Soul* (2011) Estés describes through story of contemporary people the ways they worship and honor the Divine Feminine. “She is writ into every sacred book, every document of the mysteries...into our very souls. Our longings for her, our desire to know her, to be changed by her, to follow her ways of acute insight, her sheltering ways, her trust in goodness—these are the evidences that she exists, that she continues to live as a huge...force in our world...” (Estés, 2-3). She gives homage to her own previous groundbreaking work on myth by writing, “I have always had the suspicion that our

consecration to Blessed Mother derived from the most creakingly old ethnic traditions” (Estés, 5).

Therefore, new discoveries, new understanding of non-canonical texts, new respect for other faith traditions, and new appreciation for alternative views of Bible stories and theology intersect, revealing new images of women and the Divine. While teaching these ideas to church groups, a response often heard is, “Is this pluralism?” The answer I found to work lays in a healthy dialogue about the nature of absolute truth and our inability to comprehend its entirety; about mistakes made and pushed under the carpet; about how multiple understandings of one truth is not the same thing as multiple truths; about a Holy, so vast, that many eyes were created to comprehend It’s infinite nature. Absolute truth ought not to be confused with limitation. In fact, it is essentially beyond limitation. Absolute connotes Singularity. It must stand outside the orders of time and space. Facts do not always service higher truth. Imagination does a better job revealing it.

Postmodernity

No Awakening is complete without a paradigm shift. Our new world exists not on physical land, but internal land, virtual land, land of the imagination. We live in an alternate universe where different rules apply. The old laws are barely recognizable and without much advantage.

Postmodernity has caused no small grief for the traditional, old paradigm of the Christian church. The additional shift into a digital age is even leading us further into another paradigm past postmodernity. Within most local churches, conversations take

place bemoaning the changing world; the family that is disintegrating; or the society that is corrupt. The church often considers change bad because it has depended upon the stability of incorruptible and constant tradition.

Although one still hears these negative assessments of the new reality, increasingly one hears the positive, approving stories of what is happening. Is there a reaching out for a new optimism? Are people finally tired of negativity and ready to step into a new stream? Is the field finally fertile enough to plant the seed of a reimagined Bible story with more feminine images of divinity? Can the new stories and images come from the perspective that, though old, is new again? Can new interpretation, new perspectives help people of the faith find new grounding that speaks better to this new age?

Phyllis A. Bird wrote an article for *The New Interpreters Bible* (1994) called “The Authority of the Bible.” In it, she describes the effect of Feminism. She writes, “...for most feminists...the record of the past contain no model for the future, no core of tradition untainted by patriarchy” (NIB 1994, 1: 62). I suggest that we look at this from a different perspective: no patriarchy remains untainted by matriarchy. It is not so much a question of which received more privileged, but that both existed and intertwined.

For example, one area affected by paradigm shift that has touched every church member concerns gender roles and women’s rights. The genders see themselves and each other differently. Gender roles have forever transformed for many people and most people celebrate this. It has also led some to speculate on what essential differences between the genders really exist. Clearly, there are some. Maybe we are prepared to find

women's character apart from their roles and look at them in a way not defined by the man or in male terms. This would free the men to discover new qualities in themselves as well. Hegel said that the master is far more imprisoned than the slave because the master needs the slave. The slave does not need the master (Hegel 1979, 117). Women's liberating lives may be a great opportunity for men to free themselves from defined roles.

The gender issue de jour is gay marriage. The church lags behind society in providing equal rights to those who want to define themselves. That which forms the basis that denies equal rights for women also does so for gays and lesbians. When Christianity preaches as part of its family values that one man and one woman with the man being the head of the household, presents the only true standard that is good and true before God, then not only women but also men are restricted.

At the same time that gender roles and questions about essential nature changes, ancient Christian texts have come into public view about Jesus' love for the Disciple Mary Magdalene and the special teaching he gave her. Karen King in her book *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala, Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (2003) points out that *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala* in the Nag Hammadi texts, tells the story of the inability of the disciples to "to go out joyfully to preach the gospel; instead controversy erupts. All the disciples except Mary have failed to comprehend the Savior's teaching...Mary steps in and comforts them and at Peter's request, relates teaching unknown to them" (King, 4). After she explains these teachings, some of the Disciples challenge her teachings and question her integrity. Other disciples, however, seemed to have

understood what she said because they went out to preach and teach after defending her to her detractors.

The changing gender roles experienced by folks today appear to have an ancient root. People wonder if Christianity has been completely honest about this. New learning about people like Mary Magdalene has given her a different role in story of Christianity, ignored in the official story. Is it any wonder that with these forces at work, Dan Brown's novel *The DaVinci Code* found such an enthusiastic audience? The imaginary journey of the characters seems to reflect the journey many are taking. Although people wanted to hear a new story about Mary Magdalene, they do not discard the Canonical story, but rather see in new light. When one views a sunrise from the mountaintop, it looks very different from when one stands in the valley. One can become very excited about the new view, but both are valuable. Taking the two together helps understand them both.

Art and life, science and religion, come together in new and inspiring ways when reality rotates on its axis unexpectedly. However, all things seem to work in harmony. The forces move with incredible precision. Some are saying the twenty first century is the age of the woman. The womb of the world has been incubating this new life for a long time. The baby is born, now. The question is, will Christianity embrace the awakening and suckle it to maturity?

What has impressed me in the last several years of parish ministry is how folks, regardless of their denomination, theological or political view, have embraced the reality of the change upon them, and they see the benefit of much of it. I have heard church

people celebrate the young fathers who change diapers and cook meals, and the career advancements that daughters and granddaughters enjoy. They have concluded the need for women to be able to support themselves and their children and not depend upon a man; the necessity of a good education for women because pay is never equal so she must continue to climb the ladder of success. People in churches do not conform to the conservative image that they are often given. The paradigm shifts in the greater society finds reflection in their lives and beliefs.

When given a chance to say what they honestly think, many church people embrace postmodernity because they know it is upon them whether they like it or not. The problem, however, that they face relates to how these new views conflict with the church's teachings. Many have left the church because their views simply no longer match, but for those still in the church, they ask these questions either openly, if given a chance, or quietly, if it is politically incorrect to do so publically.

Substantive change often comes from the bottom up. The people are changing the story they are telling. Can these people find a Meta story in which their own story fits? People search for it.

The Power of Stories

By their nature, stories swim in spirituality. They may be the earliest expression of religious behavior. Because they are spiritual, they are hard to define because human beings are hard to define. Although we think we understand ourselves, mostly we understand our own egos. The ego represents that part of us which copes with the so-called reality of our lives. Most of the ways we describe our ego does not describe the

inner self. The inner self, the soul self, is like a thrown baseball: trying to define it in terms of location is impossible. Trying to determine where it is going is speculation. The true self is a moving entity and its target always in process.

A story can act in a similar fashion. Trying to define it is impossible. But human beings not only tell stories, find stories, but also find themselves in stories, not of their own making or conscious choice. Stories serve as the portal to the realm of the spirit where real meaning, value, and destiny come. They are the voice of the soul self. They are religious in the most primitive and sophisticated of ways.

The Community of Interpreters (1993), by Robert S. Corrington, explains it in another way. He examines Ralph Waldo Emerson's view of language and nature. According to Corrington, Emerson believed that "Language rides on the back of nature and give it utterance" (Corrington, 92). On another level, "natural facts are symbols of spiritual facts" (Corrington, 93). In many myths, nature plays an important role, often as a character in the story. This close affiliation indicates the same thing to that which Corrington was referring: story is the natural way people speak about the spirit.

For most people their spiritual story fits into the container of a Meta story, usually one given to them. When we do not know where we are going, the Meta story we tell us the answer. When we do not understand where we have been, the Meta story in our memories explains it. If we do not know who someone is, his or her story will tell us. Stories form the most basic way of understanding the world and ourselves. We do not create them out of nothing; rather we discover them in the world and weave them into our

lives. If we had total amnesia, we would still have our consciousness and the presence of the world. Our first act would be to uncover a story that weaves them both together.

Unfortunately, we find ourselves emerging from centuries of denying the validity of any story that does not tell the official story. In the past, we have relocated nonofficial story to the realm of fiction, fantasy, dreams, and play, all of which have had negative connotations as opposed to fact, reality, and practicality. Fortunately, we have moved away from that position and are rediscovering the power of stories and the power in the alternative realities they can describe.

In *Speaking in Parable: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (2007), Sally McFague, the author, finds the power of stories through their use in the Bible, theology, and faith, emphasizing the essence of metaphor (McFague, 2). Metaphor presents itself to the imagination as a tool. It is the way the mind can leap from what it can physically sense to what it can only intuitively sense (McFague, 44). Story builds from there and so does value.

McFague describes most types of story and their religious value including personal stories, community stories, Gospel story, parables, poems, and novels. McFague does show that Christianity functions on the field of metaphor and it is here that it plays its game: creates theology, details history, plans for salvation, and the Kingdom. However, she does not address the stories in myths, legends, or fairytales. People often overlook them, thought to be void of religious significance. By not addressing these stories, we may be overlooking some aspects of religious potency that reveal aspects of human beings that are difficult to understand or transform.

The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make us Human, (2012) by Jonathan Gottschall, describes how stories find use and expression in the twenty first century. He is convinced that it is changing (Gottschall, 2191). He cites examples of role creating games in virtual reality (Gottschall, 2362). He even laments the story as too powerful a thing for us to handle well because technology makes it available continually (Gottschall, 2456). He raises interesting questions. However, before developing these questions, he richly describes some interesting findings related to storytelling.

One of those findings is about the gender differences found between boys and girls in their play (Gottschall, 565). He concludes that there are gender differences that are natural and not assigned by cultural roles. These differences, though increasingly studied, are not understood well, but clearly they are found in some basic human behavior like free imaginative play and storytelling, with the fantasy world of girls being just as dark and violent as boys, but in a different way (Gottschall, 573).

Childhood prepares for adulthood. If both boys and girls are to receive the best tools that develop their adulthood, they apparently need different resources. Those different resources include different stories offer to girls and boys.

Genders have different stories, hear stories differently, and relate to stories differently. Given that, the indictment points to gender bias in official dominate stories plaguing our institutions, including the church. Since men shaped the official story of the Bible along with all its interpretations, where does that leave women? They remain deprived of the stories that work as models for them to shape in ways that are essential for them to bloom.

The process of forming the Bible stripped away many stories about powerful women, replacing them with stories of women in submissive or sinful roles. Too many men have raped and pillaged women's stories and have masculinized their telling, just as they did with the Gospel story into which the other Biblical stories must fit. People tend to marginalized women's stories. Interpreters evacuate them of meaningful content. They become unable to stand or form their own tradition.

Men composed most of the Gospel Meta story. In order to justify it, the smaller individual stories received revision so that it fits into its confines, the result of which is to minimize multi-dimensionality. The female story does not play a significant part in the Meta narrative. It is easy to understand how some women cannot find their own salvation in what is not essentially her story. To do so, she has to twist into a contortionist position of being an appendage of the male.

To look for a Meta story that emboldens women, one must start with the smaller stories about individual Bible women. These stories can and should come alive in the eyes of living women free to go inside Biblical lives. Through active imagination, we can understand their life, by seeing how it is like ours. Identification between the two stories, theirs, and ours, is the beginning to understand gender issues in Scripture and excavates embolden women then and now.

During this excavation process, questions arise as to whether one understands circumstances correctly. Do we interpret the words correctly? Are there double meanings? Is there irony? Which cultural forces are in play and what are they? What was hidden is now discoverable from the mountain of research, as new stories form.

At any time, the best way to know the person is to find the real story that lie behind the official story. Institutions are the same. They have stories. In *Finding Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Change* (2010), edited by Larry Golemon, attention is paid to congregational stories. He opens his Preface with these words, “Congregations in America are often victims of larger narratives they inherit” (Golemon, vii). He goes on to describe the dysfunctional inherited story in Christian denominations. For me, a large part of that dysfunctional story concerns women. In chapter three of this book, Lawrence Peers writes about profound change. He asks, “How much do we prefer to remain with what is, with no inclination to move toward what is possible?” (Golemon, 41) He then offers this solution, “Leaders who have made the necessary inner shift and stand outside the dominant, problem-saturated story as an observer will find that narrative therapy offers a number of techniques” (Golemon, 50).

Churches have parlor room stories that are on websites and told to visitors. They are the official story. There are also kitchen stories told through word of mouth to close friends and those considered the inside group. Official stories on the church's website rarely serve as hot topics of conversation, but kitchen stories may. They can dominate a congregation’s conversation and can relate directly to the dysfunction. The unofficial story can also be the place of potential and opportunity.

Rachel Naomi Remen in *Kitchen Table Wisdom* (2006) draws the distinction between the conversations in the living room and those in the kitchen (Remen, 3412). The kitchen table stories give us a different view of ourselves. Although the stories Remen cites in her book are life stories of people she knows, she sheds light on another

kind of kitchen table story, the ones from her Grandfather. In the Introduction to her book, she writes about her father and his work with mystical Judaism (Remen, 242). In the Epilogue, she again goes back to her grandfather and the “ancient texts” he would read to her at the kitchen table (Remen, 3418). Clearly, old religious stories moved her and framed her appreciation for tales that matter.

In this dissertation, I find the distinction between the kitchen table story and the parlor room story very helpful. It is the distinction between the official story and the unofficial story lived by people, churches, and even religions. People may have an official story of their success; but their unofficial story tells of defeat. A church may have an official story their imminent demise; but the unofficial story unfolds differently. Christianity has the official story of salvation from its root of tradition, but its unofficial story talks of Gnosticism and women burned at the stake for ritualizing women’s biology. I believe that change comes when we face the conflict between these two stories. Although rarely told so dichotomously, conflict between them can and do exist in people and in institutions.

Understanding the differences among the stories we tell stands paramount as church struggles to survive in challenging times. Reframing story can be transformative. This cannot happen until a church grapples with its kitchen story. Usually people do not realize how the stories they tell in whispers and quiet conversations actually makeup this story. They certainly do not appreciate how much harm its telling can cause when it is negative. An example of a positive kitchen story is the church whose members say, “I love my church.” One does not always hear that. Most churches are not aware of their

shadow story. Often negative, shadow narratives can cause dwindling numbers.

Identifying the negative and turning it positive can make the kitchen story transformative.

Change in the institutional story comes by sharing the personal stories of its members. Storytelling speaks to strengths and challenges met. Sharing personal kitchen stories can lead to changes in official institutional story thereby transforming the group. One method for doing this quickly uses transformational stories such as those found in the Bible. That is the point of ministry, to heal lives and bring people closer to God by conveying the Gospel story. However, in the case of churches where the shadow story includes pain about gender, the official Gospel story may be part of the very reason why the gender pain exists. Bible stories, as traditionally interpreted, have lost much of their transformative potency because they have gender baggage. They no longer fit with a culture that is ridding itself quickly of this baggage.

Many Bible stories, often told in uncreative ways, may wake up the listener if told in innovative ways maybe with the help of imported stories. There ought to be purposefulness about how outside stories are used. Pastoral leadership can drive that use. The preacher functions as the premiere storyteller, as preacher and teacher. The challenge for the pastor is fulfilling the premiere requirement that the story has depth of value and an effective telling.

Clarissa Pinkola Estés offers some interesting paths pastors can take in finding these effective stories. She works as a senior Jungian analysis. Estés long experience with the power of overlooked and undervalued stories made her into a teller or singer of story. Born a Mestizo but adopted and raised by eastern European immigrants, she

bathed in a lavish plethora of tales growing up. She continued to collect them throughout her life from every world culture. The formation of her thoughts comes from experience with patients and the effect imaginative tales had on them. She collects stories and experiences in two primary books, *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (1992) and *Untie the Strong Woman* (2011). She makes three primary contributions. Her first book's contribution is that some stories, those from myths, legends, and fairytales, can be potent and transformative by their very nature. In other words, some stories are instruments of change (Estés, 13). She takes a journey through women's psyche. She explicates it through fairy tales, myths, and legends found in our corporate culture and consciousness. They seem to speak to conflicts, resources, and challenges within our psychic lives. It is a psychological journey through the soul self of women.

Second, the weaver of these kinds of stories she calls an archetype, which she names the Wild Woman (Estés, 15). She writes the following.

Embedded with instructions stories guide us through the complexities of life. Stories enable us to understand the need for the ways to raise a submerged archetype. The stories on the following pages are the ones, out of hundreds that I've worked with and pored over for decades, and that I believe most clearly express the bounty of the Wild Woman archetype. Sometimes various cultural overlays disarray the bones of stories. For instance, in the case of the brothers Grimm (among other fairy-tale collectors of the past few centuries), there is strong suspicion that the informants (storytellers) of that time sometimes "purified" their stories for the religious brothers' sakes. Over the course of time, old pagan symbols were overlaid with Christian ones, so that an old healer in the tale became an evil witch, a spirit became an angel, an initiation veil or caul became a handkerchief, or a child named Beautiful...was renamed...Sorrowful. Sexual elements were omitted. Helping creatures and animals were often changed into demons and bogeys.

This is how many women's teaching tales about sex, love, money, marriage, birthing, death, and transformation were lost. It is how fairy tales and myths that explicate ancient women's mysteries have been covered over too. Most old collections of fairy tales and myths existent today have been scoured

clean of the scatological, the sexual, the perverse (as a warning against), the pre-Christian, the feminine the Goddess, the initiatory, the medicines... (Estés, 15-16).

What she says about the significant alteration to women's stories by officialdom can apply to those in the Bible. Scripture still hide the bones of the feminine story. The bones grow flesh if Apocryphal texts and Near Eastern ancient legends help to shape them.

The second book *Untie the Strong Woman* offers a third insight. Estés says the archetypal woman as story weaver is Herself an expression of the Divine Feminine, transformative by nature. Transformative experiences inspire faith in Her whom she chronicles in the book. She takes the Wild Woman from folklore and dreams, and elevates her to her proper place, as the Divine Feminine, active in the lives of those who acknowledge Her and worship Her today. She draws on her experience and the experience of others to tell real stories about the Holy Mother. This is a book of great theological potency for those craving to understand experiencing the divine as feminine, as She is active today. Estés creates a lens through which we can see Her. Besides these two books, Estés recorded scores of digital versions of tales she collected and recited in seminars and trainings across the country.

Deep Story

When I use the term deep story I draw attention to something in everyone's experience, tales we remember or stories that captivate and affect us psychologically and religiously. They are stories we hear but then also live out. Many of these stories we tell ourselves repeatedly and become part of who we are. The way we understand our world

and ourselves depends on those deeply held stories. Socrates had a daemon that accompanied and guided him through his intellectual landscape in *The Apology* (1969). Hegel referred to Minerva's Owl in *Philosophy of Right* (1974). Martha Nussbaum found moral insight from Euripides' Hecuba in *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986). Plato wrote about Diotima in *The Symposium* (2008). Catherine Keller discovered inspiration from the spider Goddess Arachne in *From a Broken Web* (1986). Even the most rational philosophers seem to have found inspiration through the old but profound stories. They may have helped mold their thoughts.

Rather than defining deep story, their location is discoverable in common experience. These stories find their depth in a number of ways. First, they are deep because many of them are old by virtue of how long they have informed vital parts of self-image personal or cultural. Estés calls them “creakingly old” in the quote above. They most often come originally from an oral ethnic tradition. Generations saved them through retelling. Later writers put them on paper. These come from the myths, legends, and history. Societies keep them as part of their cultural history.

A person keeps them as a way to define who he or she is. At the root of these stories are metaphors and parables talked about by Sallie McFague in *Speaking in Parables, A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (1975). McFague properly holds up the Bible as a “storehouse of the language of the imagination” and the “Story is perhaps the least complicated way of approaching that storehouse of imagistic language” (McFague, 35). She indicates that Christian sacred scripture contains the deep stories of the imagination, as do those in other culture. They tell us who we are.

Second, deep stories feel very personal. Estés book *Untie the Strong Woman* contains many personal stories from men and women today. They are deep not because they are old but because they are archetypal. They speak to something within our psyches craving expression. Therefore the story, hooks us. We become interested in them. We identify with them on a level not easily explainable. This can be the case when one hears another's personal story and it resonates with us. The beginning story in chapter six of this dissertation is a story from Estés audio series called "*Dangerous Old Woman*." This is a personal story that she shares with her audience. One can find it very meaningful because the three characters in the story, the women, the vine, and the mean man live in one's life. The story lives out in people who identify with it. The manner in which Estés tells the story provides the hook for identification.

If the manner of the telling becomes stale, then it conveys no hook so the listener remains disinterested. One could say, "A neighbor went into another neighbor's yard and cut down a large tree because it bothered him. The owner transplanted some of the plant's remaining roots next to her house where it grew and eventually found its way into her house." Those are the facts, but that is not the story. The story is in the beauty of the tree; the love the women had for the tree; the anger of the man; the ruthless violence of the woman's space; the great sense of loss and pain the woman felt; the sprig of hope planted near her kitchen; and the new grow that came inside. If told like this, the archetypes move to potency. Therefore, leaders tell stories best if they make them accessible both emotionally and spiritually.

Third, deep stories affect our curiosity and imagination. People want to listen to the story and hear the end of it. The imagination holds and interprets its valuable tales. Because these stories get our attention, the listener retains some part of them. They ripen for retelling though never exactly the same way. We make a story ours when it recreates us. Neither the mind nor the heart go anywhere without the imagination. Personal and institutional transformation requires the active imagination. How can one use the imagination to reimagine religious doctrine to rewarm one's heart? Many fictional books about Biblical characters have embraced the imagination and fantasy. They illumine Canon for us. This project moves in that direction.

Fourth, they are deep if they have many levels of meaning. The symbolism in the story can find many ways to twist and turn in meaning, so that the listeners bring their own experiences to the hearing and allows them to use them as they mature. When people are hooked, they will appropriate meaning as suits them. Storytellers teach and inspire the general population the best. It is a teaching tool. Jesus uses them. The Bible records listeners of his stories discussing possible meanings. Multiple ideas about meanings show the story's depth. It is not superficial. Biblical stories generally have this depth if traditional interpretation does not strip it away. Rather than looking at one way to understand, we ought to look for multiple ways to understand it. What I have found is that church people hear a Bible told in the same way, until they grow quite numb to it. Telling is interpreting. Without retelling the story, we cannot reinterpret it for changing times. Digging in Scripture for feminine images of the divine requires some retelling of the story, many of which we have taken for granite as having only one rendition.

These primary characteristics, -- old in time, far reaching into our psyches, available to our imagination, and expansive in meaning, -- shows the area in our experience referred to when using the term deep story. The use of these stories carries preferable processes. Dramatic, oral telling works the best. Their telling can have variety, even embellishment. They can tighten into shorter stories or lengthen into longer ones. The story still works if one places different emphasis on different components. It depends upon the purpose of the teller.

Deep stories adapt to our context. Examples of deep story are myths, legends, fairytales, and old wives tales. Generally, the stories tell of normal people who have fantastic events happen to them, which challenge them to transform. The deep story is the most ancient and primitive of all stories. Found in every culture, it contains the unofficial history, science, medicine, values, and fortune. It is arguably the most potent of stories.

Every religion has deep stories told in their sacred scriptures. They may represent the closest remnant of the original sacred experience. It maintains its numinosity. As religions developed, control of story went with the increasing sophistication. It pushed away what did not fit into the preferred story. Sometimes kept in the annuals of its artistic or mythological past, a culture's or religion's mythic story lays just behind, underneath, or just beyond the accepted, traditional, and publically announced story. Because some old stories did not fit into the official story, the official evaluation of these stories rarely turned very positive. They get pushed down to interesting but not significant. In Christianity, this official stance reminds us of a time when some stories

were heretical. Some people still fear them. The ancient lost stories can grab a chance to breathe if they become part of a shifting paradigm. Whether we will it or not, an archetypal and penetrating story can come upon us and unexpectedly change us.

Myths, Legends, and Fairy Tales

No one would hold fairy tales accountable to the rules of logic. Deep stories are neither true nor false. They simply are. A human being is neither true nor false. He or she simply is. The story in which one lives is also neither true nor false. It simply is a story that applies to us or not. If one is to give deep stories some degree of ontological status, then it has some power to trump more transitory patterns. The sway one story holds over another may lie quite beyond control or analysis. They live in the world of divine force.

Unearthing the best stories means looking more earnestly into tales we already are familiar with, like those from Grimm Brothers and those in the Bible, and search their roots. It also means peering at the nascent underpinnings of religious myths from ancient cultures that helped form those of Christianity, like Greek and Egyptian. It means moving from the parlor room story of these ancient myths and into their original kitchen stories. Most stories have accepted parlor room versions, but also, they have kitchen versions not as known or accepted, because they unnerve those in power.

Ancient stories often bask luxuriously in women's values and perspective, particularly in earlier strata of their telling. The mothers of societies have kept the deep stories alive in culture, intuitively knowing. They shape women's history, women's

paths, and women's religious behavior. They can contrast with the sanitized parlor room stories about women. As a cantadora, Clarissa Pinkola Estés has discovered many of these women's stories among the displaced people of the world, refugees, and immigrants (Estés, 2012, 6, 49). Disenfranchised from the dominant official story, women's stories follow lines of transmission through desperate women longing for healing roots. Many of the tales come from actual events that later become the valuable stories generations later because it speaks to something so human, so essential, or so necessary for survival that people retell it. Its spiritual quality speaks to its power to heal and transform.

Deep stories address the essence of the human soul in both men and women, which nothing reasonable, rational, or doctrinal can touch in the same way. They have strong emotional components, connecting directly to the stories of our emotional lives. In fact, our emotional life may be evidence that the religious story dominating us is either working in our favor or not. Emotions may be the first sign that shifts in the stories we live by are pending or required. Such telling emotions could be depression, apathy, anger or joy, laughter, and enthusiasm. Stories that hook psychologically may be a way to help people when caught in negative emotions.

Religious leaders who want to heal a person or a congregation can use impactful stories beneficially. Pastors who use them would be standing in good company. Jesus healed by changing people's story. As Jesus said, "You have heard it said of old...but I tell you..." He changed their story by using the transformative qualities of parables, which have the qualities of archetypal story. Deep story like myth brings to consciousness that which our egos would normally never let in. It is the well of

imaginative therefore innovative thinking. It balances on the cutting edge of all great progress. Why might this be true? The characters in most ancient stories, whether they are fairytales or myths, play out in surreal environments, -- unimaginable yet shaped by very human circumstance. They reach into the patterns of human and animal past, told in existential ways that speak to the moment, hitting home. They seem to speak directly to each. This is why they transform. They connect people to a world they sense as present, but where egos never wanted to go, unwilling to yield its power. They shape the world out of which our thinking and feeling life come. They shape our soul self and drive it.

As people today live through a world that shifts, that goes through wormholes only to show up in another part of the galaxy, they may want to look to the transformational religious myth to understand what happens to them. Religious structure that finds itself on the wrong side of that cosmic shift may want to look at what they discarded long ago, the stories of the female numinous, as opportunity to reimagine itself. The power structures that find themselves on the wrong side of the shifts will soon discover that the values emerging from the new reality will replace their own. Therefore, in today's paradigm shift, Mother Nature reemerges as a value.

Non-Canonical Texts as Deep Story

In Christianity, non-Canonical text can serve as sources for the archetypal and meaningful myths. They represent the nonofficial story, deliberately rejected, deemed untrue, often associated with heretical groups. Yet they endure; they have devotees. We can incorporate these stories into the way we interpret and reimagine the Bible.

Therefore, the texts do serve as the basis for transformational story. Stephan A. Hoeller makes this point in *Jung and the Lost Gospels* (1989). He writes, “In essence, the Gnosis of old postulates, and Jung also affirms, that the ideas which form content of every religion are not primarily the produce of an externally originating revelation, but of a subjective revelation from within the human psyche” (Hoeller, 7).

Elaine Pagels is one of those who first studied the Nag Hammadi texts, the storehouse of gnostic texts. She writes about them in *The Gnostic Gospels*, (1989). The writers of these texts did not see themselves as heretical, but rather as one who transmitted an intuitive process of knowing oneself (Pagels, xix). The most striking difference between these texts and the orthodox texts is that the Divine “embraces both masculine and feminine elements” (Pagels, 49). Pagels gives credibility to the idea that orthodoxy tried to permanently sidelined women and the Divine Feminine when she declares that by the year 200 CE, virtually all the feminine imagery for God had disappeared from orthodox Christian tradition (Pagels, 57).

At one time, feminine images of divinity found wide acceptability in Christianity. Nag Hammadi texts give roots to the feminine understanding of Gospel story and offers insight into divine nature. Pagel’s thoughtful scholarship is useful as a resource for the texts because she talks not just about their content, but also tells the story of what happened to the acceptability of these texts.

Though not a scholar in the same vein as Elaine Pagels, Margaret Starbird has researched and told an alternate version of the woman identified as Mary Magdalene. In her popular books, Mary is not only the Bride of Jesus, but also the truest image of the

sacred marriage between the Divine Feminine and Divine Masculine (Starbird 1998, 8). Her research used resources that are often out of the mainstream of traditional scholarship, like gematria and mystical Kabala (Starbird 2003, 2.) The popularity of Starbird's books shows that she captured the imagination of people. She taps into what is undoubtedly a growing spiritual movement.

Barbara Thiering represents a different kind of scholar and writer. She is an early researcher on the Dead Sea Scrolls. Though not as well known in this country as either Pagels or Starbird, her book *Jesus as Man*, (1992) brought the Dead Sea Scrolls into a new focus: showing a new method for interpreting the Gospel story called the Pescher technique. She writes, "But the Qumran pesharists nevertheless offer us something of the greatest importance: their definition of scripture...as a mystery, a puzzle...the scrolls give us for the first time hidden historical meanings" (Thiering, 30). She sees a strong similarity between the early Christians and Qumran. She believes that they shared the interpretive technique of Pescher, applicable to the Gospel story. When it is applied, a new story emerges (Thiering, 2-4). Her story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene is different from that of Starbird in that she believes that after their marriage, Mary Magdalene left Jesus. After their divorce, Jesus remarried (Thiering, 195-196). Peter adamantly opposed the divorce (Thiering, 196). Thiering makes many changes to the official Gospel story including the story of Mary, Mother of Jesus (Thiering, 69-73).

What Pagels, Starbird, and Thiering have in common is that they speak of the feminine nature of divinity from nontraditional sources and tell a reimagined story.

Avivah Zornberg is a Rabbi. She does something similar as the other three writers, but uses another resource, Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (1998).

Zornberg retells the stories of Exodus in her book *The Particulars of Rapture* (2000). She uses the woman's eye to events, and allows stories from the *Legends of the Jews* to have their say. She weaves interpretation in new and inspiring ways. It was through this book that *The Legend of the Jews* found its way onto my bookshelf. Her story of the Hebrews bondage in Egypt and how the woman and midwives defeated Pharaoh opened up the book of Exodus for me personally. Her work offers a great example of how these legends bring fresh interpretation. They do not make Scripture less, but more. It becomes more penetrating, richer, and certainly more meaningful for women. It frees men also from the staleness of old thinking. I have told this story many times in Bible class whenever the book of Exodus comes up. Everyone always loves it.

The Legends offers a wealth of resources not explored enough by Christians. That is a missed opportunity. It, like the nontraditional resources used by Pagels, Starbird, and Thiering provides opportunities to walk down the path toward feminine images of divinity, which collective history already contains.

Today, the tales in these resources could capture popular imagination. No greater time exists to explore their potential for spiritual transformation. They may resonate with people more intensely than expected. They can captivate people's attention. They could bring healing to what broke long ago in Christianity: the separation of God of Father from God as Mother. Since the Gospel heals, imagine what both sides of the Gospel can do. The possibility seems worthy of consideration.

With healing, comes a new energy, a new spirit no longer bound by a soul coping with pain and loss. As the soul heals, the spirit releases. It may seem incredible even unimaginable that telling a compelling story could heal the soul and release the spirit. That is exactly what the project will experience. Will the spirit release in the people who hear it?

One aspect of this transformation concerns values. The official story in Christianity has emphasized moral code and law much more than virtue and value. Even the “family values” which one hears about so often, actually represent moral laws regulating families. These family values include one man/one woman marriage, woman submitting to her husband, the sinfulness of divorce, the unnatural status of single women, and the stigma attached to children raised by single women. The moral code enforced with such rigor by the male God has an unbroken development in Christian history. Christianity has become a religion of codified moral bonds.

Christianity may benefit from ethical rebalancing, which accomplished by rediscovering different values and their accompanied virtues. What is it that we place in high regard? Following rules cannot be the only one or the highest one. Something else must trump it. Myth can speak to values that are often off our radar in theology, though raised up and perhaps even required in today’s life. These values emphasize natural environment, personal choice, interconnectedness, and particularity. These and other values might spring from the feminine images of divinity. She would arrive clothed in values and virtue if we listen.

Toward a Theology of Teaching and Preaching

Listening can happen on a two way street. Those who listen will receive an audience themselves. If that reciprocity does not happen, then one party remains isolated and living bereaved of the bridge that connects the inner and outer world.

The pastor listens to people's stories. If enough listening occurs, material to form one story from many stories comes together. The intersection forming the congregational story can provide an opportunity to understand what is unique to them. Congregational stories feed into denominational stories. They in turn feed into the Christian story. Christian history tells that story. Sometimes that historical story contains unwanted baggage.

Christianity's story has many chapters. One of those chapters tells the story of sexism and its effects on people in Christianity. Every church somehow embodies that chapter within it, but does so in its own way. The history and people, the spinning of stories, the actions taken or not taken, even particular individuals all make a congregation's story unique unto itself while incorporating elements of the larger Christian story. Sometimes looking for transforming stories for a local congregation requires dealing with elements from the larger Christian narrative. The healthy course of events changes stories over time, hopefully for the better overall, indicating growth and learning. However, for many churches, as well as individuals, the story instead grows ever more tragic. In order to transform the tragic stories, Jesus provides pastors the tools: teaching and preaching the Word.

Teaching and preaching are methods of transformative change. They work because pastors share stories of The Word. Reciprocity makes up the mechanics of story. Listening builds a two-way bridge of a transformative relationship, exactly what a pastor and congregation establishes. Speaking carries with it opportunity. What I say influences whoever listens. What I say may even transform the listener if his or her soul listens as well. What I say may completely shut down another person, or it can intrigue, heal, and transform. Most importantly, what I say relates to what I have heard from the people. Storytelling offers a great way to communicate meaningfully. However, what stories serve people best?

Finding good stories to tell challenges pastors. If one uses personal story, one ought to be critical of the story one picks. High quality stories do best if they carry a punch. It does not matter from where the story comes. Using imported stories from outside one's faith may secure the opportunity to share great stories that offer new perspectives. Ultimately, good stories speak to everybody.

When leading a church, the quality of story told will dictate the quality of results. As the fulcrum of prophecy, teaching and preaching serves the Word. Trying to specify exactly what result will come from an input is a fool's desire. However, one can certainly tell if the effects of these tools put the congregation to sleep, expands their sad story, or engages them into progress. Again, the relationship of listening is two way. A teacher/preacher must also listen as a way to monitor effectiveness.

Human beings find motivation from the inside. For churches led by the nose too often, rather than taught to walk on their own, this challenges them. People fulfill their

own destiny best if allowed to think for themselves and design their own actions. The pastor may consider speaking to the inner world of the person...the place that requires development if great human beings are formed. The production of quality human beings, able to think and create uniquely and independently, while relating to and serving the greater Good, offers the greatest goal of religion.

Human beings not only have self-consciousness, but finally they live in their internal world. People live in the conscious, subconscious, and trans-conscious of their thoughts, environments, hearts, and intuition. These internal landscapes collide, reconcile, recreate, and sponsor action, even though some of this activity resides beyond our immediate awareness. No human being can move out of that zone. Human beings can bring self-consciousness into less accessible areas of their inner self.

Local church teachers and preachers may be failing to challenge minds to think independently and to discover what potential lurks within their hearts. Like water, activated minds often seek the deepest level. Ideas, whose content can be spiritual, emotional, psychological, or theoretical, as well as practical, can help minds run deep.

John Wesley believed that he could change the world with one hundred great preachers. The power of the spoken Word transforms. However, to allow the Word to be transformative, we must set it free from the confines of outdated and uninspired theological framework often strangling it. The Word must breathe like the Spirit that carries it. The best way to do that utilizes story, engaging the mind and heart and very soul of the listener. The story can tell best what rests in the subconscious or trans-conscious, bring it into awareness, and thereby, liberate choice.

Like no other time in history, the world acts as a stage and all of us act upon it. That metaphor has come true. Because others watch, Christians may want to evaluate the storyline they act out. Who wants to join in a lackluster plot with a superficial performance neither which inspire? The audience as well as the actors may move on to another stage.

People yearn for meaning, significance, and value. They yearn for it because they do not have it, or they have very little of it. People tell me that good preaching has ceased to exist. Further, they describe their hunger for spiritual nourishment. As preachers and teachers, we have the responsibility to tell a new story pregnant with significance...one that fires the imagination. People will jump at the opportunity to hear it. This project attempts to do just that, to tell a new story, one that draws from feminine images of divinity in Scripture and adjacent texts, using the tools of teaching and preaching. The project uses both parts of the listening process: talking and hearing. For this project, the theme of the stories will reimagine Biblical stories reframe with tales from the outside.

CHAPTER THREE

PROJECT METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

The Story

Enik loved his life of solitude. Choosing to live well beyond the clan village, he spent days camped by the river fishing for salmon, or by the Bering Sea hunting seal or walrus. Except during whale hunting season, Enik lived away from his clan, on the northern Alaskan frontier, home to his people, the Inupiat Eskimo.

He never dwelt much on his solitude, until one serendipitous discovery led him down a very different path.

He was fishing one day. His line snagged something...something deep. It did not really feel like a fish, but he pulled it up and into his boat. It was a skeleton, a skeleton of a woman, her long black hair still clinging to her skull, her face still emoting character. As he looked at her, the empty eye sockets seemed to look back.

Frightened, he immediately tried to push her back into the water and fanatically headed back to the safety of shore. He did not realize that the skeleton woman remained hooked to his line and followed him, bumping along on the waves of the river. After reaching shore, he pulled his boat onto the land. That is when he saw her again. He panicked. Grapping his gear he took off running to his camp. Still she followed him, now hooked to his gear. He could hear her rattling bones behind him. He ran faster and faster, but she kept up with his pace. He dove into his shelter, hoping she would not

follow. As he lay there, face buried in the bearskin on the floor, he could hear his heart pounding. Slowly, he raised his head. As soon as he did, he saw her, staring directly into his eyes. The skeleton woman was laying there...eyes penetrating out from the bones.

Maybe because he felt safe and calm in his shelter. Maybe because there was something pathetic about this pile of bones, but he sat up and took time to look at her more closely. He reached out and straightened out her body, moving her legs out in front of her and folded her arms beneath her ribs. Her head was tilted just so to one side. She now gave a rather tranquil appearance.

As Enik went about preparing supper, he continued to glance at her. Something in those vacant eyes seemed to follow him as he moved about. Soon that did not bother him. He ate, grew tired, and lay down to sleep. He fell asleep quickly.

The skeleton woman grew wanting for his company. Perhaps warmed by the fire or perhaps Enik's gentle touch awakened some life within her. Whatever the reason, skeleton woman, dragged herself over to where Enik slept and laid there next to him.

Then something amazing happened. Skeleton woman started to fill out. Perhaps drawing on the energy from Enik's lonely but robust life, skin started to stretch over her bones. By morning, her formation was complete. When Enik awoke, he was surprise to see the woman lying next to him. As he looked at her, a tear formed in her eye and ran down her now plumb cheek. His heart reached out for her as his finger lifted the tear off her chin. Enik arose and began his morning chores. As he did, she watched him. Soon she too was busy at his side. They worked well together, this isolated man and the

woman who came from the deep. They stayed together every winter and every summer after that...two people now whole (retelling of *The Skeleton Woman*, Estés 1995, disc 9).

Methodology and Evaluation

Mary Clark Moschella describes ethnography, in her book *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* (2008), as the practice of listening to the congregation and recording their stories (Moschella 4). She includes in the practice “narrative models of theology and care” that “recognize the importance of storytelling as a hallmark of human experience (Moschella 5). She continues by writing, “We shape our lives and give meaning and coherence to them through telling personal stories, family stories, group stories, faith stories, and cultural histories (Moschella 5).

About the listening process, Moschella stresses, “...listening is a liberating practice, a practice that validates and honors another person’s experience, insight, and soul. Many people in the world do not have the privilege of being heard” (Moschella 13). In fact, Moschella calls it a “dialogical process of speaking and listening, and reflecting back...”(Moschella 13). She adds that one understands ethnography best as “narratives than as scientific treatises” (Moschella 29).

One opportunity for ethnography that Moschella particularly lifts up describes “religious leaders who feel that their community is somehow stuck in the past, immobilized by some unfinished business” (Moschella 35). Religious leaders position themselves to do ethnography by living in the tension between being part of the community yet one set apart to lead (Moschella 37). “Inspired preaching and thoughtful

reflection on theological and historical traditions are important, even integral to authentic religious leadership” (Moschella 50). A pastor, then, stands in the unique position of communicating between what is and what could be, hence a transformative role.

The pastor uses him or herself in Pastoral Ethnography. Moschella explains the use of self when she shares her story of being a pastoral counselor while conducting research. She became aware of the reflexivity in both ethnography and counseling. She points to introspection on the part of the caregiver that enhances “accuracy and effectiveness in choosing appropriate...modes of response to congregants...” (Moschella 103-104). Over the years of a person’s ministry, modes of response that are beneficial to churches, form as ministry practices.

Since the pastor is part of the ethnography process, identifying what specifically a pastor brings to the relationship is important to describe and track. In my case, I had developed some ministerial practices that worked well in other churches. I necessarily carried with me my theological perspective through years of observations and experience. In my case, I brought sensitivity to sexism, a developing theology on women’s stories and feminine images of divinity in Scripture, and a practice of telling tales. Those characteristics described my gifts that may help a congregation transform and meet its goals. I recorded and described the interaction and results of its affects, and narrated the story as it unfolded. Accounting for all parts of the ethnographical observations filled out the whole picture of the narrative description.

In chapter three of her book, Moschella poses four questions about project design: The developmental question: how did this come to be? The mechanical question: how

does this work? The comparative question: how does this compare to that? In addition, the causal predictive question: how does this influence that? (Moschella, 63-85). The design of this project was the fourth, causal predictive.

The example she uses to illustrate causal predictive is a study on the effect of gay pastors on straight congregations. The question posed was whether the gay pastor would hurt church growth (Moschella 60-61). Several congregations were compared for outcomes. The project implemented at Pioneer would not be compared to any other Fellowships, but it would ask the question about church growth when the Fellowship had a pastor with a feminist theology in a hurting church that has a traditional theology.

Moschella understands that prediction is common in this puzzle. She believes it is a natural tendency but the final statements of causation will not be “simple or straight forward” (Moschella 60). One starts by “asking a question, offering a theory or a hunch...” (Moschella 208). After collecting data, one asks whether it speaks to the theory.

Pioneer set their goals: survival and growth. These goals rang true to me since they seem based on two primary forces, the will to live and to thrive. Without a counter force pushing it toward renewal and life, the speed of the dying accelerates over time. The other force at work stretches with life’s natural inclination toward adaptation. The drive is away from the ultimate simplicity of death and toward more life giving complexity. For a church to move toward growth, they could start by changing their sad story and adapt a more hopeful story. One way to encourage formation of new story is to challenge neatly folded stories already in place.

Preaching and Teaching as Delivery System

The congregation spoke of their desire to hear preaching and teaching from an ordained Elder. They talked of their hunger for spiritual sustenance. The LAC members indicated their belief that story sharing offered a good method for building community. Teaching and preaching gave me an opportunity to decide on theological input. The opportunity presented itself to use sermons and Bible teaching with new images and stories.

In this project, the religiously meaningful stories of people confronting great trials form the basic content for preaching and teaching. The stories may influence people's willingness to share their own stories. Moschella writes, "When a group recalls and tells its painful history...the people may speak of trauma, loss, betrayal, or shame" (Moschella 231). If I told stories, particular regarding the trials of women and use feminine images of the divine, would it start a cathartic experience for people in their own painful situations yearning to heal? People's behavior may come under the influence of a cathartic experience. The behavior change may produce a new story for them. The new story may influence how visitors reacted, finding it more attractive. Worship attendance may increase.

The actions taken in this project were not different from ordinary requirements of ministry: preaching and teaching. What was not ordinary was content. What was different—reimagining the Biblical stories with feminine qualities of divinity using mythic tales—would be the actual content. Utilizing ordinary practices to deliver an

extra-ordinary message helped make the extra-ordinary seem ordinary. It also helped the ordinary become extra-ordinary. The LAC agreed with the approach.

The project would fail, however, if content remained undelivered. Contents could capture their interest and imagination, and spring them toward transformation as long as I continued to listen to them and respond. I preached the Good News and taught Holy Scripture held true to the principles of basic scholarship and Christian Faith. However, the boundaries of both would be subject to challenge. New paradigms required challenges and some rule breaking. For some, who had spent a lifetime keeping the rules, this seemed risky. What I would discover is exactly how far local church people would venture from the normal path of Biblical interpretation and theology in order to find a new way to sort out issues that have become a burden in their own lives.

The Project

I designed and taught a Bible study about the Divine Feminine that offered lessons in Biblical scholarship and spiritual space for sharing and conversation. I chose particular Biblical women and presented their stories. With the use of additional resources that offered another version of each story, people would hear something different. They would hear about powerful women who feasted on the moonlight and dew of the Great Mother, acting out Her divine will under Her guidance as She co-authored the Gospel story. These stories found in Scripture but reimagined in their telling, would evoke conversation around people's personal story. The transformation of Biblical story could serve as a catalyst for transformation of their collective story.

I kept several journals that I wrote in daily. One journal recorded what actually took place in the Bible study and another recorded the sermons preached. Both of those journals had two accompanied journals detailing the research I completed for both. Another dual set of journals recorded how people respond in each Bible study class and worship experience. These journals recorded conversations and events that directly or indirectly related to the class topic or the sermon. All behavior was part of the story lived out so I kept notes on the whole life of the Fellowship. Filling out these journals helped reflection on what was happening and respond accordingly as we went along.

Moschella writes about what happens when a group co-authors its future. She writes, “Two dynamic activities are involved...first, constructing one’s life story in a new way, using new themes, metaphors, and story lines; and second actually living into these new themes and plot lines that were not previously imagined and tried” (Moschella 237). I paid special attention to both of those two dynamics, construction, and living out of new story. I found that the pivotal feature of the dynamic change was creativity. Moschella points out that creativity and change are interrelated. I found that to be true and took particular interest in it. Moschella writes, “Adaptive leadership involves, among many other things, the art of paying attention to ... how to marshal and support the ‘collective creativity’ of the group” (Moschella 243). The final narrative told the story of that collective creativity.

The Bible Study ran for nine weeks from mid-January to mid-March 2013. My small home in Anthem served as venue. Space was limited. Advertising focused on the

Fellowship at Pioneer. The Lay Advisory Committee members attended. How many people attended over the course of the study indicated basic interest in the topic.

During the same nine-week period, I delivered two sermon series: one on animals in the Bible and one on the emotions of Jesus. Both of these topics served to speak indirectly about the divine images of the feminine within Scripture. I used myth and archetypal tales frequently in the sermons.

Evaluation

The LAC and I listened and watched for a change of story finding expression in words and actions. Believing that change happened over time, we kept weekly notes on observations and conversations during the Bible study and at worship. These notes became the bases of tracking and telling the story of transformation. When the LAC and I talked we queried, are people's souls released and their spirits free? Are there positive interactions among the people or positive conversations? Is there new vitality? If it happened, it ought to be noticeable to all.

After the completion of the project, the LAC conducted personal interviews with participants of the Bible Study and worship to give opportunity for conversation. I recommended that they use very open-ended questions. I recommended questions like, what Bible story or sermon did you like best or least? If a person felt no pressure to fit a certain model, an honest response might come. I further recommended that follow up questions come from the words the interviewee used in their initial response. Safety and relaxation served as key elements for story gathering. The LAC attended the Bible

Study, so that those on the LAC who were not part of Pioneer Fellowship developed a relationship with the participants.

Then the LAC and I reflected on the changes in story we observed and recorded. The reflection culminated in the Site Review.

The observation period continued beyond the project's timetable to see what transpired within the next several months. Was new energy a mere bubble lasting only through Easter, or did the change of narrative, energy, and participation show signs of taking root and growing. I asked the LAC to provide individual responses to the content of the project. I looked for their personal stories.

I also kept a log of visitors and worship attendance. I would know if new members came on the roles, or if I baptized or confirmed new members over the months following the project. I could weekly observe the movement away from dying by assessing the numbers. Was there measurable growth in the numbers in worship? Several dynamics poured into this measurement. First, were there first time visitors? Second, were the visitors returning? Third, were members coming or staying home. I logged attendance numbers with a breakdown of members and visitors. I contacted visitors and track their return and or future membership. Because the church was small, it was easy to track the people.

To avoid unnecessary complexities I kept three numbers. One was the official roster of church participants as printed the end of December 2012 and the official roster as of May 2013. I looked at the total number on this list as well as the types of changes

that may have occurred, i.e. number of children, members vs. constituent, age of new members. This would indicate if Pioneer Fellowship experienced growth.

The second number tracked the worship attendance broken down by regular member, visitor, and children. Between January and May 2013, I logged the worship attendance numbers to compare the beginning and end totals. Because of reliability issues, movement in attendance could not compare to any other numbers in the past. The number indicated how the project affected Sunday worship, a prime indicator of the health of a church.

The third number covered the participants in the Bible Study: what was the total number of participants and the average attendance. The numbers may speak to the interest in the topic as presented over the course of the nine weeks.

To measure the movement toward transformation, we all listened and watched for the story to change, as told and lived out. The point of the project was to observe the effect of transforming story on people's ability to transform their own story. I witnessed the drama of Pioneer unfold through the weeks of the project and after.

As their pastor, I wanted their soul freed and their spirit released. I wanted to provide space and safety for that to happen. The LAC kept conversations private, confidential, and positive. They recorded what people said and not directed or squeezed the response in any specific direction. Based on the stories heard and seen, I could ascertain if souls freed and their spirits released.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHAT HAPPENED

The Story

Once upon a time, there were three ugly, old women, who had big feet and wide hips. They walked side by side, ever so slowly on the country paths, always weighted down by a load on their backs. As they lumbered along, their weight, load, and wide feet made deep imprints on the dirt road, quickly raked smooth by their long braided hair trailing behind them.

As strange as they were, their ugliness came from a particular deformity, developed from the work they did every day. One woman, who carried vast loads of shorn wool, had a drooping lip down which spittle constantly flowed. The lip was elongated by the weight of the spindle as she daily spun fine thread from the wool. Another woman had a large and misshaped thumb making her hand look like a tool. She always carried large bands of yarn as thick as rope, which she daily twirled together from many fine threads, using her thumb as the fulcrum. The third woman had an overly large foot that lay almost perpendicular to her other foot. Because of years on the foot treadle, her foot grew deformed. When the foot hit the ground, the sound boomed for miles. She weaved fine cloth that she then carried on her back.

One day as the three women walked along, they heard a girl sobbing. They approached a young girl sitting beside a stack of wool. The old women asked her what

was wrong. She answered that her very cruel master demanded her to make fine clothes for him in just three days out of the raw wool. Thinking the task impossible, she simple could do nothing more than weep.

One of the old women pulled the girl's hair back off her face and dried the tears from her eyes. Another took a red ribbon from her pack and placed it around the girl's head. The third plaited her hair with the ribbon into two long braids.

Whether it was the kindness of the women, or the beauty of the red ribbon, the girl grew more composed, sat up straight, and watched the women start to work. One hung her spindle from her misshapen mouth; another used her gnarly thumb to twist the threads; and another placed her huge elephant foot on the treadle and began to weave. The girl watched and learned.

Completed in three days, as the master had demanded, the women did not stay there to meet up with him. After laying the fine clothes out for him, the women took the girl away for her own protection.

The three women continued to teach the girl their craft, as they roamed the countryside. Soon, she was skilled at these trades. One day a storeowner who sold fine clothes offered her a job. He and his wife offered the young girl room and board in exchange for her skills. She and the three women thought it a good offer. However, before leaving her, the three women asked of her one thing: invite them to her wedding if she should marry. Thankful for all they had done for her, she eagerly agreed. The years passed on and indeed a suitor came. He was a dashing caballero who rode a great white steed. He loved the young girl and decided that he would ask her to be his bride. Excited

about his pending request, he drove his horse fast along the road toward her humble dwelling.

However, something slowed him down on his journey. The three old women, who never moved fast, were on the same road as he. He yelled at them, “Get out of my way, you old hags!” The women did not even seem to notice him. Finally able to find some clear space on the side of the road, he spurred his great steed and got around them, cursing them as he went.

Upon arriving at his destination, he quickly proposed. She said yes. They began to plan their wedding. She advised him that she would invite three women to the wedding. As she described who they were, he recognized the three ugly women as those he had cursed on the road. Upon telling his intended bride about his recent experience, she cried out, “Oh, no! They are not ugly. They are beautiful and kind. I must ask them to my wedding.” The caballero wanted nothing to do with such hags at his nuptials. The two lovebirds had their first argument. The arrangements were quite unsettled. The caballero would soon change his mind about the invitation, when one day as he was riding his great steed at great speed, the horse suddenly slipped and fell off the cliff. Both horse and rider fell rapidly down a deep canyon.

His prayer for salvation reached the ears of the three ugly women. Quickly the thread pulled, ropes twisted, nets weaved. The stuff of salvation flew down after the horse and rider, catching them in midair, pulling them to safety. He quickly realized who it was that saved him and his horse: the three ugly crones who he had cursed on the road. In gratitude, he thanked the women and quickly extended an invitation to his wedding.

When the festive day arrived, the three ugly crones, laden with loads of thread, yarn, and find cloth stood ever so dignified with all their deformities. In front of them, stood the handsome couple correctly sown together with respect (retelling of *The Story of Las Tres Osas: The Three Old Re-Weavers of Torn Lives*, Estés 2010 a, disc three).

The Lay Advisory Committee

There was no project without the LAC. For different reasons the LAC played the definitive, pivotal role in the project's formation and success. For four of the members, their role began years prior to the project, when I served in their churches. Bringing these people onto the LAC seemed an obvious choice and could not have been otherwise. They had an interest in church growth and were willing to serve as mentors to a struggling congregation.

For example, one of the men studied the Bible with me for seven years. He experienced my initial efforts to weave Biblical interpretation with outside resources, including the Apocrypha and *The Legends of the Jews*. Captivated by the stories in *The Legends*, he bought the whole multi volume set, including the Index. He became fascinated with research so also purchased the five volumes of *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. During the years teaching the class, I started to notice a feminine voice of the divine emanating from texts. Later, in preparing the LAC and discussing the Prospectus with them, I said to this man, "During all those years teaching Bible Study, I never realized that I was actually preparing to do something on the Divine Feminine." He replied, "Well, I did."

Another man on the LAC, from a former congregation, drew my attention to the underlying content of my sermons while serving there, the feminine perspective. Upon leaving that congregation, he said, “Laura, you preach on the Divine Feminine without anyone realizing that is what you are doing.” His comment fostered much for me to contemplate while developing this project.

The two women, married to these two men, also served on the LAC. They characterized in their own ways unique spiritual qualities. One woman had studied the Bible for years, and the other had a spiritual, empathetic soul. The first woman, though trained in traditional and conservative Biblical interpretation, first opened her mind to alternate texts, when she sat in on a short-term class I taught during Advent Season at her church. It detailed the impact of the New Testament Apocrypha on the common version of Jesus’ birth narrative. Being a great lover of all things Christmas, she became interested in these texts and felt quite surprised by their influence on tradition.

The other woman was uniquely suited for the project. She had the ability to act empathically and read people on a spiritual level like few can. She also understood the effects patriarchy had on women in the church. The combination of those two traits made her a valuable asset for the project. She was a woman one wanted at the kitchen table during conversations about gender and the church. The other two members of the LAC attended the Pioneer Fellowship. They were both women. One was a retired airline pilot. She never shrank from confrontation. Because of her background, she understood gender bias very well and had always brought that sensitivity to her faith. She served as Lay Leader at Pioneer.

The other woman was new to Pioneer. She was a UM pastor years ago. She surrendered her Orders out of frustration. For her, the project became an answer to prayers. A Ph.D. herself, she understood the Prospectus immediately, including the evaluation part, with which others struggled. She served as Chair of the Worship at Pioneer.

The LAC successfully understood the project. However, it took time for some of them to grasp the evaluation part. I asked them to keep a journal and write down all observations and thoughts as we go along. They agreed to this and all eagerly jumped in.

The LAC quickly engaged others during the Bible Study and helped to bring them into the project by sharing their own story. One man declared openly to the class that he worshiped the feminine nature of divinity. It is how he understands the Divine. Another shared his seven years of study with me and how he was eager for more. These comments helped people enter the project.

One LAC member privately expressed some frustration a couple weeks into the study. She felt unprepared to help with the study. She said, "I don't know anything about these resources you are using. I do not think I am any good to you. But I can tell you which people are sick and what the illnesses are." Her ability to listen to people and people's comfort in sharing with her indicated her success in the group. I gave her that feedback. She related to the Pioneer Fellowship from the kitchen table. That helped build trust, a requirement for story sharing. It took a little time before the LAC really understood what change would come from a freed soul and a released spirit. When change started to happen though, the LAC noticed and identified it. The two women

from Pioneer helped tremendously in focusing the congregation attention on this project and helped them open up to change. The leadership they provided encouraged people to hear something new, which allowed change to occur.

Luckily, the convincing was easy and quick because everyone started noticing positive change only a couple of weeks into the project.

Teaching the Bible Study

The project required a specially designed Bible study that explored the feminine aspects of divinity through women's stories. The Bible contains a library of such fecundity. Transformative stories of women, that used the Bible as a primary resource, received backing from ancient tales left out of traditional interpretation. However, one cannot let the traditional interpretation of the Bible stories tag along if one reimagines them. This Bible study used fresh and new perspectives. Hence, I titled the Bible Study, *A New Look at an Old Book*.

As provided in the written handout that introduced the class, found in Appendix B, the purpose stated the following: "Through the use of story, a journey through selected Scripture and ancient texts will offer a view of women that shows they are powerful and divinely created in the image of the Divine who is equally male and female. The ancient texts are not meant to supplant Scriptures, but to inform its interpretation." I read the goals to people on the first day the class: "First, create a new excitement for Scripture; second, open an opportunity for a deeper relationship to the Divine; third introduce and instruct on issues regarding Biblical Scholarship" (see Appendix A). I decided by not only tell the stories, but also to explain the excavation process in

discovering them. It meant explaining the use of Biblical research, like historical, cultural, and textual. The planned study included introduction to some new materials and methods. I called this time the Scholarship Moment.

The broader purpose sought to transform congregational story with the use of ancient and meaningful story. Personal story bridged the gap between the Bible story and the church's story. To accomplish this, every study had a designated space for sharing personal experience concerning targeted topics. Since the study concentrated on the femininity in the Bible, those topics included things like prostitution, single motherhood, leadership, female submission, and violence against women.

Thus, the Bible study design included certain regular parts. It began with a Bible story with a female main character that embodied something about the divine nature. Second, it introduced tools of scholarship, including resources unfamiliar to many. Third, it invited the sharing of personal stories. Fourth, it included an ancient story that undergirds more personal meaning and value to the Biblical narrative.

Introduction to the study made clear that this "is not your Father's Bible study." In the first sentence I spoke to the class, I said that this study searched for the Divine Mother in Scripture. I wanted no illusions as to my purpose. If people felt uncomfortable, we could address it. However, I also emphasized that I did not ask them to believe what I presented, but to think on it and see if it made sense to them. They could judge it for themselves. I simply asked for an open mind and heart as I told the stories and for honest responses. My LAC advised me not to expect many to sign up for the class. I hoped for twelve people to sign up though I would have been happy with

fewer. I felt thrilled when twelve people initially sign up for the class. Because some of the leaders of the church signed up, I remained optimistic that more might come. As it turns out, twenty-two people showed up that first evening. By the end of the nine weeks, thirty-six people participated. The size of my home limited further growth. The topic and the conversation did not upset anyone. Rather they appeared increasingly inspired and energized. Men represented one quarter of the participants.

Several parameters set my choice of topics over a nine-week period. First, each story concerned powerful women. Second, each highlighted a different aspect of womanhood with which this Fellowship could identify. Third, each story revealed something about the divine that is feminine. Fourth, each story gave occasion to use a different resource in telling the story. Fifth, each story fitted into a larger story that emerged over the period of the study. With this in mind, I chose the stories and the resources out of a plethora of possibilities.

I sought to ensure that during each class, I would inspire people's curiosity and engage them. I intended to take that engagement and invite them into new Biblical territory. Finally, while in the new territory, I wanted them to tell their own kitchen table stories. Since the traditional interpretations of the Bible represented familiar parlor room stories, I presented the Bible's kitchen stories, thereby inviting people to do the same. These classes took place in my modest home where heirloom quilts cover the walls, giving an atmosphere of the kitchen table, comfortable and safe.

The following summarizes what transpired in each class emphasizing its primary topics of conversation. The details of the study are included in Appendix A and B which

includes a large amount of handouts quoting from primary sources. These handouts seemed critical for the study.

As I proceeded, I paid attention to some fundamental responses from the participants. These responses played a critical role in how I structured the following class. If the responses were different, the next class might have been different. In other words, I chose the stories and resources prior to class, but I did not prepare lesson plans until a few days before class, so that I could respond to ongoing discussions or questions as well as overall movement in the church. I keep listening to them, as they listened to me.

The education level of the class participants was high. Most people had a Bachelor's degree. Four people had doctoral degrees. Three people had theological degrees.

I gave credit for their willingness to venture down a new path to an agreement that I made with them at the start: I would not try to make them believe anything. They had the freedom to choose belief for themselves. I asked them to open their minds, hearts, and souls to hear a story different from what they were accustomed to hearing. I asked them to be willing to share openly and honestly and not feel afraid. They could receive and reject, or receive and accept, any part of what I presented. They were the drivers of their own souls. I think that contract allowed them to feel safe and engaged...throttle forward.

Class One: Womb of Creation

Introduction to the class required complete honesty and deliberate pronouncement of my intent. I used the word repeatedly, that we would study the feminine images of the divine in Scripture. I told them we would study free and independent women living centuries before anyone believed they had either. We went over the printed handout with the stated purpose, goals, and reading assignments over the nine weeks. I explained that I would distribute more handouts through the course.

During the Scholarship Moment, I introduced *The New Interpreter's Bible*, *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, and *The Legends of the Jews*. I presented these resources as generally accepted and reliable religious scholarship. The articles in them served as doorways to other ancient texts, history, and culture.

The Bible passage for day one was Genesis 1, but I asked them to read Genesis 2 as well. I recorded their reaction to the two different creation stories. I asked this discussion question, "How do you feel about the two stories?" The overwhelming response pointed to their belief that the story of Adam and Eve had gender bias. Because this came even from conservative people, conservative thinking may be shifting.

I refocused their attention on the first creation story and asked them to share what they find interesting about it. One response concerned the pronoun "we" God uses in speaking. Why did God speak like that? One woman answered that it spoke to Christ's presence along with the Holy Spirit. The Trinity existed from the beginning. I told them that though this represents a Christian explanation, one might ask what Jews had to say about it. People were curious.

I introduced mystical Judaism at this point. I read a passage from chapter one in *The Legends of the Jews* where the text described Torah in feminine terms. This divinely feminine presence resided with God from the beginning (Ginzberg 1998, 1:3). She played a huge role in the myriad of creation that occurred prior to the creation in Genesis 1 (Ginzberg 1998, 1:4-8).

People appeared stunned to hear of the existence of other creations prior to Genesis. Equally, they expressed surprise that the Feminine actor played an equal role in it. People showed signs of curiosity after reading the text. Minds opened and people's paradigm shifted. Speaking about the Divine Feminine did not seem so absurd when mystical Jews had been doing so all along. I read a piece from *Sefer Yetzirah* that depicts understanding as Mother (Kaplan 1997, 30-31). It furthered their curiosity.

One memory hangs vividly in my mind. The woman, who founded Pioneer Fellowship, now well into her eighties, appeared visibly stunned by the reference to the Torah as female. From that time on, the adventure of discovering the feminine in Scripture hooked her. Her buy in to the project encouraged others to follow. I also discovered that the story I told fell on ears who had been hearing the whispers of it all along. For the first time they could talk about it. I concluded the class by reading the story of *La Loba* by Estés, found in Appendix B (Estés 1992, 25-26). I told them that we would proceed to discover the bones of the feminine in Scripture and sing them back to life. It played well as a metaphor for the project.

Class Two: Sarah

Sarah served as the topic for the second class. I boldly identified her as the Great Mother, personified in one woman; much like Abraham's personification as the Great Father. I used the hook of laughter. I gave out the list of every Bible passage that used "laughter" or "laughed." In almost every case, the passage uses it in a derogatory manner. How can such a wonderful human response, known to be healing and helpful, possibly fall so hard out of Biblical grace? Therein laid the story of how a Greek Goddess, Baubo, associated with mirth and laughter fell into conflict with a Canaanite God, stingy with such mirth. To open up the field of Goddess, I spoke about cultures, which influenced Hebrew people widely and profoundly. I introduced the Goddess as worshipped in early times by Minoa, Egypt, Greek, Canaanite, etc. I distributed readings from *The Hebrew Goddess*, by Raphael Patai, showing the cultural genesis of Goddess (Patai 1990, 23-27). I furthered the study of Sarah by providing the biographical information in *The Legends of the Jews*, where Sarah functioned as a seer and spoke directly to God (Ginzberg 1998, 1:78, 203). She suckled one hundred babies at one time (Ginzberg 1998, 1:262-263). In addition, she liberated other women. Hagar's freedom resulted from Sarah's willingness to give Abraham her prized gift from Pharaoh (Ginzberg 1998, 1:238).

The Biblical text described her marrying two other men, both kings, during her marriage to Abraham in Genesis 12:19 and Genesis 20:2 (NIB 1994, 1:427, 480). *The Legends* tells that story of the Giant Og also sought to marry Sarah (Ginzberg 1998, 3:343). I reminded the class that we name the practice of women marrying more than one man at the same time polyandry. It may indicate Matriarchy. I spoke of the

conviction of some scholars have in the existence of a matriarchal age, under the authority of the Goddess. I suggested that Sarah's portrayal in *The Legends* fitted the matriarchal model.

Then I moved to the story of Sarah's laughter and the angel's curt response to it. I told the mythic story of Baubo, the very ancient Greek Goddess of sexual humor (Estés 1992, 365-367). I spoke of her buxom, large body, nude, with raw sexual power. She had the ability to challenge social mores yet brought belly laugh into the most tragic of times, as she did with Demeter, struck by the loss of her daughter. I asked the class how Baubo related to the story of Sarah. People saw the connection. She laughed with the sexual humor of a Goddess. She laughed at the image of two aged bodies copulating, and at herself pregnant and nursing. One woman said, "Any elderly woman today would do the same thing." The story of Baubo hit a homerun in class.

When returning to the story of the angel's announcement to Sarah, the class saw that she laughed with the humor that is raw, sexual, and earthy. Yet the angel of the male God condemns her for it because he did not understand it. He took it as an insult to God's power. He did not get the joke and could not appreciate the raw bawdiness of its humor. The Bible and later the church followed that path.

People in the class quickly perceived Baubo as very likable and engaging. They insightfully saw the stark contrast between her and the male God with whom they were familiar. People commented that the effect of the male God promoted preference for women who are thin, silent, obedient, or prudish. One member of the class laughingly

joked that this Bible study was much more like Baubo. No pruders may enter. Barriers fell quickly, with men joining in the fun.

This early in the Bible, the rules of gender conflict received solidification. Rules that favored the male God, gave men authority to edit and interpret the stories. The original kitchen story of the Great Mother Sarah remained and continued to find voice in the written record. No one could strip her laughter. Still a powerful woman, the angel could only scold her for it. Torah remained Female after all. Sarah's voice would not grow silent, no matter how much editing of text happened.

The highlight of this class for me happened upon dismissal. A class participant, a new person not yet a church member, stood up and pronounced loudly, “I’m going home and tell my husband I have the body of a Goddess.” Baubo stood embodied.

Class Three: Dinah

Dinah’s life tells a sad story that provoked a lot of emotion in people. Like many harsh stories about violence against women, interpreters go through Olympic style mental gymnastics to smooth over its harshness or to point the finger of shame and guilt in the wrong direction. I did not want to fool people. I sought more honesty. I wanted the pain to come out and allow people to stand in it. Most woman and many men, related to the pain so it served as catharsis. The pain started coming out when they learned about the translations of words. The translators inconsistently chose different English words for the same Hebrew word in the Old Testament (NIB 1994, 1:576-580). In some places, the Hebrew word translated as “rape” in the case of Dinah and Shechem, translators used

“slept with” in other passages. I took the class through examples of this discrepancy (see Appendix A). The bias existed in textual interpretation and certainly translation. During the Scholarship Moment, we talked about translations and inconsistency. The class surmised that interpretative bias became part of the accepted translated text. That fact was a revelation for one man. He thought that chapter titles in the Bible were part of the original text. I provided further information on interpretive methods and tools to show the variety available. This helped explain the difficulty that has risen over the years about conflict among interpretations.

The point in question related to Dinah's supposed rape. All Bibles with story headings (not part of the original text) labeled the incident as a rape. However, everything indicated an intentionality to tell the story of Dinah and Shechem as a rape to justify the later actions of Simeon and Levi. The people understood the hypocritical nature of the two brothers who accused Shechem of doing a deed of which they stood guilty. Quickly, the class saw the bias in how the telling of the story altered the formation of characters. One can easily read the story as a real love affair between Dinah and Shechem. It reads as a story about a young girl who went to town, maybe for a woman's festival, where she took up with a man. He not only becomes her lover, but a suitor, and the father of her daughter. Yet this story jumps instead into a horrific story about Jacob's sons and their vengeful actions. They cast the dye that dictated the plot for centuries to come: war with neighbors. What provoked her brothers' action? Was the reason less about the sexual encounter and more about the kind of man that she chose? He lived as an outsider. Did his sexual liaison automatically make it a violence again

Dinah in their eyes? Another provocation may have been that the brothers saw Dinah as property. Whatever the motivation, her brothers victimized her. The Bible stories as traditionally told cast women in the victim role, blamed her for their actions, and expected her to abide without justice. Did Scripture editors claim this as the natural role for women?

I asked the class who defined rape either then or now. They responded uniformly that men decided. I explained to them that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2012) recently changed the legal definition for rape. The two changes now meant that a woman did not have to show that she fought the perpetrator in order for it to be legitimate rape. In addition, rape included forcible penetration into any area of the women, not just vaginal. The people in the class showed shock to learn this. Certainly, they said, it indicated why many women did not come forward when raped. Most people had no idea about the criteria used by law. I reminded the class the state of Arizona had hundreds of rape kits yet unexamined and that Arizona still did not conform to national standards for reporting sexual predators.

The next discussion dwelt on the prevalence of rape in America today. How prevalent could violence toward women be if we broaden it to include physical abuse and stalking? I provided the class the latest statistics from the Center and Disease control and Department of Justice Survey on Violence on Women (2012). The statistics described three types of assault. The data claimed 52% of women reported physical abuse, 17% reported rape, and 10% reported being stalked. If one assumed these numbers did not overlap, potentially 79% of women in America today have experienced some sort of

physical assault on them. After hearing this data, people discussed stories they knew indicating the frequency of these events in people's lives and about how perpetrators were often members of family or close friends.

I asked them if they knew about what Rick Warren said about men abusing women. A woman said she had heard that he said women's abuse was part of what women must bear for men's original sin. I then discussed a study done by an Evangelical pastor in Phoenix that indicated domestic violence culture might be stronger in the church than outside the church because it was accepted.

In returning to Dinah, I moved past the victimization and family violence. The rest of the story about Dinah, found in *The Legends*, drew her out of that role and offered her justice. As a true granddaughter of Sarah, she finally received vindication and championed over those who did her wrong. Simeon married his half-sister, but Dinah bore a daughter, Asenath. Shechem fathered the child. Though Simeon wanted to kill Asenath, Jacob forbade it. Jacob created a tin necklace for her with an inscription that indicated her true lineage. He put it around her neck, and then left the baby under a thorn bush. An Angel of the Lord picked up the baby and took her to Egypt where Potiphar and his wife, who were barren, raised the child. They loved Asenath. Years later, when Joseph came to Potiphar's household, Joseph and Asenath fell in love and married. The necklace around her neck told Joseph of her true lineage. They married and had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim (Ginzberg 1998, 2:37-38, 77). Later, Jacob adopted these two boys as his own and Manasseh's tribe received ten times the amount of the Promise land than all the others.

I heard from many women in the class about stories they knew about gender violence. They talked freely about what rape was. The level of empathy with Dinah was palatable. Among the men in the class, they felt the pain of Jacob who could not fathom the destruction caused by his two sons. Their response reminded me of how good men felt when presented with abusive men. The response of the men illustrated something very important: this study spoke not just to women, but to men also. Everyone appeared mesmerized by the story of Asenath and the final justice awarded Dinah through the inheritance given to her grandsons. They felt better. A pain freed itself with justice served. Because people had not known this part of the story, the question of its legitimacy came up. Some people wondered if it were legend only with no basis in fact. I took the opportunity to explain the main feature of religious story. I asked them if Scripture served people better as fact or as meaning. They admitted that meaning served a higher purpose. The story of Dinah's final justice helped people come to terms with violence against women acknowledging that justice reigned, even though vindication came not from the male justice system, but from the justice of the Divine Mother. The value of facts fell quickly when people craved meaning.

I argued for the importance of victims never staying victims. Triumph must be part of the story for healing to happen. Importing stories from outside faiths and cultures allowed women to triumph. In the framework of Scripture, where there existed so many examples of women's victimization, imported stories evened out that playing field. The stories have qualities of powerful femininity.

Class Four: Tamar

Coming so quickly after the story of Dinah, Tamar's story strengthened the image of women not as victims, but as commanding humans. It made the Dinah story even more remarkable.

I opened up the class with a request; describe your first experience with prostitution or prostitutes? People laughed at the question but then went about telling stories of early memories of knowing a prostitute, seeing a prostitute, or hearing about prostitution. A variety of opinions arose as to the actual definition of a prostitute because in rural areas, a loose woman, may have been considered a prostitute, though she may not have worked as such. The stories set in a city described professional prostitution better. People struggled with definition verses cruel labeling. The conflict between real prostitution and a woman's sexual behavior set up the story of Tamar very well. I explained to them that we would deal with actual prostitution in two weeks when we tell the story of Rahab, but Tamar did not practice prostitution. I started the story of Tamar with the end of the story of Dinah in Genesis 34: 31, where brothers of Dinah called her a prostitute. Certainly, nothing in the text suggested that. Rather they labeled her in a derogatory manner. The reference went to the heart of how they perceived her sexual behavior, rather than to her profession. We just saw the same pattern in people's stories today. Something very similar happened to Tamar. A big difference existed between a loose woman and a professional prostitute. Tamar had sex outside of marriage with Judah, but she did not serve as a temple prostitute. She did actually serve as a temple priestess.

What confuses us about the Tamar story abides in the translation of “Qedeshol” as temple prostitute. I shared the article in NIDB that said no evidence existed for temple prostitution in the Old Testament, but rather that these men and women, whom the Bible spoke about, served as holy priests and priestesses, set apart to work in the temples of Goddess. Some of them were married or otherwise engaged in sexual activity but that remained outside their religious duties (NIDB 2009, 4:652).

As a daughter of a priest, Tamar most certainly inherited her father’s holy role. A priestess herself, she probably served the consort of the supreme male deity of Canaan. By the power invested in her priestess role, Tamar earned entitlement to respect and honor. When this did not happen with the legal requirement that she have a child, she took the action available to her, sexual seduction. I asked the class about sexual seduction. I asked people to consider whether procreative seduction serves its purpose. All seemed to agree that people used seduction all the time, and often without mutual consent. Many in the class believed that men used it most often. The topic again wandered back to prostitution, the questionably topic in this story (NIB 1994, 1:604-606). Did the fact that Tamar dress up and veil herself before going to the roadside prove prostitution? I brought up the question if people used veils back then like today as a normal way to dress. Someone brought up today’s Muslim women who wore the veil to depict modesty. People became skeptical that Tamar’s veil indicated anything at all. Although Judah’s payment to Tamar may seem like payment of sexual services, it did not prove prostitution either. It may represent a simple gesture of gratitude or appreciation. Is there any difference between that and dinner and a movie before sex during many dates

today? People saw that sexual behavior played out not so differently today. We ought not to call it prostitution.

We dislodged the idea that Tamar acted as a prostitute and replaced it with an image of a powerful and assertive woman. The change made her even more twenty-first century. We thought of the single women today who bore children knowingly and purposefully. Tamar's unmarried status did not stop her from planning a pregnancy and supporting a child. This actually put her in the category of 40% of families today, with the mother being the financial responsible person for a child according to the Pew Research Center (2013). Many women today are single like her. Amazingly, Tamar commanded the emblems of Judah's power so quickly during their liaison. It indicated how women actually moved in society: powerfully. When judgment time came, Judah knew quickly he acted wrongly. He knew Tamar held the moral high ground (NIB 1994, 1:604-606).

The lesson of Tamar spoke to the meaning of a story that often rested upon understanding words and context. If viewed from the perspective of a forceful single woman and mother, meaning altered even more. The new story smashed some stereotypes people held. People, so used to seeing women as victims rather than embolden, were given the opportunity to make a big paradigm shift. Doing so threw away many basic assumptions and replaced them with other assumptions. We could assume Goddess worship existed; priestesses existed; women acted independently, often under the authority of the divinity.

The Scholarship Moment for the class on Tamar addressed terminology and translations. We also talked about Hermeneutics: how meaning of text altered according to individual eyes that read it. When independent women read stories, they saw something different from those who are under the control of men and their interpretation. Being honest with what your eyes see and your heart senses, frees both women and men from tradition's snares. The class saw men's intention to write renditions of the story that remove the power of Tamar and cast her as a victim. The male story said her family put her aside, her requests ignored. Her salvation came only from the grace of a male God.

In the different story, Tamar basked under the influence of the feminine images of the divine that work to sustain and grow families through the most natural of means. By this time, the class acknowledged that the images of the divine that are feminine influenced creation, procreation, fertility, and justice. They understood how these same dynamics worked in their own families. By this time, I could tell the class related well to the material. They shifted their paradigm. They realized that male theology or politics did not reveal the feminine qualities. The natural power of women drew from a source outside the dominion of men, but a source still as close as everyone's hearth.

Class Five: Miriam

By this time in the study, questions and comments made by the participants took up the largest part of the class. I included details of the conversation in the complete study found in the Appendix A. The conversation always stayed on topic. After much discussion, I moved them on to Miriam. Miriam seemed to illustrate the best in the

Divine Feminine: wise, active, accountable, celebratory, and fertile. I introduced Avivah Zornberg and her books to the class during the Scholarship moment. I related the story of Miriam told by Zornberg in *The Particulars of Rapture* (Zornberg 2000, 17-80). This Jewish Rabbi gave authenticity to my process. She used the legends of the Jews and reframed a Biblical story from a feminine perspective. In many ways, Zornberg served as my role model. People enjoyed Miriam's story, finding it fun and mesmerizing. It spoke well of her duties and power. It indicated her association with the Goddess of water, as a midwife, and as songstress at the Crossing of the Sea. Finally buried near a spring in the wilderness, Scripture could not hide her honor. Like the death of Sarah, people mourned her loss for days.

Part of the larger story of Miriam took the lead in Chapter Two of this dissertation. The wondrous tale of cruelty by the master found answers in mirrors, seduction, and fertility. It told of bravery and leadership on Miriam's part. Her story led to a discussion about women as leaders. The class drew contrasts between female leaders then and now. During the time of Miriam, people functioned in a religious world where the femininity received recognition and worship. Today, there is no such recognition. How has that affected female leaders? The class understood well the dynamics for women leaders functioning in predominantly male institutions. Many women in the class worked in professional roles, either retired or active. They all understood the dynamics. Equally, the men in the class understood. One man argued forcibly that things were changing in the work place. Several women responded to him by saying, "Not fast enough." One woman shared the heartless way women treat other women in the

workplace, mimicking ruthless men rather than sisterhood. She drew the conclusion that not having a feminine image of Divinity may contribute to the problem. Another shared the example of the lack of equal pay. Another shared experience brought up women having to produce more work than men did for recognition. Another woman said that improvement did not move fast enough. They concluded that we should not be content with small steps.

At the closing of class, I summarized the picture of the Divine Feminine that our voyage of discovery found. She represented the Womb of Creation (in Word, Spirit, and Wisdom), the Great, Honored Mother (Sarah), the Seductress and Lover (Dinah), the Weaver of Destiny (Tamar), and the Giver of New Life (Miriam). God as Mother took shape.

Class Six: Rahab

The story of Rahab adds another dimension to the God as Mother in the Old Testament: She Who Turns the Wheel of History, depicted in other cultures as the three crones, or the three blind Furies.

I reminded people of the discussion about prostitutions. I redirected the discussion to professional prostitutes today and the places where the sex trade actively took place. People pointed out that many women involved in the trade also raised and supported children and family. They also suggested that male pimps and the pornographic industry victimized them. I relayed to them the fact that mostly men controlled modern prostitution and pornography. During earlier times, women controlled

it. I reminded them of the double standard in America which supports a very lucrative pornography business while distaining its immortality. The class acknowledged that church going people seemed to accept this double standard. For men who use pornography, church people overlooked them. However, women received judgment based on a different standard. After all, how many working prostitutes have you known in your church? Whether considered a prostitute or just loose, whether a single mother, divorced or not, women found themselves on the wrong side of sexual mortality. These women did not often attend church, but Scripture certainly retained their story. Over time, Christianity pushed out the harlot and kept only those women who abided by the male standard of womanhood. The fact that increasingly women do not seem to mind this bias appeared problematic to several class members. It somehow disqualifies too many women from attending church.

Older women tuned into this gender dynamic, probably because they witnessed it within their families and churches over the years. Older men and women, still in the church, understood these gender issues. It may indicate a reason why this Bible study went so well. To some degree, the study served as a safe place to talk about the issues regarding sex that has stuck in people's throat for years.

We returned to talking about Rahab's life. We talked about why the spies go to the house of prostitution. It offered anonymity but information. We discussed the power that she wields in the community, and how she used that power to help overthrow a tyrannical king who taxed too heavily. As a revolutionary, she seized an opportunity to

serve the greater good. Like Tamar before her, she did not belong to the Hebrew lineage, yet Jesus' genealogy included her.

I shared with them that in Canaanite society people used the words for indebtedness and prostitution interchangeably (NIB 1998, 2:592-593). Poor people very much in debt had to prostitute themselves to those whom they owed, like Rahab. Rahab acted powerfully and with self-sufficiency. She saw in the spies ways to overturn the current power structure that make her, her family, and her community so miserable (NIB 1998, 2:592-593).

I told them the story about Rahab latter marriage to Joshua that attached her whole family to the tree of the Jews, much to the chagrin of many orthodox Jews (Ginzberg 1956, 6:174). Rabbis also included her on two lists: the Most Beautiful Women and the Women of Valor (Ginzberg 1998, 4:117, 5:258). I asked them if there was an effort to domesticate Rahab by making her more acceptable to be on those lists. Marrying Joshua would do that. In other words, was the valor of Rahab only acceptable if she married a Jewish man?

As I finished this session, I introduced information important in making the big transition next week, from the Old Testament into the New. I gave evidence that women had vested power and continued to play a role in history, reminding them of Cleopatra and her extraordinary power over the Roman Empire. I told the story of Queen Salome and her remarkable reign just prior to Jesus' time. No one in the class knew that there was a Queen on the throne at Jerusalem just prior to Jesus, or that her reign appeared successful though controversial. I spoke about the altar area thought to exist in the

Temple at Jerusalem where women worshipped the Consort of God (NIDB 1994, 1:298). I spoke about the powerful Goddesses worshiped in and around Palestine, like Isis, Artemis, and Athena, and about the enduring influence of the Oracle of Delphi, run by priestesses. Worship with feminine images of divinity thrived just before and during the time of Jesus. Women continued to reflect that power in education, religion, politics, life style, and economics.

I introduced new texts as New Testament resources. I described the Nag Hammadi discovery and texts, as well as those of the Dead Sea Scrolls. I showed examples of other New Testament Apocrypha, even showing them a century old pastor's book of a collection of Apocrypha. Many in the class asked about Gnosticism. Because of the large number of people asked about it, I prepared readings and planed time to discuss it. An obstacle for many, I wanted to deal with it. Interestingly, with all I had said, the people pushed back on Gnosticism. I explained Tertullian's role in defining Gnosticism. I clearly announced that scholars now see the Gnostic term as unusable because of the diversity among the texts it purports to describe. I promised to provide readings from a variety of scholars offering opinions about the term and its meaning.

The class ended with a simple Ash Wednesday Service. It was a natural service with no written materials. We sang *Kim Bah Yah* to begin. The sense of the Spirit hung thick in the air like the scent of a summer garden. As I went around the room and placed ashes on people's forehead, it was silent, yet active with a spiritual embrace engaging us all. After so much talk, silence felt good to us, a great contrast and very holy.

Class Seven: The Canaanite Woman

I distributed readings on Gnosticism and conducted a discussion about the variety of opinions offered in them. The readings and discussion seemed to put their issues at rest. They began to understand that Gnosticism's meaning is different than it used to be. Next, we talked about Jesus and the Canaanite Woman. The story of the Canaanite woman gave opportunity to talk about women's freedoms, rights, and power around the Mediterranean during the time of Jesus. I distributed readings from several sources in NIDB. The readings offer a completely different view on women than what they had assumed. Women had freedom to have businesses, engage in politics, travel, receive education, worship in the temples of Goddesses, and be priestesses (NIDB 1994, 5:885-8). In addition, many of these women were single whether they got that way through divorce, being a widowed, or just choosing it. I suggested that many of the women mentioned in the Bible might be single. The background helped support the image of the Canaanite woman as an independent, self-assured woman, likely a single mother and perhaps worshiping at the Temple of the Goddess Diana (Artemis). I made that claim because Diana had a canine companion. Perhaps knowing this Jesus used the dog in metaphor.

The story depicted her as self-assured. She talked to Jesus and made a large request of him. Neither threatened nor intimidated by His Disciples as they tried to dismiss her, she remained steadfast. Nothing dissuaded her. Because I also preached on this story within a week of the lesson, I held the conversation to the general description of self-assured women during Jesus time that seemed in stark contrast to the traditional image. Much discussion wrapped around women and Jesus, centering on how men had

engaged in attempts to push women aside. Quickly women spoke up about the institutional church's male hierarchy and its effects on women. They appeared to me like the Canaanite woman herself courageous enough to speak the truth. Though this time around, the men listened intently to women speak and did not try to brush them off like the Disciples. The conversation automatically led to a discussion about Mary as mother and Mary Magdalene. I took the opportunity to tell the story of Mary, Mother of Jesus as told in *The Infancy Gospel of James*. Mary was dedicated and raised in the temple where the priests saw to her betrothal to Joseph. People loved this story of Mary. A woman joked, "Were the temple virgins cleaning ladies?" I quickly corrected that image and said they were revered. The comment indicated how unlikely church people were to assume that anyone actually put women in an honored position. They were accustomed more to seeing the lowly position of women elevated, which was how theology had responded to women's roles. They were less accustomed to hearing about women stationed already in elevated positions. I then introduced the concept of the monks in the eleventh century who craved a different model of governance. They found it in the image of God as Mother, referring to the books by Caroline Walker Bynum.

Class Eight: Mother Mary

The next two classes almost taught themselves. Mother Mary and Mary Magdalene were familiar women who have been the topics of popular culture offering a myriad of views, perspectives, and information. However, I upped the stakes of this discussion by providing a picture of a painting by Quirizio de Murano called *The Savior*,

which shows Jesus with breasts from which milk poured out (Bynum 1987, loc. 46). Christ's depiction as a nursing woman came as a surprise. Hearing about the feminization of Jesus in some artwork came as further surprise. Why did they never know this, they asked. I added the information Bynum gave about the overabundance of women joining monastic communities during the eleventh century. The relevant story I told was one Clarissa Pinkola Estés has in her book, *Untie the Strong Woman* (2011). The story took place in a poor Hispanic church in Denver, Colorado. A mural of the Virgin of Guadalupe above the altar dominated the church. Through the years, countless people prayed to Her and found refuge in Her caring presence.

Sadly, a new priest changed all that. Renovation built a wall in front of the mural, and those in charge placed a statue of the crucified Jesus in Her honored place. A high pulpit, level with the image of Jesus, replaced the humble lectern. The people tried to stop all of this from happening, even taking a petition to the Bishop, but to no avail. Finally, they had to live with the fact that their beloved Mother was stuck in the back of what became a broom closet.

Devoted people found a way. The people began to find their way into the broom closet and knelt before their beloved Virgin. Sometimes lines of people stood just outside the closet. No one could stop the love of the Mother, nor people's devotion to Her, though it may be hidden and obscure (Estés 2010, 105-115). The people in the class perceived Mother Mary as Mother Goddess. How the church developed the cultural worship around Mother Mary drew people's attention. Her placement as the Queen of Heaven vindicated the presence of divine femininity in church history. One member of

the class asked why reverence for Mary as Queen of Heaven did not come over to Protestantism. We had a rich discussion about how the God as Mother lived on in Protestantism. Protestant churches reflect Her with qualities like potlucks, allowing ministers to marry, allowing women to be clergy, emphasis on the physical structure of the church as womb for the spirit, and serving the poor. Because Protestantism tried to discourage the worship of saints, Mother Mary herself, however, failed to make it in.

The class jumped forward in time very quickly. Probably through popular culture, their awareness of the importance of Mary as Mother, Virgin, and Queen, made them wonder why church authorities denied access to her spiritual potential over the years. I now saw these people wanting the image of God as Mother in their religious lives.

During the Scholarship moment, we read together a narrative from the *Pista Sophia* describing the feminine nature of divinity. People breathed in the words in this ancient document that describe Her. They realized it spoke to the same Femininity revealed in the Scripture stories they had already studied.

By the end of class, participants had grown more conscious of the Divine Mother present in Christianity and the church even today, though rarely acknowledged as such. By their conversation, I witnessed their starting to take notice for themselves of Her presence. One man shared his ongoing faith in God as Mother. A woman shared her belief that women always sustained the church and without them, the church would die. Another spoke of the building as a womb, where her re-creation happened. Another shared how the class taught her to respect her body.

Class Nine: Mary Magdalene

Most church people have a familiarity with Mary Magdalene and stories about her. However, many did not realize the importance she had in the Nag Hammadi texts, where she took the role of a religious leader. The class read several passages about her from these texts, such as *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, emphasizing her conflict with Peter. I provided readings from a variety of authors, i.e. Elaine Pagels, Barbara Thiering, and Margaret Starbird. These readings provided a variety of views of Mary, all of them out of the mainstream of traditional interpretation. I drew attention to the variety of resources used by each of these authors. Thiering used the Dead Sea Scrolls. Starbird used gematria. I pointed out that non-traditional resources used by authors, expanded the possibility that images of Mary would vary. I introduced the *Gospel of Peter* and the *Gospel of Mary*. I read certain parts that showed the conflict between Mary and Peter. Quickly, people saw in these stories the paradigm that would plague the church: the church leadership insisting upon male leaders while putting down women and the feminine images of divinity. The gender conflict led to male Biblical interpretation, male theology, and to an all-male hierarchy.

Some people in the class argued that United Methodism had changed all this gender stuff. I reminded them that UMC had simply allowed ordination of women, and that those denominations that have women clergy represent a small percentage of Christianity. I also reminded them, that women's ordination could not sway the long history of male storytelling. The only thing that would bring change would be balancing the male story with the female story.

By this time, the class realized that the issues around Mary Magdalene sprung from other soil than whether she married Jesus or whether she bore his children. The larger issue had to do with her assertiveness, standing, independence, honor, and leadership. They realized that whether priests could marry did not represent the only issue, which asked whether women could stand equal to men as the Divine Feminine could stand equal to the Divine Masculine. The people understood this. As a test for that understanding, I created an oral survey. I had two lists of words: belief, forgiveness, redemption, love, doctrine; and faith, grace, salvation, compassion, story. I asked them to decide which words described the Divine Masculine and which ones defined the Divine Feminine. In each case, they got it right. The first list represented qualities of the Divine Masculine. The second list represented qualities of the Divine Feminine.

By this time, people talked and discussed freely. They oozed energy and enthusiasm. I just sat back and let the conversation flow. I wrote up a two-page summary of what we had learned about the Divine Feminine over the nine weeks and distributed it (Appendix B). She characterized Prime Matter, Torah, fertility, nourishment, and joy. She received wounds and healed wounds in others. She understood family relationship and willingly defied danger when the need for protection arose. She exercised pure freedom that abides on the edge of chaos ready to use Her gravitas for transformation. She everywhere challenged the status quo and reminded us all of her depth and mystery. Her image possessed the Holy Spirit and Sophia, who allowed God to bring the salvation of Jesus into existence. She spawned Gnosis, the

Truth out of which God moved and performed. God existed as Her Consort and She as His. She provided the raw material. He provided the pattern.

The class concluded with introduction to the book by Pamela McCorduck and Nancy Ramsey, *The Futures of Women: Scenarios for the 21st Century* (1996). I explained how their work grew out of the Fourth International Conference on Women held in Beijing, China. We read the four possible future scenarios for women they proposed ten years ago. I told the class that the authors were working on an update to this book. So, the question I posed to them was which scenario do you see as being most dominate now ten years later? Their response fascinated me. They all saw the Backlash occurring, but that it was fading. They finally seem to agree that the last scenario, separate but equal represented what they observed most in and out of the church.

The Sermons

Two domains associated with the feminine nature of divinity, animals and human emotion occupied the central themes for the two sermon series. The rationale for animals as topic was that animals are part of Mother Nature, about which we all feel comfortable speaking. Further, people love animal stories. Animals do not have theological significance today, but played an essential role for the early Hebrew and later Jewish culture. The Hebrew people, unlike us, acknowledged their importance daily, as food, protection, companions, transportation, and economic wealth. Equally important, animals had spiritual qualities and the ancient Hebrew respected them for it. Each type of animal symbolized spiritual qualities unique to them. In early times, animals represented

the Divine. That representation forever tied them to the spiritual virtues. Tribes of Israel used them as emblems, thereby giving a tribe the quality of the animal, i.e. the Lion of Judah. This fact made it easy to tie animals to spiritual lessons.

For the series on emotions, I chose to focus on Jesus's emotional states that offered penetrating views to the inner world of this man, a world not often viewed. However, when following the emotion, the spirit lagged not far behind. The final stories I picked textually indicated strong emotional states, the kind that all of us have a hard time dealing with: selfishness, greed, anger, grief, and doubt.

The stories showed Jesus as all too human, making him much more approachable even understandable. Emotion played a role in the spiritual essence of creating new images for the Divine, which plays to these stories of Jesus, though often not interpreted as such. The stories indicated images of Jesus throughout the Gospels. I would tell them like the stories came from the kitchen, not the parlor.

I did not write sermons out prior to their delivery. I wrote out the text the day after. Appendix C contains the written sermons based on my memory of speaking them. I decided on this course because I wanted the sermons to be fresh and dramatic. To do so, I prepared myself well in advance and wove stories within the larger stories. I would fill the role of the oral storyteller, the best way to tell stories.

Sermon Series One: Animals

The Bible has so many stories about animals from which to choose. I knew I did not want to choose the most obvious ones. I settled on some stories where animals

seemed to bud from the cultural roots, even perhaps part of the landscape so naturally there that they were overlooked.

In the first sermon on “The Color of Goats,” I described the animal husbandry of Jacob. I did a lot of internet research about goats, the types of goats, their qualities, and their history in the Middle East. I concluded that Jacob might have interbred the domesticated goat of his time with the wild black goat, which served as the basis of the story. The offspring from this breeding produced a goat that gave more milk with less water intake. Clearly, Jacob’s goat did better than Laban’s goats.

Jacob accomplished the interbreeding by placing females next to water with freshly cut branches, a food source for wild goats. He made his own goat bordello. The offspring of this interbreeding would be a multi colored goat, the kind of goat that built up Jacob’s herd. What goats he had already gleaned from Laban’s herds probably resulted from random interbreeding with the wild goats. Did Jacob’s close watch on the goats teach him that those multi colored goats produced more milk; hence, he had the idea to breed more? I intended to substitute a miraculous explanation with one of human ingenuity using what nature offered. In creating a natural explanation for the story, the Divine creation dwelt within nature not superimposed upon it.

I received immediate response from the congregation. A veterinarian showed interest in this interpretation. Additionally, a young father in the congregation shared how he loved hearing a scientific explanation for the Bible stories. Their responses encouraged me.

I then did a two-part sermon on “Balaam’s Donkey.” I used these sermons to illustrate how God called the non-Hebrew into prophecy, emphasizing the lack of differentiation between the insider and outsider for the Divine. It offered a good platform to step out of the box culturally and religiously. The lessons Balaam learned we could learn as well: listen to the animals.

The early history of the story helped unfold how animals functioned in worship, illustrated by the sacrifice of large numbers of animals later in the story. For many people, the talking donkey held fascination. According to the stories in *The Legends*, Balaam favored his donkey and its companionship above all others, even his horse (Ginzberg 1998, 3:365). Supporting the notion that animals carried spiritual sensibility, this animal saw the divine presence on the road three times and communicated spiritual knowledge to her master. Yes, the goat was female. This wonderful story harkened back to an older stratum of storytelling, like Aesop’s Fables, yet its meaning transcends time. What pet owner does not believe that their animals speak to them nor witnesses behavior enriched by their spiritual qualities?

In the second part of the sermon, I talked about the lack of virtue in Balaam that leads to his ultimate failure as a prophet. Against that backdrop, I talked about the way animals were symbols of virtues for the Jews. Daily they would be reminded of the virtues that God expected of them. Without that, they could become like Balaam. It does not take much leap to see that disrespect for animals often accompanies loss of personal virtue.

Moving to the New Testament, I preached on the Canaanite Woman and the use of a dog in metaphor. This represented the only sermon specifically about a woman. The story showed the effects a self-confident woman had on others. Unafraid to approach Jesus, she asked him to heal her daughter. She stands up to the intimidation of His male colleagues who try to dismiss her. Jesus plays almost the role of a patsy, pulled to appease his male colleagues, but finally submitting to the woman rather than to them. Jesus chose to respect her request.

She took it upon herself to change Jesus' metaphor about the dog. Jesus told her that he did not come to feed the dogs, but she replied that even dogs get crumbs under the table. She knew she did not carry the influence of his male companions, but neither did she want it. She had her own power. Who else could have corrected Jesus on the use of His metaphor and have it remain in Scripture? Her status may have rested on her ability to find images of herself in the Divine. Jesus support of and respect for a pagan woman who probably worshipped at the temple of a Goddess, indicated his sense of comfort with powerful women and those feminine images of divinity. He clearly submitted to their guidance.

The story of Jesus's donkey during Passover served as the topic for the next sermon. I introduced the different renditions of the story among the Gospel writers paying attention to the age, gender, and the number of donkeys accompanying Jesus. Matthew's story had Jesus on a donkey, but leading a colt. Matthew further confused the issue because he parenthetically wrote, "the foal of a colt." The problem in Matthew rested on gender. A foal is female and a colt is male, indicating a second animal. In the

other three Gospels, Jesus actually rode the young animal with no second one around at all.

The problem seemed to be with the use of Zechariahs 9:9 from the Septuagint. Confusion swirled around whether the passage talks about one animal or two. Did the reference indicate a second and possible third animal, or did it simply describing the first animal, providing a genealogy so to speak? This sermon offered an opportunity to discuss text and translations, particular as it pertains to the New Testament writers as they seek to conform to the Old and making mistakes along the way. Rather than being an actual description of what animal Jesus rode, the writers seemed occupied with fulfilling the Old Testament prophesies. The real problem resides not with a mistake in translation, but with what that mistake costs: the image of a grown man riding a colt.

Finally, the sermon was about common sense, another natural quality, often dismissed as a tool in Bible study. Most people in the congregation knew that one does not ride a colt. No one during Jesus time would have done that. It destroyed the young animal for later use. People considered animals too precious to hurt or treat so inhumanely. Jesus would not have done that. Why then did some Gospel writers claim that he did? Adherence to tradition and doctrine dominated their thoughts. Therein lays the story of error in understanding an Old Testament text while being driven by a compulsion to fulfill it. They ought to have known better, but their common sense did not prevail. Our common sense needs to prevail by faulting the writers with a mistake and moving on. The effort to treat Gospel writers as incapable of mistakes, has led to a

morally reprehensible animal rights violation in Scripture: the depiction of Jesus riding a young colt, injuring it for life. In no way ought we to believe that really happened.

Pigs and the story of Jesus sending the demons of a possessed man into a herd of them formed the final sermon. I gave a psychological interpretation of the demons as being part of a man's terrible mental illness that demoted him to violent, inhuman behavior. People found this behavior all too familiar today and yet just as puzzled to understand it. Mental illness today causes the same propensity for violence that this man experienced. The brutality caused his removal from society and tied him down in a graveyard, where Jesus originally found him. When Jesus sent the demons into the herd of pigs, he actually sent the man, full of psychosis. The action indicated his demented state. Finally, the man pulled himself back from the brink of destruction. Self-consciousness of his own behavior prevailed when he no longer joined in the company of humans, but found himself in the company of pigs. The sermon offered a look at violent mental illness, and the way Jesus healed it. Healing came not through demonization, but through relationship, that bridges the inner and outer worlds. Relation with both the human and animal world keeps us sane by reminding us who we are and where we belong.

The congregation shared that they had never heard this explanation before and really appreciated it. Several people seem to believe that the story made more sense to them now. Their interest in the story may have indicated everyone has a mentally ill human being among his or her family and friends. Not demonizing these people offered a first step in ministering to them.

People had great fun during the animal sermon series. People shared their own animal stories during fellowship time following the sermon. Those sermons became an ongoing Sunday event. Attendance not only started to rise, but visitors returned repeatedly, including two young families, each with three kids.

Sermon Series Two: Emotions

Humanizing Jesus by attributing real emotional life to him, allowed all of us to give witness to our own emotion before sending them underground, where they can cause damage. These sermons may have weakened his perfection, but making Jesus less than perfect helped people to identify with him. He became more accessible emotionally, therefore spiritually.

I introduced the story of the Temptation of Jesus, offering the view that the “devil” reflected Jesus’ own shadow figure full of negative emotions: selfishness, greed, and arrogance. The fact that he faced his shadow figure before beginning his ministry offered a road map for our journey with these emotions. He does not ignore them, but confronts them head on and gives us the tools for winning the fight against them: thinking of others, sharing with others, identifying with others.

The two-part sermon on the story of the Raising of Lazarus, offers the most provocative indications of Jesus’ strong emotions. Based on the original Greek words, Jesus displayed true anger to the point of agitation and great sorrow during this story (NIB 1994, 9:690). The text says that he is angry at the Pharisees’ false mourning over the loss of his best friend. Textually, this is the story of anger and sorrow in Jesus. The

two sermons preached from this long text ultimately show Jesus going through the stages of grief: from denial to bargaining, to anger, to tearful acceptance, and then moving on. Everyone could identify with these stages of grief. Showing Jesus going through them supported people in their process.

In all my experience of preaching, no sermon series hit home as much as the one on Jesus' emotions especially on the Raising of Lazarus. Particularly the men seem very absorbed by the women preacher who spoke on Jesus' angry outbursts and tearful grief, arrogance and pride, doubt and shame. In addition, I would admit, I preached to the men. I observed unusual calm and focus during these sermons. They did not fidget nor close their eyes. In fact, the whole room grew unusually quiet except for my voice. After the sermon, three women told me that their husbands were crying.

The sermon after the end of the project's sermon series opened up the emotion of spiritual doubt, shown by Jesus in the Garden. It is not included in the Appendix because I preached it after the project ended. It offered a transition point. Doubt was an important ingredient in developing faith. The stages of grief led to doubt but also new life and calling. Rather than seeing faith as rock steady, fluctuations of the spirit, and tides of emotions better describes the place where people live out their faith, at the kitchen table, where ongoing emotional drama played, far removed from the stately parlor facade. Transformation started there, but people could carry over into the official story.

CHAPTER FIVE

TRANSFORMATION HAPPENED

The Story

Seeing him come down the path to their home was the best thing possible. Away at war for years, she had longed to see her husband. She ran from their small cottage in the forest and down the path to greet him. As she ran to him and flung her arms around his neck, his response was unexpected. He stiffened and pulled away. Trying to cling, she found her arms pulled off his neck. He grunted and walked toward the house.

She was stunned for only a moment. Too happy to be distressed, she cheerfully followed him into their home. He sat at the table. She talked as she started to put food on the table, but her husband remained sullen with his head hung. He did not eat much... a crust of bread. Then silently and without even looking at his wife, he lay on the floor and went to sleep.

When he arose the next morning, he went out for the day. Where? She did not know. What was he doing? She did not know that either. At night when he returned, he was silent, cold, and mean even when she tried to show him affection.

Day after day, the same pattern continued. The wife was beside herself wondering what she had done to deserve this silence and belligerence. She decided she would seek the advice of the wisest women she knew, an old woman who lived deep in

the forest. She got up early one morning and went to visit her. After explaining the situation, the wise old women's advice was this: "You need the three silver hairs on the nose of the Crescent Moon Bear." She explained that the tricky part was finding the bear that lived far up the big mountain. It would take many days to get there.

Anxious to follow through with the old woman's advice, the wife ran home and quickly stuffed some dried meat and bread in a sack, provisions for the journey; then set off for the big mountain.

The journey was arduous. The mountain was steep and rocky. Driven by love for her husband and the heartfelt desire to connect with him again, she sped on, barely stopping for rest. Finally, after days on the trail, the wife reached the top of the mountain. She was exhausted, wither hair disheveled, her skirt torn, her arms scraped and bruised by her journey. Her goal was still clear in her mind: get the three white hairs from the Crescent Moon Bear. However, where was he?

As it happened, on that first night on the mountain, there shown a crescent moon in the sky. Sure enough, as the wife sat against a large rock, she saw him, the Bear walk over the ridge close to her. He did not see her, but she feared that he would soon smell her, so she reached into her sack and drew out some of the dried meat she had taken with her. She pushed it out toward the bear, drew back, and waited. Soon the bear smelled the meat, went over to it, and ate it. Then he lumbered away.

The next night, the bear came back to the same spot. The wife had the dried meat waiting for him, only this time she sat where the bear would see her. Hungry for the meat, the bear did not seem to mind her presence. He ate and again left. Over the next

couple of days, the wife sat closer and closer to the meat until at last she was right beside it. As the Crescent Moon Bear ate the meat, the wife reached out and pulled the three white hairs off his nose. Wincing only a little, the bear continued to eat and, as was his routine, then wandered off.

Quickly, the wife put the three hairs into her pocket and started her journey home. So excited and happy, she quickly sped down the mountain. Catastrophe struck. Running too quickly across the rocky way, she tripped and fell, rolling down over rocks and thorny bushes. Even more cut and bruised after her tumble, she seemed ok, until she reached into her pocket. The three white hairs of the Crescent Moon Bear were gone. Somewhere they were lost on the long course of her fall. Though she searched for them on the ground, she realized they were gone forever. Broken hearted she cried all the way back to the wise old woman's cottage. After telling her sad story, the wise old women simply shook her head and told her not to worry. "Oh dearie, you don't need those hairs. You faced the Crescent Moon Bear and tamed him. Now go home and do the same to your husband." The wife did just that (retelling *The Story of the Crescent Moon Bear*, Estés, 1995, disc 10).

The Bible Study: What Transformed?

This project sought to free the soul and release the spirit. Describing energy, creativity, and involvement of the people served as tools for evaluation.

One could measure the level of energy through the nine weeks of the Bible Study. One could often hear energy among people. At the beginning people exhibited quiet and

polite behavior. By the second class, people began to talk to and over each other, asking and answering questions, sharing stories. That behavior increased through the duration of the class. Yet, in the cacophony, each listened to the other. In the beginning, I did a lot of talking, but that transformed, indicating the level of energy released in the participants. By the fifth lesson, they took over the conversations after I initiated the topic or question. By the last lesson, most conversation came from them.

The conversation between and among the class participants served as the modeling clay for the project. I offered them a general topic on which their conversation spun. How they molded it was up to them. In the beginning, however, I wanted to deal with any fear among the participants of linking femininity and divinity, about questioning standard interpretations of Bible stories, and about using other texts as recourses. After the first class day, my fears dissipated. I observed no fear among the participants for any of the issues. They willingly addressed questions they had about each as we went along.

I had wondered whether they were ready to discuss the feminine images of the divine and how they illumined gender relationships. I did it boldly and honestly. As it turns out, they hungered to have conversations about this and to learn something new about this topic as it pertains to the Bible. Gender conflict in the Bible and in people's lives has caused unresolved turmoil. Treading slowly and carefully at first, I learned very quickly that this group could jump in.

Early indications of their quick grasp of the topics came in several ways. First, the depth and scope of the conversations indicate understanding. For example, a young woman suggested that Dinah's treatment by her brothers came because of their sexual

attraction to her. My experience taught me that people rarely bring up the topic of incest. Though still a taboo topic, it remains more widespread today than most people would acknowledge. For this young woman, she saw it play out in the Dinah story. That led to an in depth discussion about incest in the Bible. Being a very quiet middle age woman, she clearly became more emboldened through the course of the study.

Second, conversations indicated that some people thought about the topic as a whole. For example, one man in the class suggested on a couple of occasions that I research Suzanna in the Apocrypha who, he believed, would help support my thesis of the presence of the Divine Feminine images in Scripture. This man claimed genealogy that goes back to the Wesley family. He spoke openly in the class about how he had been reading the Apocrypha for many years and found its stories interesting and meaningful. In addition, people told stories about taking what they learned into contexts outside of class. For example, a woman in the class shared that while watching a TV show about the Bible she drew on what she learned in class. When the show narrator talked about Sarah, the woman said to herself “Well that’s not right.” She had a new image of Sarah. She made a choice as to what to believe about her. This woman was a successful single professional. The fact that she would choose to believe that Sarah was a powerful and independent woman did not surprise me because this woman was powerful and independent herself.

I noticed that midway through the Bible Study women wore brighter colors of clothes that appeared provocative during worship. One woman said, “I may be eighty, but I’m not dead!” She wore a low cut dress, brightly colored print with a flared skirt. It

appeared as though women were taking pride in their feminine bodies. I also heard people laugh more robustly. I credited the Baubo story with both of these trends.

People shared how the Biblical women became real to them. A woman said, “I really know these women now. Before, they were just shadows.” As the Divinely inspired Bible women were taking hold of the people at Pioneer, I was witnessing their newly found assertiveness. One woman told me, “I feel safe. I feel that I can say anything I want to in this class.”

I also saw men increase their comfort level with the topic. They spoke out and felt safe in addressing gender issues. I very deliberately did not place any blame on men. If one held women’s freedom of choice and range of choices as most important, then one could blame men generally for preventing that choice. However, placing blame was not the same as bracketing male authority temporarily. Nothing liberates men more than a liberated women. I witnessed the men who participated in the Bible study become more active in church. A men’s breakfast started up on a monthly basis. A man prepared and delivered the children’s sermon twice a month. More men contributed time and energy with the set up for fellowship on Sundays.

Telling the story of Biblical women in terms of their own womanhood,--powerful, forceful, and independent, -- and not in terms of a helpmate for a man, creates multidimensional women with whom people identify. As they became more real to folks, Christian women became less repressed, more vibrant, and engaged. This change became apparent as people, studying about the powerful Sarah and Tamar, shared their own stories about sexual repression in the church and sexual bias in the workplace. One

woman talked about how married women shunned single woman in the old days often stopping them from even coming to church, and how divorced couples usually drop out of church. Another woman talked of her conflict about her adult daughter coming to church. On the one hand, she wanted her to be present, but on the other hand, she did not want her exposed to the gender bias in the church. She declared, “The world is changing for the better faster than in the church.”

People shared because the women’s Bible stories, like most compelling stories, could be about us and reflected who we were. People could not identify with characters when the characters were thinly drawn or when a whole gender came under the shadow of submission. There was reluctance to identify with the woman characters whose stories did not fit their own. The women, who thought they knew these stories, suddenly realized they did not know the story at all. The Bible women became real when fleshed out like women, as we would know them today, independent and assertive. Scripture edited and interpreted out much of women’s inspiring stories. The traditional stories we told, focus too much on women’s reliance upon men or upon women’s victimization. Church people struggled with the traditional version. People had to choose to live their lives according to these unfulfilling stories or leave the church and write a new story. I offered a third alternative: retell the Bible stories in a way that showed searching, independent women seeing themselves call by feminine images of the divine, that provided people a fulfilling story that matched their own experience.

The success of the Bible study indicated the possibility to update people’s view of Biblical women. The new version felt more comfortable to them. A woman told me that

the Bible women seemed familiar to her in a way that they were not before the study. People who went through this study went through a cathartic experience. Women who experienced family abuse had insights into the story of Dinah. A retired professional understood the importance of women supporting each other and not competing as men did showing insights from the stories of Miriam. People identified with the characters in stories and with their feelings. Sometimes repressed feelings came to the surface, clearly displayed in the class when describing the full body figure of Baubo. Full-bodied mature women felt better about themselves as they shared.

More than one time, anger bubbled up during class. On one occasion, when two men in the group were arguing about the changing attitudes in the work place, several women quickly and with some anger rebutted that it was not changing quickly enough. Others in the class spoke out about the gender bias in the Bible interpretation being one of the causes of this slow change. Another person says, “Yes, and that is why people are not coming to church.”

The study gave voice to woman even though she struggled with pain. When the story had positive or transformative outcomes, then so too did the person hearing the story and identifying with it. For many women in the class, identification with the pain came easily. The story offered a good cathartic experience. People end up in a better place than where they started. There was insight. There was learning. A burst of creative energy resulted from it.

On the first day of class, I asked people if they remembered decades ago, when the church liturgy introduced gender sensitive language. Did they remember the prayers

to Mother God? I asked them if they had felt comfortable with this language.

Unanimously they said no. At the end of the study, they admitted to feeling more comfortable with talking about Mother God. The change came about because they saw the Feminine Divine in Scripture and in their lives, which was not true before. They saw the hardness and cruelty of an all-male God play out in places in the Old Testament. They saw the caring and nurturing qualities in Jesus, a man who was willing to talk one through a difficult time, rather than dictating mandates. They saw that these qualities in the Old Testament image of the Divine as well, after stripping away the old fashion interpretations and allowing new stories to emerge.

One of the positive outcomes of the class came when I asked them if they would be interested in a follow up class about how the feminine images of divinity took form in the later church and what women played critical roles in that formation. They were universally interested in a follow up class. It could not take place, however.

The Sermon Series: What Transformed?

Conversations centered on the animal de jour for several weeks at the beginning. People wore clothes or jewelry depicting animals. After every sermon, I heard a person's story about a goat or a donkey. People were connecting to the story and sharing their own stories. Interest grew around the next animal in the series. People focused positively. Something more happened. During the sermon series, people started living out a new story. The sermon series, set with the continuing Bible Study, brought unexpected change in worship. Three weeks into the project people noticed the change.

It came quietly and took everyone by surprise, like the first green tulip that appears from the snowy ground. It appeared organic.

The first, most unexpected thing I noticed was that I suddenly started to enjoy worship. It happened the third week into the first sermon series. I observed it as I drove home after worship when I said to myself “I actually enjoyed myself today.” The background to this observation was that I had not enjoyed Sunday mornings at Pioneer, unlike my other parishes. The atmosphere seemed toxic.

I happened to mention my observation to the Lay Leader and she confirmed feeling the same way. We agreed that people seemed happier, more relaxed, more positive, and had better interaction.

It may seem unimportant, but asking the question, “Am I enjoying this?” presents an evaluative question more churches and pastors ought to ask. I have learned that when visitors tell me after worship that they enjoyed the experience, then I am likely to see them again. I have also learned to use myself as a barometer. When I enjoy worship and find it meaningful, usually others do as well.

The second unexpected observation occurred in how people constructed the worship setting. The background for this observation begs for explanation. Although worship occurred in a full size gym, the set up carved out a small section of that available space. They placed fifty folding chairs closely together in front of small altar tables poorly decorated with unmatched colors and themes.

This worship area took about one quarter of the gym. Another quarter of the space housed the area for coffee and fellowship. The fifty percent usage grew to one

hundred percent usage in a few short weeks and liturgical colors started to match, as did the themes. The appearance improved.

To understand how it started to change, one has to understand the history of Pioneer and sewing. One of the ministries at Pioneer had always been sewing groups. One group knitted prayer shawls to give away. Another group made small baby size quilts usually to sell at community events as income for the church. Through the years, these groups had also made a variety of banners or other types of liturgical clothes for worship. However, in spite of their skills and the beauty of their shawls and quilts, the liturgical clothes are unimpressive and never set up in a way that matched color, texture or theme. The altar area appeared more than unimpressive. It seemed conflicted, even sad. Something prevented the beauty to shine through their craft.

One woman began the change. She created beautiful quilts. Her use of color and animal images impressed people who saw them. Just by chance, she offered to bring a quilt for display that depicted animals. She made this offer to those who set up the altar area. They eagerly agreed. That choice started the ball rolling. To accommodate the display of that quilt more space was made available for the altar area. It widened and extended. They experimented with more ideas on vibrant colors and themes. Cohesiveness flowered to full bloom.

By the time I started the second sermon series on emotions, everything started to change. More chairs were set up to accommodate more people. There were placed on an arc and set further apart, allowing people to move more easily. Space opened up to display more quilts with liturgical and sermon themes. This expansion now filled half of

the gym just for worship, doubling in size from what it was before. In similar fashion, the fellowship area received new design, fully utilizing the other half of the gym. Everything spread out allowing people to walk, mingle, and see displays.

For worship, the change allowed room now to accommodate the larger choir that had tripled in size going from four to twelve, and for the growing number of children to sit for the children's sermon. Previously we were lucky if we saw one or two children on a Sunday. Now we saw seven or eight on average and eleven or twelve on a good Sunday. Families attended and brought their kids.

With more vibrant colors, larger width and breathe for extra quilts, the worship area appeared more attractive and comfortable. It opened up and radiated creativity.

Clearly, Pioneer started to tell a new story. They reached out and stretched. Their worship setting now showed how they chose to live, creative, happy, and engaged.

With the change in setting came changes in worship, instituted by the worship chair. She expertly engaged the laity in new ways, bringing in new liturgists and soloists for special music. She energized the congregational singing with new songs while providing experienced leadership.

People expressed happiness on Sunday morning and related to each other in healthy ways. This drew back visitors. Located in a growing community, Pioneer had always drawn visitors, but they rarely returned. Several individuals, couples, and families now returned and became permanent attendees. My experience taught me that a welcoming congregation could not emerge through artificial means. It must come from the inside out. People want authenticity. Following instructions for a welcoming

congregation did not work for people when it comes from the outside. Welcoming congregations come through internal transformation.

Welcoming came instinctively from the heart. It came when people themselves felt warm and welcomed. A cold person could not pretend to be warm when he or she had been hurt or not acknowledged. However, a warm heart fulfilled the only requirement. Pioneer's heart warmed. The people stretched into freedom. Their transformation resulted in a growing church.

As John Wesley learned, the Holy Spirit came with the heart-warming experience. At Pioneer, the Spirit started to pour out from people. Everyone in the church noticed it. They saw how Sunday worship changed both physically and experientially, becoming more fun and meaningful. They also noticed the return of visitors. Many people felt the Holy Spirit abiding in the midst of people on Sunday morning. However, the most profound revelation to the people of Pioneer came from the Good Friday Service. The revelation experienced on Good Friday served as a definitive moment confirming for all transformation of Pioneer.

The Good Friday Service

Good Friday evening worship used the UM Tennebrae liturgy but it was not a quiet service. The choir director and I interwove the liturgy with choir cantata songs of her choosing to form a creative and collaborative service, unique to Pioneer. It included many readers and a large choir recruiting some outside people. Though Pioneer had done other Good Friday services, they consisted of a choir cantata usually sung with another

church's choir and performed in the other church's sanctuary. They made this choice because not enough church members volunteered to sing, and not enough people attended to fill out a suitable congregation.

For this Good Friday Service, new choices brought new results. Pioneer worship setting served as venue and no other church choir joined in. People paid particular attention to setting up the worship area, making it appealing and fitting for the occasion. The Pioneer choir had grown large and well prepared. As we watched and waited to see how many people would show up, everyone sighed with relief when people came and the turnout grew large. People felt upbeat at the start of worship. The setting produced a beautiful atmosphere. All the creative energy released at Pioneer during the previous several months came to full fruition on that evening. Things grew even better.

Being sensitive to the presence of the Holy Spirit, I quickly felt its presence early in the service. As the music and liturgy moved on, the Spiritual presence grew in strength. It hung as a fragrance, refreshing and vital. By the end of the service, everyone in that gym felt its presence, caught up in its power. I gave witness to its presence at the close of worship, so that all could acknowledge this experience publically. The Holy Spirit accompanied these people and called them forth. It was a turning point for Pioneer.

Virtually everyone in the congregation approached the choir and me after this service. People had difficulty expressing what they had just experienced. What they said most often is "I have never experienced anything like that." The Divine gave us all a blessing that night. Everyone sensed that Pioneer transformed.

The Retreat

A spiritual retreat center, built by hand by a woman now in her eighties, one of the founding members of Pioneer, is located in the heart of New River, AZ. She built walking paths along the desert landscape in her large backyard that border protected land.

After the passing of her second husband, she found solace in a spiritual retreat center to work through her grief. While there, she understood the impact spiritual walks had on the heart and soul of people while healing.

Upon her return to her very rural and rustic home in New River, AZ, she set to the task of building spiritual walks around her large desert property that faced untouched Sonora desert on two sides. She picked up stones and lined walking paths to fifteen areas of contemplation. These areas all had a sitting area, a view, and a hand worked cross.

The rustic materials that went into the sitting areas and the crosses created a unique quality. She collected pieces of old wood, metal, pieces of colored glass, and stones. Out of the materials that most others throw away, she created a unique landscape for contemplation.

Being a small woman all she created sat low to the ground, set in a web of interconnection of paths and materials. With her small house with two open porches at the center of the property, she created a place for spiritual tranquility. Away from any sounds of the city, the quiet allowed focus on the desert landscape accented by the natural desert beauty, but arranged artistically. I, like others, felt smitten by the sheer beauty and peace of the place. In the fall of 2012, Pioneer held a retreat there. Twelve people came,

including a photographer from the Annual Conference to take pictures of the place. I had informed them of the unique quality of the place. I expressed my opinion that someone ought to document the place as a UM heritage place. The pictures lead to a story in the Conference publication. The publicity put Pioneer on the map in a new way and thrilled the church members.

I came to appreciate that the un-kept dirt road and intense heat outside did not discouraged people from coming. The retreat gave people a chance to see it and a chance to talk to each other in a peaceful and spiritual centering.

As a way to evaluate changes in the congregation, another retreat went on the calendar for April 2013 after the project. Sixteen people attended. Coming from the energy of the Bible Study and worship environment, people seemed enthusiastic to discuss the proposed topic: What is your vision for Pioneer? This was a vision quest retreat. The first question I asked the group to consider: describe the holiest place you have ever been. One hundred percent of the participants described a place outside. No one described a sanctuary or any enclosed area.

For the individual quiet vision quest, I posed this question: what is your vision of Pioneer? After everyone had walked around in prayer and contemplation, we came back and shared. Eighty percent of the response described a vision of Pioneer that entailed a change in where the worship occurred. They sensed a journey to another location coming. At the heart of that came a sense that the school did not offer them a place to gather during the week; and most homes simply could not accommodate the small but growing Fellowship.

The visions also described change at Pioneer. A young woman said, “I used to like our smallness. Everyone knew everyone else and we all did the same thing. Now, I realize that we must be open to people bringing in new ideas. We can’t all be the same and also grow.” People discussed this insight in length. People acknowledged that growth is more important than staying the same. They experienced the gifts that new people brought to the church, and they like them. New people brought their gifts of music. People sung folk music and popular music now in the church accompanied by guitar. People enjoyed the addition. Pioneer now understood that change could be positive and beneficial...a gain, not a loss.

The conversation now heard at the church glowed with its self-understanding. They spoke like people on a mission. They wanted to move forward and make the necessary decisions to help growth happen. A clear consensus formed on Pioneer’s future and the required steps to bring it to fruition. A member of the LAC, who attended an earlier fall retreat, said to me, “The difference between the fall and the spring retreat really shows how much this church has changed. Nothing really happened last fall. Now people are engaged and speaking out.”

The Numbers

Part of the evaluation for this project concerns the numbers. I recorded three numbers. The first number was the total participants, both members and constituents, recorded in the official rooster for the end of December 2012, which was 52, and the official rooster for May 2013, was 67 adults and 10 kids.

Comparing the two lists indicated that five people listed as constituents in December joined the Fellowship officially. Five additional people, including two couples with family, started to come during the project and joined just after the project ended. Additionally, there was one baptism and one Confirmation of a youth. By any standard, this was a good result.

The second number for evaluation recorded the number at worship, with particular attention to visitors and kids. The record showed increase in the number of adults and kids during and just after the project. At the beginning, 33 people attended. Through Easter, it more than doubled. Six weeks later, attendance continued to be up. Though fluctuating, more people attended. Though the numbers for the Fellowship were still very small, they did double and on Easter weekend almost tripled. The third number kept was the participants at the Bible Study. Thirty-two people participated plus one baby. Average attendance was 18. Four were one-time participants because they were visitors from out of state.

The LAC Interviews and Comments

The LAC chose the people they wanted to interview. They conducted those interviews and included the results in their On-site questionnaire. During the site visit held April 4, 2013 conducted by Chris Hammon and Vicki Hollon, each of the LAC members shared their final comments concerning the evaluation of the project.

G saw the Divine Feminine as a unique lens through which to view the Bible. The story of Sarah really opened the door. People appeared unafraid to ask questions.

One person interviewed said, “I didn’t know that I could ask questions about the Bible.” People felt “awakened” and their own spirituality “enhanced.” People could now choose belief for themselves and not “be told what to believe.”

D agreed with G. She added that people have a new understanding about how independent women really were during Bible times and how much the church has subdued it. She believed that one of the pivotal conversations revolved around their earliest knowledge about prostitution. She learned from those she interviewed that they felt freer to penetrate layers of the Bible. She also believed people had more incentive to be engaged in the life of the church. She saw their higher level of church participation.

S shared that his seven years of studying with me had him convinced that there would be nothing new in this study. He admitted surprised to see how much I had expanded the concept of the Divine Feminine. His surprise continued at the amount of time spent on Rahab because he did not think there was that much to talk about. He realized how much he could understand about this woman and her context that had gone unexplored before then. S’s interviews confirmed that people appreciated freedom granted to them to believe as they saw fit. That seemed to increase their willingness to explore new territory. He said that I was a “fountain of knowledge” that gave a lot of territory to be explored. S felt impressed by the level of interaction among the participants. The Retreat best illustrated people’s positive interactions. He saw Pioneer as being on an upswing and that everyone contributed.

H shared his excitement about the project because he saw it as a viable option to stop the church’s slide downhill. He quoted something I said, “If one is going to change

the activity, one has to change the story.” His experience from Jesuit priesthood training taught that men had written, translated, and been the storytellers. He believed that I told the story from the matriarchal view and the story transformed because of it. He shared what he witnessed at his home church when I served as pastor. “She told stories, different stories. People really liked it. They didn’t realize how much they were being changed because of it.” Henry believed that this project should happen in every church.

M saw people becoming engaged and finding life changing experience through the Bible Study. She said that she had never seen anything like it before. She saw Pioneer come alive. She shared that she had felt “finished with the church” and that she “had longed for this perspective of assertive women.” She saw Pioneer change through their willingness to change the music. In fact, during the months after the end of the project, three changes came to music: addition of guitar, folk music, and country music. The changes came through individual talent added to the church roster.

C believed that the difference between the two retreats was illustrative of the change at Pioneer. People talked, clearly engaged. She believed this change happened because everyone was “given permission to follow their spiritual path.” Her interviewees said how much they looked forward to each class and how they were feeling positive about themselves. She quoted one person as having said, “This is the most riveting class I have ever been in.”

All the LAC members believed that people drew into the sermons and the classes because of my use of story. They labeled me a “Pathfinder” often searching for the big truth. People felt captivated by that journey because I got them excited about it. No one

fell asleep. Finally, the LAC believed that I have given people permission to be themselves. I honored them and they felt safe enough to tell their story as they listened to mine.

After the Project

What changed after the project? One important and observable change came from personnel changes in a couple of lay leadership positions. These changes acted as a catalyst for governance change. For a small Fellowship to make changes in leadership showed ability to make critical decisions that were right for its future. It indicated courage and faith that it had a future, something lacking before the project. With the change of leadership came the creation of a Church Council, which became their governing body.

I observed another transformation at Pioneer that came about because I made an announcement. I would retire the end of June and move out of state so I could be with family. I had not intended to do this when I first started at Pioneer, but because of a family tragedy, I had to make an important decision that put family before career. When I announced my impending retirement and subsequent move out of Arizona, I spoke clearly and honestly about why I made the decision. They already knew of my personal tragedy and I asked them to understand and support my decision as a mother and grandmother. They did understand it and gave me great support.

The next two months amazed me. Pioneer gave me love and understanding. My colleagues warned me that the people would be angry, but that turned out to be wrong. I

continued to help them with the transformation they started in worship, leadership, and governance. The announcement came that the Bishop appointed another Elder to serve them upon my retirement. They felt thrilled and encouraged by a Conference that seemed to take notice of their transformation.

The spiritual change of their story I came to understand very personally. I can tell it best by describing my personal experience with one of their sewing ministries, prayer shawls. The ministry incorporated group and individual prayer over these knitted shawls. They provided them to someone who was ill or going through a stressful time.

I had not appreciated this ministry the fall of 2012, the actual time of my family tragedy, because I did not receive a shawl at that time. I was all the more curious about this because a colleague had told me upon his own ministry to my loss, "Pioneer can now minister to you." I fully expected that to happen, but it did not.

I came to understand that Pioneer's natural love laid dormant, log jammed. Brought on by fear and discouragement, natural care and affection simply could not flow. This happens to traumatized people.

Therefore, months after the family tragedy, and a month after the project's completion, and upon my announcement of retirement and the reasons for it, a sudden outpouring of love and support came to me, unequal to anything I have ever experienced. No, they did not want to lose me as a pastor. Nevertheless, they did not think of themselves. They thought of me first, my needs, and my family's needs. For me at that time, no greater gift could they have given. The story of the prayer shawls captured this transformation. While into the project, I had been under the weather. During a worship

service, I received a prayer shawl. I had not really expected to get much use out of it, but I found myself throwing it over my shoulders sometime through the day. During the outpouring of love latter that spring at the end of my appointment, I come to realize that I was putting this shawl on because of the loving prayers these extraordinary people had knitted into the shawl. Those prayers gave me comfort during my time of extraordinary change.

I decided to share my insight about the shawl during worship. I told them about my use of the shawl and how much love and support I felt when I wore it. In response, they gave me the opportunity to choose another out of the many colors they had. I greedily chose two. I did not want to be without a shawl. I use them to this day.

Pioneer acted with love, courage, and affection. They could now show their true character. I can testify that other people wanted what they had to give...a great opportunity for a congregation.

CHAPTER SIX

WHAT I LEARNED

The Story

There was a woman who lived in a house with a large beautiful Trumpet Vine Tree in the yard. It was very old, very thick, and blanketed the whole fence line. Every year the humming birds came to drink the nectar of the trumpets. The woman loved the tree for it was part of the eco system for the whole neighborhood. It was the epitome of love and beauty.

One year, a new neighbor moved into the house on the other side of the fence. Soon the neighbor was knocking on the women's door complaining about the thick vines that grew so profusely that tentacles would run up his kitchen windows. Equally disturbing to him was the fact that at night, the wind would sway the abundant growth and it would creak, crack, and even mourn. The woman found the sounds comforting, assuring her that this old tree was alive, well, and happy. However, the man did not. After many complaints, the neighbor finally cut the vine off his side of the fence. The woman was very distressed and could not understand why he would do this.

The next year, the tree grew back its vines and again ventured into the man's yard. A knock on the women's door lead to a heated conversation in which he asked her to cut down the whole tree. She refused. However, he was unrelenting. One day, after work, the women came home to find the tree completely cut down. The neighbor had

come into her yard and cut down the tree. She was devastated. How could someone cut down something so beautiful and part of her home sanctuary? She felt violated. The sanctity of life raped.

After much grief, the women came up with an idea. She knew the roots of the tree still laid beneath the ground. The Trumpet Vine could come back. However, she had to move the location of the tree. She and her children started to dig out as much of the roots system as they could and transplanted it next to their kitchen window, away from the fence. After months of looking very bad indeed, the tree started to come back and send out vines. When it was coming into bloom, low and behold, the vine had wiggled its way into the kitchen and bloomed inside the house. The woman was overjoyed. It was as though it was saying thank you to her.

The Trumpet Vine Tree continued to grow both inside and outside the house. The ancient tree survived at the hearth of she who loved it (retelling the story of the Trumpet Vine, Estés, 2010 a, disc 4).

The People Who Amazed

Pioneer transformed their story. Souls freed and spirits released. As a result, they became loving, happy, and creative. I learned an important lesson. People take their future into their own hands when their souls are free and their spirits released. For the people at Pioneer, that meant making some critical changes, namely changes in lay leadership and changes in the process for church decisions. I knew that the church stood to gain from these changes, but were difficult at best without movement from the

congregation itself. That movement came, hard and fast, and served the congregation brilliantly.

It started with many phone calls requesting some changes to governance. The message came from grassroots, so I met with the Lay Leadership Committee. We came to a very quick agreement about what could change. The opportunity gave a chance for a Church Council to come into being. Pioneer had never had a Church Council as its primary decision making body. Just before the project began, I created a blueprint for the Church Council, so we had a plan to implement. We believed that the time ripened to set the Church Council as the body of governance.

The Lay Leadership committee and I agreed upon a course of action. All went smoothly with the implementation of the changes. The congregation appeared content with the transition. The first Church Council met just prior to my departure. Their dedication to work together, share information, and find consensus, was noteworthy. The people showed their readiness to chart their course.

The response of the people of Pioneer UMF to this project amazed me. The response went beyond expectations. I believed in a good outcome, but never did I imagine the degree to which these people took on the big issues and resolved them. That took energy and commitment. It also took the ability to work as a group, as a fellowship. They did that. They moved from individual story to corporate story. They moved from individual freedom to corporate freedom. They jointly authored their narrative and formed their future. They learned to worship together and to work together. In the very contexts where church contention showed up most, Pioneer worked in harmony.

Whether in worship or in meetings or in doing the grunt work, happy people seemed thrilled to be part of a team where everyone respected and appreciate each other. More importantly, they sensed that they had a future. People eagerly showed up early for church to help set up the gym. People eagerly agreed to serve on teams. An atmosphere of laughter and joy replaced fear and dread. More children, even teens dotted the scene. People spoke up about ideas they had to enhance ministry: collecting money for No More Malaria, using local artists during sermons, and starting a monthly newsletter.

An important escalation of the changes came about because men and women felt comfortable enough to speak up in the first place to address the larger issues that kept team spirit from happening. So often, the problem glares as clear as an elephant in the room, but no one wants to name it. These people, men and women, stood up and named it. They did so in a healthy way.

The change in leadership and governance came about because of the last part of the project: the Retreat. The big outcome from it named problems and solutions. Tremendous amount of energy swirled around it. People addressed the issues with great energy. They shared and supported each other and supported me as we worked through the process to continue consensus building.

When considering where this fellowship started and how it transformed, many more questions than answers remain. How did everything work together? The theory of the project was the retelling old religious stories could transform. It appears that the telling of deep story clearly had a cathartic role. I received 100% positive feedback about the stories I told. People loved them. The stories begged others to share theirs. For

example, after preaching one man invariably shared with me an experience he had that related to the story I told in the sermon. He ended up sharing a great deal about himself. Women shared about their husbands. After the sermon about Jesus' anger, three women told me that their husbands cried during the sermon. Stories beget stories.

By the conversations and sharing of their own stories, some kind of cathartic experience occurred and freed people from a painful past. What was surprising to me was how much that led them collectively into positive actions to help shape their Fellowship's future.

As I look back upon this project, the lessons learned will hold in my mind for a long time, taking the form of things people said or things I saw people do. I describe some of these things to let them speak for themselves. Upon hearing the story of Baubo, the woman says, "I am going home to my husband and tell him I have the body of a Goddess."

The eighty-year old woman in the bright sexy dress on a Sunday morning says, "Well I may not have the body for it, but I am showing what I have!"

From the man who trained to be a Catholic priest, "I understand the Divine to be Feminine."

From the man who studied the Bible with me for seven years, "I never knew so much could be known about these Old Testament Women."

From the woman who was called Rabbi in her own family, "That was the most extraordinary Bible Study I have ever been part of."

From the woman while watching a TV show on the Bible on its description of Sarah, came this outburst, “Well that’s not right.”

I watched with awe and wonder overcome the eighty-year old founder of the church after learning that mystical Judaism understands the Torah to be feminine. Hearing the man speak with so much enthusiasm about the meaning the Old Testament Apocrypha had for him.

This list could go on. I came to realize that individual experiences built upon each other and a communion formed under the Holy Spirit. The communion received Baptism during the Good Friday Service. The individual body became a church body. Thereafter it functioned as a true church. In my mind, that experience made the change of leadership and governance possible. I learned that I lead best through teaching. I teach best when I can help others find their power. My eye is always to the ethical dimensions. I want to inspire people to fulfill their dreams as long as the dreams sparkle with integrity and ethical standard. The dreams also should provide for their own best interest and the interest of the community. I work best independently. I can put my own dreams aside, but I cannot put the dreams of others aside, even if it means confronting some ogres. The LAC supported the project enormously. I would not have asked for more. The people of Pioneer UMF extended an open mind and heart and honest response. I felt heard, accepted, and received much gratitude. They appreciated the work I did and respected the research. They loved the stories. The people of Pioneer with the support of the LAC transformed their story and assured a better future. They faced tough

issues and dealt with them. They confronted their ogres. They were no longer traumatized people victims of an unwanted fate.

The Rock or the Vine

Clarissa Pinkola Estés tells a story about a stone child (Estés 1990, disc 2, track 3). He is a motherless child shunned by his community. He hangs on to a stone, his only possession. He holds it so close that it drains all of his warmth and he grows closer and closer to death. The church is that child, clinging to the rock. Peter as rock, is the church and the church is dying because of it. The Inuit story of the stone child has two endings, according to Estés. First ending says that the stone grows hot because it drains all the warmth from the living child until his last tear spills upon the rock where it sizzles and splits the rock. Inside the rock is a girl who becomes his love forever. The other ending has the child wander into a hut of an old woman who needs a stone to put on the fire and heat the meat pot. After warming the pot, it would keep the hut warm all night after the fire went out. Because the child had a stone, he contributes and feels needed. The stone child finds love. Either story gives credit to something feminine in saving the motherless child: the young girl or the old woman. This dual nature of the Divine as feminine becomes apparent while working with the very old archetypal stories. The Divine Feminine presents Herself either as the mother that helps the boys find his own worth; or as the girl who loves him into full manhood. Those roles are complementary but not the same. The young girl becomes part of what the man becomes. However, the old woman does not play out her role through the boy's life. She is simply the agent of change.

Something very similar to this comes from Robert S. Corrington in his book *The Community of Interpreters*, (1995) concerning the nature of meaning. He writes that there is a distinction between “horizons and the Encompassing” (Corrington, 103). Horizons, he says are “realms of finite meaning sustained and concretized by sign series” (Corrington, 103). For much of this project, we searched for meaning of God as feminine, traced, and sustained by stories found in text, image, and legend. This project offers a new look at the seminal woman in Christian thought. She defines herself through her own divine nature and not by a man. She is like the discovered girl inside the stone...real and relatable.

However, the Old Woman also resides in the Divine Feminine taking a role similar to Corrington’s Encompassing. Her mystery runs deep, but from Her depths come all horizons. She forms the fountain of being and the womb of becoming. From the beginning, She is an aspect of divinity, which is by nature, beyond mortality. Her numinous nature dwells beyond the knowable. Humans can only find meaning by defining the horizons that emanate from Her.

Corrington calls the world between the Encompassing and the horizon the Midworld. All horizons come to birth there. It is the place where horizons can merge. Human endeavor seeks to merge these horizons, which represents *the* quintessential human activity to Corrington (Corrington, 103). Hope and transformation occur simultaneously with the activity.

The Midworld of Corrington has similarities to the Medial woman talked about often by Estés, especially in her audio CD “Seeing in the Dark.” She tells the story of

Hecate, and Cybele, and Medea. Medial Women stand as the liaison between the psyche that is and the psyche that is to be. Medial woman has the quality of transformation itself. It is important to understand Her in order to understand the transformative nature a new story has for us.

The opening story in *The Women Who Run With the Wolves* describes the medial nature of the Divine Feminine best. *La Loba* tells the story of a wolf that runs the hills in search of bones, which she picks up and collects in one place. Upon their collection, La Loba howls over them under a full moon. As she does so, a woman forms out of the bones. Fully formed, she then runs into the wild in search of more bones. As she runs, she transforms into a wolf. The wolf who had howled over her bones turns into a woman (Estés 1992, 25-26). The Divine Feminine reveals her transformative dual nature. The two natures belong to the same transformative process.

Pioneer and I searched the hills for bones of the Wild Woman. We danced over those bones to put flesh on Her and see who She is. One resulting find is that She has a dual nature, the dual nature of the Divine Feminine. She has her own story, but she also weaves other people's story. She stands at the horizon but also at the Midworld. She portrays the old woman who helps the stone child and the young girl who will live her life with him. As Mother and Daughter, much like Father and Son, the Divine Feminine takes shape in a form Christians understand. Because, if we add the dimension of her as the Womb, the encompassing out of which everything springs, She becomes three.

This trinity explains how transformation is possible: someone to entice you, someone to walk with you, someone to weave your future. Unlike Corrington who does

not see the Encompassing as being truly knowable, I believe it is, through image and culturally old story, at least describable. It plays out as a character, even if that character is not a person but a natural quality. The importance of creation's womb for the human heart drives us to do more than peer over the ledge into its abyss. Mythological story gives it a face and even a gender. Without acknowledging the Divine Feminine, the Encompassing remains remote. We can only come to the brink. Giving it a gender and dual roles in the story makes it more describable.

Intuitive Knowing and Paradigm Shift

Estés tells a story about her own work as a scholar in the audio collection "The Dangerous Old Woman" (Estés 2010 a, disc 1, track 3). She tells the story about doing 20 years of research on transformation using the progressive images of trees aging like a woman ages. The most fruitful of trees are the old ones, which symbolized for Estés the wisdom of old women. She claims her inspiration came from a graphic drawing she saw in Carl Jung's collected works, which showed a progression of trees that took the female aging form. In her memory, the trees grew more beautiful and fruitful over time.

As she ended her research, she went back to the original drawings that inspired her. Much to her dismay, she discovered Jung's image of the old tree was not fruitful, but old and decrepit, with barely one leaf. It was not at all fruitful or even useful. She did not remember it that way. How could she have gotten it so wrong? She explains the conflict between what she thought she saw and what was actually there in this way: she was looking with her intuition when she first saw the images. She saw them the way her intuitive nature told her was the truth. However, Jung recorded the way our culture views

it: old age is unfruitful, deficient. Her work reflected her trust in intuitive knowing rather than cultural perception.

This story is about trusting intuition. We cannot chase after what we do not know until one sees it with the heart. Many women have seen visions of themselves as free, independent, and forceful and that they have always been that way. They have intuitively seen the Wild Woman and saw Her run free. They have formed images of the Great Mother sensing that the official story of Christianity was not the only one. Women tend to trust intuition. Women band together with this intuitive knowing and have found paths forward. Today, acceptable scholarship pertaining to gender and Divinity grows. Some Christians remain uncomfortable with this since it conflicts with the official story. To avoid the uncomfortable issue, many denominations teach that God was neither male nor female, so it does not matter. However, this does not ring true for many people because the Bible remains the elephant in the room that continues to make God male and made the man dominate over the female. Without addressing that issue, the church may not move forward with the issue of gender. Telling folks that women run free and independent and are not from Adam's rib shifts the paradigm.

Fortunately, many people are making this paradigm shift in their own lives. People wait for the church to catch up. A new paradigm can alter the gender world of the Bible. If one assumes that woman had power and independence, Bible stories about men and women changes. Change of perspective, change of story. The average churchwoman and man may have known about the Great Mother intuitively, partially because they have shifted the paradigm within their own lives.

Auxiliary cultures, texts, and legends hold stories exposing new images of the divine and its nature. These resources can lead the way toward transforming our view of the Bible narrative. Using the new view to reinterpret Bible stories can transform churches. Transformative story engulfs us. Community story transforms because personal story transforms. It seemed to influence Pioneer.

We cannot underestimate the tyranny of the majority, a term used by John Stuart Mills in *On Liberty* (1869). In the official story for a majority of Christians, women remain in their assigned places. When that stands contrary to what people know as true, all else is suspect. Too many in church leadership think these issues do not matter...that stories about God as Mother are too esoteric for folks to care. Too many leaders want to keep people in an uneducated place because they are easier to lead. That enforces the official story of dominance. When the official story does not work on a personal level, people drop out of the story rather than put up with abuse, lack of personal autonomy, or lack of positive images. The time ripens for letting the fringe within the Christian story speak. The fringe spawns the leading edge of creativity.

Scripture has primacy. No amount of theological gimmicks can make tolerable the significant gender inequality apparent in it. Yet, we can look at it differently and see if new images appear. If femininity appears in images of divinity, then woman can feel proud because of their nature, not in spite of their nature. Some old stories helped define the God as Mother in ways that Christian history is yet to open. That is why imported stories can help us acknowledge those images, harvest their transforming potential, and

give us new eyes to look at Scripture. These imported stories, like the Trumpet Vine, find their way into the empty spaces.

We Are Deep Story

Every person not only lives according to stories we value most, but also we create our inner life around mythic story. One story may dominate or there may be a dozen rolling around in the person's life. It depends on how many horizons, to use Corrington's term, which the person has defined and described for him or herself. Each horizon has a significant story that ties it to the Encompassing. We assign signs to it, making it more culturally acceptable.

However, stories do not always stay functional for us. Personally, a story may motivate us and create us in wondrous ways, until suddenly it does not. Shifts in our lives alter what works for us. Clearly the fast pace of paradigm shifts and new realities over the past several decades have made many of the stories people wrap their hearts and mind in quite unusable. When we live a story that is no longer right for us, it will turn toxic. We must find a new one or perish.

What leads us to the brink of the Encompassing in the first place? Perhaps we take the spiritual wanderings when we despair of our old story and yearn for a new one. We journey to the brink of chaos, on the brink of what we do not know, only rescued by a story that latches to us and pulls us to the safety of the shore. The story resonances with us significantly and we continue to uncover it. It becomes who we are.

Christianity can seem to tell a story to which all adjacent stories are required to adhere. During the time of making the Canon and doctrine, the church tried to make a

single story by destroying the other competing stories and calling it heresy. Further, it made it singularly true by whittling down its interpretive potential. That one root has served as the foundation of tradition. Like many single sided stories, this one is not working well for a lot of people. Finding stories we can relate to and help heal us may come from another version of ancient story, one with affirming images for women. One such alternate version may be in the Mary Magdalene stories.

In addition, the elements of the Gospel can come across as male centric. One example of how the Good News from God as Mother could differ may be this. Christianity has told the story of guilt and forgiveness. Maybe women suffer less from guilt and more from shame. A more feminine version of the Gospel lifts up those stories that speak to shame. Ultimately, finding images for the feminine nature of God could address the problem head on. Because much of the masculine image of divinity comes from the Bible, finding the feminine image of divinity can balance it.

Quick transformation can happen with a significant story. The idea that change takes time, happening incrementally, may be true for change, but it is not necessarily true for transformation. It may happen quickly, spontaneously even. How? Human beings have preferred futures intertwined with a collection of stories adopted from the outside. They were imported stories around which they choose to form their own lives. Changing the future means hearing and embracing new stories. Whether or not we intertwine our lives with them is contingent on our own self-direction, but the new stories will reshape our preferred futures.

New vines with new meaning, value, goals, and motivations, become the living blood for transformation. Because the root of meaningful story is so fundamental, its change ripples through us very quickly. Our choice to live according to a new story transpires as quickly as the nod to choose one over the other. The heart wants what the heart wants. The cascading affect brings forth the new day.

What the Heart Wants

The heart is at the center of this whole thing. In chapter three, I talked about the importance of telling a story with emotion. I said that meaningful story might open spiritually to people if told with emotion. Great stories have emotion contained within them. Along with other qualities of Mother Nature, emotion plays a pivotal part in how a meaning envelopes us. The emotion will teaches us spiritually. The heart informs the soul. Eventually new ways of seeing will come into our mind while theology forms. A manifestation of the meaningful story comes into being because we have defined it in our own way, making it personally ours.

One of the hardest parts about teaching the Bible Study class was balancing my desire to tell the great story while also showing people how the new story is possible because of discoveries coming from scholarship. I could not miss either step. For example, before I could really unfold the story of Tamar as priestess, I had to show that she was not a prostitute, when every sign confronting the class said different. I had to teach people that they could dismiss certain aspects of their Bibles. I had to rely on the expertise found in acceptable scholarship in the NIB or NIDB to make this argument.

That role felt conflicted with the telling of the story. It is as though I had to set up the environment that put their minds at ease about hearing a new story, and then create an environment that made it safe for their hearts to open. We cannot underestimate the tyranny of the official story that held hearts hostage. Freeing the soul meant we free our hearts to choose something new if we desire it.

As a teacher, there was a tension between teaching to the head and telling story to the heart. It became do-able because of the personal stories shared. Personal stories put people at ease, particularly if the story is honest and real. Laughter was important as well. Laughter disarms people, taking down barriers. When people laugh together, they discover together. With the right environment, I could teach to the head, and then tell the story with hearts receptive and fertile.

History as Deep Story

One time I preached a series of sermons on the ancient cultures of the Near East...those cultures that were important to the development of the Bible. Church members who were fascinated with what I had been teaching in Bible study requested the series. I spend a lot of time working on summaries on the civilizations of the Sumerians, Egyptians, Greeks, Babylonians, Assyrians, bound in twenty-minute sermons holding some kind of life lesson.

Ultimately, I failed, receiving a lot of criticism and complaints about the sermon series. I learned that people are interested in ancient history, but that the vehicle of transmission is everything. I preached the history of these civilizations but left out their story. The failure came from not telling the story behind the history.

Clarissa Pinkola Estés showed how women's psyches move in harmony with archetypal tales through their lives. Perhaps her use of the archetypal tale has a role in churches, particular those with baggage from the past preventing growth. Perhaps its use among those who are searching for spiritual guidance and fulfillment may also benefit from woman's story of conflict and resolution. Maybe seeing those stories outside the Bible can help us see those stories inside the Bible more clearly.

The lead story in this dissertation is that of Bridget of Kildare, based on research for a class at Drew University in the D. Min. program called "Jesus as Mother" taught by Dr. Catherine Peyroux. During the research, I discovered that her story as recorded historically contains more fiction than nonfiction. That fact made her a great tool to show how history was about meaning as well as facts, and that history can find expression in a value-laden tales moving through time collecting various meanings. I rewrote the research I completed for that class into a form that drives with transformative potential. It became trans-historical. It emphasized spiritual meaning. I found it spiritually and emotionally available to people of any educational level. I would assert that history still served as its basis. Christians can reimage histories in the same way, looking for meaning that resonates. In some ways it makes new something what is very old, the creation of legend and myth. I suggest that we can embrace it as a tool for creativity.

I would not claim that my version of Brigit is history in any normal sense of that word. Nevertheless, it is not entirely fiction either. The form of myth lays somewhere in between. It has archetypal characters acting at an historical moment in emotionally identifiable situations. The amazing fact about archetypal characters is that we can

identify with them, even if they are not all real. The story line represents a very human tale that lives out in personal lives. It offers value and significance for those going through similar events, like trauma, so it serves people's psyches. In addition, no provision exists for concise interpretation. One can find it for oneself. Therefore, it serves the highest goal of education: to offer environments for the creation of good people, free and able to transform themselves and their world.

From the beginning of time, myth formed as a way to keep the past and its values in a containable form like folklore, legend, and kitchen table tales. Myth kept the wisdom and knowledge left on many editing floors.

A place may exist for the use of fantasy stories in the church even though it may be more myth than fact. I think that pulp fiction and virtual reality games ought not to be the only mediums controlling the content of the active imagination. The church can enter this field. It has a vast reserve of content deliverable to people's imagination. The church can provide valuable myth retelling religious story. Imagination fires passion. By telling transformative stories, within our sacred texts, the fire will ignite in the human heart. Transformation may occur.

It seems like a nebulous goal....to free the soul and to release the spirit. However, in fact it is exactly what happens when one runs with the Wild Wolf Woman archetype. She invites us out of our cages to run with Her. In the official story, such a goal would not be desirable. So, one must be ready to allow it to happen and support what it brings. It means higher authority will have to move over and allow another driver of the bus. However, since the occupants in the bus are dwindling, it may be a wise choice.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BENEFIT TO MINISTRY

The Story

Many years ago, there lived a very old woman carried to the hospital far from her mountain village. A fever ravished her aging body. Her family had to work the land, so they could not come to visit her for the distance was long.

The doctor treated her fever with aspirin and cold compresses on her head. When that treatment did not work, the doctors kept her still and continued to give her aspirins and cold compresses. After many weeks, the old woman told the physician to take her outside. The physician and the nurses thought this request strange. Clearly, she was delirious with the fever. It was near winter, the cold wind blew with gusts of chill. “No,” they told her, “You cannot go outside.” Doctors and nurses administered more aspirin and more cold compresses, but the fever persisted. Still the old woman asked everyone who came to her bed, “Please, oh please take me outside.”

A young girl worked on the floor of the hospital where the old woman laid. She once lived in the same village as the old woman. She understood the old woman’s request because she knew the importance of being outside. She also knew that in the village a person’s intuition led to the healing of the body. The inner self knew what was best. The shamans there often talked about the spirit guide in every soul. Unfortunately, they were not in the village high on the mountain, but in the hospital where the doctors

thought differently. Here the doctors and nurses knew best. Yet the old woman's fever did not break and the young girl grew more and more anxious at the woman's constant call for the outdoors.

One night, the girl could not stand the cries anymore. When the floor was quiet, she went to the woman's bed with a wheel chair. She bundled up the old woman as best she could, and placed the thin and frail body on the chair. Against hospital rule, she was determined to take her outside. She followed her own intuition.

After quietly wheeling her down the hallway, she opened the side door exit. Whoosh....a gust of wind blew through the door and with it snow. The first snow of the year was whirling with the wind. The old woman said, "Go on." The girl pushed her further away from the hospital, the wind flapping the blankets and the coat on the young girl. The woman then said, "Stop. Stand me up." The young girl stopped pushing the wheel chair and helped the old woman up to her feet. As the wind blew against her body, her thin grey hair dancing to the rhythm of the wind, the woman dropped the blankets from around her, exposing her thin hospital gown. Then the young girl saw her do something unthinkable. The old woman pulled the gown off her fevered body exposing her hanging breasts and her wrinkled but once fertile pelvis. The woman closed her eyes and let the snow and the wind have their way with her. After a few minutes, she sat down and said, "Take me back." The young girl covered her up and took her back inside. The next morning, much to the surprise of the doctors, the old woman's fever was gone. It must have been the aspirin, they thought (a retelling of *Grandmother Snow: Intuition is the Great Physician*, Estés, 2011, disc 6).

Arenas of Benefit

Five areas of ministry can benefit from this project: narrative research, personal transformation, Biblical understanding, understanding the Divine, and transformation of local parishes.

Benefit to Narrative Research

A group of stories rests below all other stories. They serve as their fountainhead. I have called them the deep stories about which this project turns. The legends, myths, and fairytales offer an opportunity for narrative research to journey further into religious story. People incorporate these stories into the story they tell about their world and themselves in that world. Some religious stories tell the official story, but legends and myths tell the unofficial story, but are no less potent. By recognizing we all live according to these fantasies is to realize that there are forces that play out in our personal and collective lives about which we are not very conscious. At their basis, they lie beyond the control of the mind, but not the heart.

Understanding more about how these myths and legends offers opportunity to see their effect on religious life. One way old religious myth affects us is how we understand gender. Whether by accident of history or by spiritual essence, these deep stories seem to form the basis of how we understand the feminine. Understanding the stories may start to untie the gorgonian knot that bounds Christianity to sexism. The nontraditional tales offer a picture of feminine virtue and value somewhat differently than tradition. They

offer story lines and images that show the natural power of women left out of many official stories.

Some myths appeal to people because it has meaning. For many older people that myth may have been Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty as children. For Boomers, Star Wars or Star Trek became the myth some lived by. Today girls and boys are looking to virtual reality and role-playing computer games, gothic novels, or other fantasy venues to find their meaningful but imaginative stories. The fact is that the de-mythologizing of Christianity has removed the food for the imagination, which pushed people toward other sources. It would be a challenge to try to win them back by offering them a richer variety of myth.

Religious myth, traditional or not, fires the imagination and serves as transformative agents. They make up the core of our mental musings, our imagining, our heartaches, and our joys. When the deep story shifts within us, everything else shifts as well. The opportunity lays ahead for us to claim if we want to bring transformation to individuals and communities through this means.

Benefit to Personal Transformation

Whether or not one believes as thoroughly as I do in the violence against woman that the church perpetrates, one must give credibility to the amount of data collected on the widespread abuse women experience today on American soil. One must also give credibility to the even more noxious problem of feminine victimization around the world. On that basis alone, the benefit of this project gives women a new self-image by offering

new images in Christian Scripture and heritage. Women fulfill the images they choose, but the choices have often been shallow and limited in scope and virtue. As women stretch into new areas of leadership and creativity, the images in nontraditional religious myth offer a variety that would help her to expand her true nature and potential.

Additionally, women and men transform by telling and listening to stories, if the stories fire the imagination and give flight to spirit. Because storytelling happens in community, the community story transforms as well.

Benefit to Biblical Understanding

Christians hold the Bible as most sacred of entities, and yet, they are puzzled to the point of angered by what they read in it. In time, their anger turns to apathy. The average Christian both loves and hates the Bible. People can benefit from a change to its official interpretation. In fact, people can grasp transformation within themselves when they see that transformation can come even from the Bible. In other words, if a Bible story is retold and reimagined, then clearly, one can reimagine one's own life. Rather than calling the process blasphemous, one can call it expansive and creative, adventuring into new space for the divine to dwell as we encounter it in the Word.

I have used the model of kitchen story as opposed to parlor room story to contrast the difference between the official story we tell and the hidden story we live. In equal manner, I have contrasted the difference between the official story offered by traditional Christianity and its kitchen stories, those found in apocryphal texts and histories.

Allowing these stories to have their say in the local church setting can bring about transformation, particularly around those issues that most paralyze the local church.

Traditional interpretation of the Bible feels like instruments of contortion for many people. They try to fit into a Biblical theology that just does not work for them. People are now using other sources to find the meaningful stories that free their soul and release their spirit, because these stories seem unavailable in their own faith and sacred text.

The project demonstrates these stories energize folks. Energy and creativity marks an awakening, something possible for struggling churches to experience.

Benefit to Understanding the Divine

Like the Bible, a Christian's view of the Divine is a wellspring. Because of the nature of the Divine, problems always exist about how to speak of it. The best way to do so is through story, which is why the Bible, the revealed Word of God, is a collection of stories. What we all know about this collection is that it has been reworked many, many times. Political and theological agendas sculpted what finally emerged. Lost in these editing battles were women and their stories, along with the qualities of the Divine Feminine. Yet, She still shines by the light of the moon. With help, She becomes quite clear. There is always a primacy of Scriptures. Imported stories from ancient culture or other faiths serve as a prism to see Scriptures in a new way revealing what would be for some more compelling images of women.

Christians strive for a clearer epiphany of the Divine Feminine. Until clarity comes, a path forward may be in the reimagining of women and the Divine Feminine at the core of myth. Exposure to it may unravel the knotty turmoil of gender roles and

relationships leading to epiphany. It can most specifically help women who have been hurt or abused. They find healing and meaning through shared story. It can help men come to full appreciation of the complete women, independent of him. He is learning this appreciation from the culture. He could breathe fresh air if he saw that model in Scripture.

The benefit to churchwomen is extremely important and absolutely at the heart of this project. Churchwomen, denied their own divine image and their own wisdom, suffered from their faith not offering them complete personhood. The time has come for them to claim it by discovering the feminine images of God in Scripture. For many old women, they already know of these things. They understand through the intuition of their bodies. To confirm this understanding in their church context is to free their soul and release their spirit.

For young woman, many have already found the valued myth in secular culture, but it is not as mature as it could be and certainly without rich Christian context. For these younger people, the addition of a more mythic and imaginative stratum of story from Scriptural and Christian heritage could be a faith-changing event.

Benefit for Transforming Local Parishes

When a church wants to transform their story, they look for other transformative stories. Hearing a new story emerge from their faith can profoundly alter their own story. For example, our Christian stories would benefit from renditions that emphasize nature, coming from the Great Mother Herself. Nature teaches and heals in ways so basic that

they form the very fabric of life. Church has grown away from what is natural as it pulled away from the feminine. Importing stories into the Biblical narrative can help us find how Scripture speaks to nature. Emphasizing stories with natural qualities, like those found in simply cultural tales can help us locate those in Scriptures, especially for church people who are not going to do years of careful research. Importing alternative story, I believe, helps bring shifts of paradigm more quickly. Ultimately, we always return to Scripture with the advantage of hearing it anew.

This project can benefit any parish. There are certain characteristics to look for that would be indicative of one who would benefit the most. One could be a parish that has a sad shadow story killing the parish. A second type of parish could be one where bullying is a problem. A third type could be one in which women cannot be recruited for leadership positions. A fourth type could be a parish that is experiencing high incidence of sexual abuse within the community.

The Model

The Bible Study and sermon series served as the basic elements for this project. In both elements, I used a vast assortment of materials and resources. The Bible Study and sermon series I created can be a resource for any church, but they are not exclusive.

What I am purposing in this project is something that churches can do on their own by simply accessing three types of resources: the deep story, the non-traditional Bible story, and personal story.

Deep Story

Many uses may come from appreciation for stories that matter, stories that linger and resonate, particularly when they are new for us. A plethora of resources exists from which a church can draw to find archetypal and meaningful stories. They can be collections of fairy tales, legends, or ethnic old wives tales. They can be mythic stories from different religions. They can come from Jungian Depth Psychology like the work of Estés. I chose the ones that fit my criteria about women's issues. However, one could choose other criteria for other purposes. They can help people to start talking about issues and avoid some of the pitfalls.

For churches wanting to address gender issues, they are often fearful of hot debates because of political agendas. Approaching the topic through an unknown archetypal tale, ancient myth, or reimaged Bible story, sidesteps those agendas. The issues emerge through a more subtle means naturally. They open up the issues by addressing the heart and not the head. Opening the heart first, induces people to tell their own heart stories. One can hear from the heart when the heart takes notice. Any other highly sensitive issue would benefit as well. Sometimes secrets are hard to tell, especially when we packed them away in pain. Unknown stories dredged from the past may speak to the issue helping us to unwrap it more safely.

Non-Traditional Bible Story

The second choice for a parish is to decide upon its resources for non-traditional Bible interpretation. There exists a large variety: Jewish Rabbinical writings, Nag

Hammadi texts, Dead Sea Scroll texts, apocryphal works, and Gnostic texts represent sources. Other resources may come from women writers like those I have used here, like Elaine Pagels, Avivah Zornberg, and Judith Baskins. Writers of church history like Caroline Bynum offer refreshing ideas. One can search for historical works on women like Thecla, Pope Joan, Hypatia, or stories of the Saints.

Wherever a church may spot itself along a theological spectrum, it can find something from this group of resources that it can use. Their purpose exists in their ability to offer a different perspective. Gender issues or other difficult issues can never begin to heal without breaking from the past traditional thinking, or at least allowing another strain of its history into consciousness.

Because of the abundance of non-canonical texts, a discernment process is required as to what is useful for one's purposes and what is not. For example, one can find other stories besides those of the divinely inspired women in these resources like those that support male bias or supremacy. One has the option to use these competing texts for comparisons. Political and social background unravels the thorny branches of the conflict. The process can in turn help to unravel similar problems today.

Personal Story

To accomplish the project, one mixes in the next ingredient, personal story. How people open up and what they open up about will depend on the setting. The setting will create the environment into which personal story emerges. I chose a Bible Study about particular Bible women and a sermon series. However, the setting could be a study on a

group of apocryphal texts, or a historical study conducted on women's history, opening up the topics of matriarchy and goddess worship in the Old Testament, or a class held on the monastic movements in the eleventh century with its emphasis on the motherhood of Jesus. Discussion groups on social issues like inclusivity, equal rights, domestic violence, or even gender identity may fit some churches better as settings for personal story. Resources of deep story and non-traditional Bible story can then complement the personal stories either by provoking their telling or by offering an alternative perspective or encouraging images. An eye to creating a cathartic experience may be helpful.

Emphasis on Story Telling

Whatever serves as the setting, at center stage is storytelling, including deep story, Bible story, and personal story. A concern arises whether people will share personal stories after hearing a reimagined Bible story or a myth. By personal, I refer to the kitchen story, not the parlor story. Getting to the kitchen table story happens by opening people's heart through trust and inspiration.

One can trust in the effect of a new penetrating story. Rather than starting with a controversial topic and then asking, "what is your opinion?" one can tell a story and ask, "how do you feel?" or "what images are brought to your mind?" or "do you have a similar story?" At the beginning, it is best not to start by asking people's opinion, the location of dogmatic beliefs, but rather start with the imagination or memory where those beliefs lose their footing.

I gave a sermon one time for a graduate level class in which I was a student. The professor's feedback to me was that I had no point in the sermon. No, I did not, but I did

have a purpose. My purpose was for each person to experience a shift in perspective. The point came not from me but from them. That is a non-traditional way to teach and preach in the parish setting. An important rule to follow for those who want to emulate this project encourages facilitators and teachers not to make points but to offer a space where people can reflect, share, and grow. However, growth does not happen in a vacuum. Rich content provides the nutrients for the soil in order for the project to fulfill its promise. It requires lots of natural, organic material. Furnish an abundance of content. One cannot have too much for major transformation.

Two requirements help people share their stories: belief that someone will listen with their heart and trust in those listening people. People never speak up if they believe their words will fall on ears not hearing. In order for people to honestly venture into the quagmire that is gender, its roles and abuses, then people must feel safe. With these safety nets supplied, people will share because gender conflict is such a burning issue in their life. People want to share what matters to them, and what matters to them is who they are and how others relate to them.

Twenty-five years ago, I worked as a case manager in publically funded clinic. My clients were pre and postnatal woman at risk. Because it was a federally funded program, I had forms to complete an inch thick for each case, documenting observations made during home visits as I tracked what happened to these women and their infants. I learned very quickly that all the required documentation and the regulated procedures they represented never produced results. When I listened to these women's stories and shared a few of my own, I saw results. Sharing conveyed caring. Caring started healing.

Story sharing heals because real listening takes place, not just recording. Real listening opens one to vulnerability for both the listener and the storyteller. One can produce a personal story in another if leaders are willing to share their own kitchen stories. A life lesson lifts up for all. Vulnerability and trust happens on both sides. Leadership must be keen on doing this well.

If an alternative Bible story becomes acceptable to hear, then so too can the secrets in our souls be acceptable for telling. To break the system, we must tackle it at its core. Politically incorrect Bible stories allow for politically incorrect personal stories, stories that women have had to hold in for most of their lives. We must free people from systemic and theological prejudice in order for women to find any safety to reveal their experience and tell their story. By telling the different, non-traditional story of Sarah, Dinah, and Mary, or the story of Baubo, a safe and comfortable place invites people in. At ease, people can find space for gently releasing their old stories and the calm for claiming new ones from the collection of those who went before.

The Century of Women

The twenty-first century may be the century of women, not just in this country, but also in the world. The issue for the church challenges its willingness to get out and take a lead in this reality-changing phenomenon. If it does not meet the challenge, it may continue to shrink in importance in people's lives and significance to culture. I believe the church can take a lead in this and it can do so in a way that requires no hierarchal mandate. It simple takes the willingness on the part of local leadership, including clergy

to bring to people what is already in existence, a vibrant and life alternating story of the Wild Woman in folklore and God as Mother in Scripture.

Semantics do not count much, like using the pronoun “She” for creator if it is not backed up by story. Nor does ordaining women priests rid the church of sexism if there images of women leaders go missing. Some single mothers may ignore the church until they see themselves in the stories it tells. Substantive change, demands a real encounter with what many have ignored, buried, and forgotten. God as Mother has never disappeared, nor can She ever be diminished, nor vanquished. She waits to help us into our next evolutionary leap. The question remains as to whether She will shed her Christian shell as extra baggage or if Christianity will open its shell and find the pearl.

Women of the church take on an important role and represent a great asset. Not the enemy of change, they contain the essence of the ancient feminine spirit that can transform the church. If the church gains access to that treasure, women must feel safe from male dominated images and stories that threaten many of them because of the old abuse and rejections.

Every woman has the Wild Woman in her, even the elderly woman. She has probably already encountered Her. Many older men have also encountered the Wild Woman. He may know Her well, not questioning Her real presence. I doubt many men have a safe place to share their stories. Men’s stories illuminate a different perspective on the Divine Feminine. Women and men together while taking the journey toward the God as Mother, who illumines all of humanity. Having both genders present in a project offers the best avenue for growth. It is healthier. However, I advocate telling Her story

without allowing the male divinity story to dominate the conversation in the beginning. Her story needs telling before it can engage with His story. The two will come together.

Facing Reality through Fantasy

People live with loss, hate, mistrust, and revenge, as the Bible so aptly describes. We cannot find salvation from the human condition, but we can learn to understand it and live in it as the garden of delights rather than as a trial by fire. Gardens have thorns and dangerous animals as well as beauty and harmony. We find this truth in all our fairy tales folklore too. As we walk in a common garden, we confront ogres. The story we tell speaks to how well we handle them. It raises us up out of childhood. A walk in a garden can quickly turn to a dangerous journey through a dark forest where ogres prowl. Successfully maneuvering through it starts with admitting the dark forces really exist and bad people threaten you. On the other hand, you may find yourself playing the role of ogre in someone else's nightmare. We play different roles in different stories, all happening at the same time.

Ethical complexity fills life. The project offers a way to understand ethical tug-a-war through the lens of deep story. Sometimes one plays the hero, and sometimes the villain. Archetypal story helps us understand ethical situations better, including our own culpability.

Too many people in our churches play a very bad role in other people's story often relating to sexist agendas. Christianity may not be adequately preparing churches to deal with the problem. Repentance and forgiveness alone no longer seem effective

methods by themselves. An imaginative story may offer an intermediary step especially if it is rooted in Scripture.

Badness ebbs and flows. I do not advocate scapegoating people. However, I believe that anyone can play the role of a bad person at any time and that we learn from the archetypal characters in the story as they take action to set things on a different course. This is true for the ogre as well as the victim or hero. Understanding how a negative story plays out in lives, helps us get a fix on the dynamics of what is keeping us from more healthy stories.

Touching mythic story enriches understanding of our personal story. Its potency reveals powerful roots. One ought not to underestimate its ability to address underlying issues preventing survival and growth. People's stories encompass lives. Disrupting them can bring unsettled results. A mythic story, however, offers the path out of the nightmare. It illumines the path forward. Therefore, what appears alarming about the effects quickly melts away into something transformative.

Teaching from feminine images of God through reimagined religious story frees people to see their own story and the spirit to change it; to face the dangerous people and change the story they are living. The fallacy of false equivalency supports the belief that all people at the same time are equally responsible for a church not moving forward. Real culpability exists. Our local church often destroys itself from the inside because it cannot identify those culprits and deal with them in ways that are right for the greater good. Identifying with mythic story may help us do that. Because of its fluidity, no

labels remain fixed. Churches that use deep story can help people move pass conflict and inertia.

The following story comes from M, a member of the LAC with whom I had no relationship prior to this project. She shared this with me through emails.

I am trying to condense a lifetime of spiritual struggle with the incongruities of the church...I was highly interested in the possibility of truly sorting out Biblical references on women after my own experiences of the long road to ministry and of the Bible for the rest of my life...I had pretty much lost all interest in the church...I had fallen into apathy, since no one wanted to see or hear about truth...I finally heard a reason for why things are the way they are. And finally, more truth is being revealed through Laura's research and teaching...And people are eating it up. THAT gives me hope. This hope says my own soul is beginning to be freed. My spirit is beginning to be renewed...it would seem my spirit could now be released. Perhaps there is hope humanity's spirit can be healed and released as well.

APPENDIX A

THE BIBLE STUDY, A NEW LOOK AT AN OLD BOOK

Class One: Creation

Scripture Reading Genesis 1 and 2

Opening Prayer

People introduce themselves and share their favorite Bible story.

I introduce the Study and distribute the outline for the class with goals and topics.

Introductory Remarks:

I will never tell them what to believe.

I asked them to listen and respond to what I have discovered.

This is part of a dissertation project.

I will record what they say, but never attribute names to it.

They are not guinea pigs. I had already started preaching and teaching on the Divine Feminine in other churches. The positive result there led me to develop the project here.

I introduced them to the LAC.

Theme of the study is women. I questioned traditional interpretations.

I will teach tools and bring resources used in Biblical Scholarship.

Discussion question: What are the differences between Genesis 1 and 2 creation stories, and how does it relate to gender differences? Their answers conclude belief in gender bias in the Adam and Eve story. They see the possibility that the Divine Feminine

is included in the pronoun we in Genesis 1:26-27. They also suggest that Genesis 1:1 might indicate a feminine presence in the beginning.

During the Scholarship Moment, I show them the set of *New Interpreter's Bible*, *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, and *The Legends of the Jews*. I explain each set.

I read passages from *The Legends* about creation. In them, the writer considers the Torah female. She stands with God before creation (Ginzberg 1909, 1:3). I read from the *Sefir Yetzirah*. In this passage, Hebrews call the three primary letters “Mothers” because they represent wisdom, which is feminine (Kaplan 1997, 13).

I ask the class to read Proverb 3:13-20. Some people had Bible, which did not keep the feminine gender of wisdom, others did. People understand that this passage supports the readings. They question why some translations did not include it. They concluded that Her removal was intentional.

I respond with this question larger question: Has the Divine Feminine been part of Scripture all along, but did someone translated or interpreted Her out?

I introduce Clarissa Pinkola Estés and her book *Women Who Run With the Wolves*. I read the story of *La Loba* (Estés 1992, 25-26). I explain that I am searching for the lost bones of the Divine Feminine in Scripture. Will you help me sing over them?

Closing Prayer

Class Two: Sarah

Scripture Reading Genesis 17:15-18:15

Opening Prayer

Handouts provided.

Discussion Question: What do twenty first century sophisticated Americans know about laughter? They answer that people who laugh stay healthy; it heals; and it uses energy equal to 20 minutes of rowing.

Discussion Question: What does the Bible say about laughter? They do not know. I pass out a list of Biblical references about laughter. We look at some of them that drew only one conclusion: the Bible sees laughter as bad. Luke's version of the Beatitudes represents an exception when Jesus says people will laugh. I ask them how something so good became so bad. The story of Sarah and her laughter may hold the key to understanding it.

We examine the text. We compare Genesis 17:17 when Abraham laughs upon the news of a baby and in Genesis 18:12 when Sarah laughs. The text indicates that Sarah laughs at the thought of being so old and having such pleasure, perhaps presumably pleasure of sex. However, unlike God's tolerance of Abraham's laughter, the angels are clearly angry at Sarah's mirth. They accuse her of laughing at the power of the Lord and received reprimand for it. However, clearly she does not doubt the power of God, but laughs at the thought of two old bodies having sex and her old body delivering and nourishing a baby. The humor appears raw with earthy sexuality, but void of ridicule. Yet, from then on Scripture views laughter is from the perspective of ridicule. The writers force the label.

So from where did this raw sexual natural humor of Sarah come? Before we answer that question, what do we know about Sarah from *The Legends* and from history?

I make the following points: Sarah may have lived during the time of matriarchy, where women yielded great power and respect. Female Goddess abounds in all cultures. She evolves into the most beautiful, respected, and powerful of women of the times. She has the qualities attributed to the Mother Goddess. According to *The Legends*, Sarah serves as a seer, and spoke directly to God (Ginzberg 1998, 1:78, 203). She suckles one hundred babies at one time (Ginzberg 1998, 1:262-263). In addition, she liberates other women. Hagar's freedom comes because Sarah willingly gives her to Abraham (Ginzberg 1998, 1:238).

The whole country mourns her death. "So long as she was alive, all went well in the land. After her death, confusion ensued" (Ginzberg 1998, 1:287).

The Biblical text describes her marrying two other men, both kings during her marriage to Abraham in Genesis 12:19, Genesis 20:2. *The Legends* tells the story of the Giant Og also seeking to marry Sarah (Ginzberg 1998, 3:343). I remind the class that polyandry correctly defines women who marry more than one man at a time. An age of Matriarchy may sponsor this behavior. However, at the very least we can conclude that Sarah was very desirable.

During Scholarship Moment, I pass out images of six ancient cultures, which influenced early Biblical people and text. I briefly discuss each one.

I then tell the story of Baubo, from the ancient Greek culture (Estés 1992, 365-367). She is the raw sexual Goddess of laughter. Her large voluptuous body shakes with

laughter as she makes raw sexual jokes. She represents the Goddess that brings healing to women in pain.

Discussion Question: how does Baubo relate to the story of Sarah? People see the connection. Sarah laughs with the sexual humor of a Goddess. She behaves in earthy ways, every inch woman.

Discussion Question: Does anyone laugh in the Bible after Sarah? People appear stunned by the obvious answer to that question: no.

Discussion Question: Does the silence of laughter silence women?

Last comment from the class: why haven't we ever heard all this about Sarah before now?

Closing Prayer

Feedback

Before the start of class three, I receive three pieces of feedback. One woman shares that she realizes that we have been taking about the Great Fertility Goddess that she had learned about in college. A second woman says that she loves to laugh and people know when she is around when she laughs. In addition, a third woman shares her thought that some categories of things portray characteristics considered feminine, like ships and other categories of containers.

Class Three: Dinah

Scripture Reading Genesis 34

Opening Prayer

Handouts provided.

Open class discussion with a review of past two sessions: The Divine Feminine represents the time of creation. The people of Genesis stories stand under the influence of the age of Matriarchy, where women hold power and influence, and Goddess worship. I use the article in NIDB for “Asherah” to help document the ancient Hebrews worship of Goddess (NIDB 1994, 1:297-299)

I review the Biblical text that leads up to the story of Dinah: Jacob is in Canaan. He buys land from Hamor, father of Shechem. He calls his God El, who is also what the Canaanites call God in Genesis 33:19-20. Then Dinah goes out to visit the women of the land. Perhaps she went to engage in a woman’s religious ritual of the Goddess.

I ask them to share how the Bible labels the chapter heading in Genesis 34 titled. Several people say that the word rape is used. I tell them that chapter headings are a late addition to the Bible and not in the original text.

I ask them if the story warrants the conclusion, that Shechem rapes Dinah. Responses indicated they grasped bias in the story and question how the words are used and what they mean.

I offer some word analysis. The English scholars may have translated some words differently than what the original Hebrew text required. In some cases, English translators do not use the word rape, but rather “slept with.” I Genesis 35:22, Deuteronomy 27:20 and I Chronicles 5:1 offer examples, which we examine. Given the love indicated between Dinah and Shechem, one may question the legitimacy of using rape as a description.

A more apt place to use the word rape is later on when the brothers invade the city and forcibly take Dinah away from Shechem along with the other women. The original Hebrew also means rape, but translators never use it in this instance (NIB 1994, 1:576-580). One can assume that violence appropriately claims the activity of rape as does rape claim the activity of violence.

The angry response of the brothers Simeon and Levi is the first time a group of people practice violence in the Promise Land according to the Biblical narrative. Unfortunately, they engage in genocide perpetrated by two brothers of Israel. They do it because they did not want outsiders in their clan. Their father later curses them for it.

I pause on the story to pass out explanation of different types of interpretative methods used in reading and understanding text. I review it quickly and ask them to review it further at home. I produce this as an aid in understanding how words, context, language, culture, translations, and interpretations become a very involved subject. It leads to mistakes. However, people find it hard to judge which is right.

The conclusion drawn is that there is wide variety of opinions of what rape is in the Bible but that it seems to always involve and lead to violence. That is true back then and is true today.

Discussion question: what is rape? They define it as forced sexual intercourse. I then ask if that ever happens in marriage. They respond, yes. I ask them if the public debates whether a woman asks for it. They say yes. I ask who decides what rape is either then or now. They respond that men decide.

I tell them that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2012) recently changed the legal definition for rape. The two changes now mean that a woman does not have to show that she fought the perpetrator in order for it to be legitimate rape. In addition, rape includes forcible penetration into any area of the women not just vaginal. The people became more aware of the problems with holding men accountable for rape. This lesson zaps them into understanding the stakes.

Discussion question: how prevalent is rape in America today? How prevalent is rape if we broaden it to involve physical abuse and stalking?

I provide the latest statistics from the Center and Disease control and Department of Justice Survey on Violence on Women (2012): 52% of women report physically abuse, 17% report rape, 10% report being stalked. If one assumes these numbers do not overlap, 79% of women in America today have experienced some sort of physical assault on them. Discussion ensues about stories they know about the frequency of these events and about how perpetrators are members of family or close friends.

I asked if they knew what Rick Warren had said about abuse of women. One woman replies that it is part of what women bear because of men's original sin. I then discuss a study done in an Evangelical church in Phoenix that indicates domestic violence culture is stronger in the church than outside of the church.

Discussion question: Has the church supported a culture of violence against women? The response is strangely positive on the church's role in supporting the violence, almost as if they had already surmised it. People talk about the lack of respect and power given to women that leads to abuse in marriage and the expectation the church

has for women to live with it as part of a natural order. They draw the conclusion that because the church does little preemptively, it actually contributes to its continuation.

I now go back to the story of Dinah and tell the rest of story as found in *The Legends*. Simeon marries his half-sister, but a daughter, Asenath, is born to Dinah. Shechem fathers the child. Though Simeon wants to kill Asenath, Jacob forbids it. Jacob creates a tin necklace for her with an inscription that indicates who she is. He puts it around her neck, and then leaves the baby under a thorn bush. An Angel of the Lord picks up the baby and takes her to Egypt where she comes under the care of Potiphar and his wife who have no children. They love and raise Asenath. Years later, when Joseph comes to Potiphar's household, Joseph and Asenath fall in love and marry. Joseph knows who she is by the necklace around her neck. They have two sons together, Manasseh and Ephraim (Ginzberg 1998, 2:37-38, 77). Later, Jacob adopts these two boys as his own and Manasseh's tribe received ten times the amount of the Promise land than the others.

Justice served.

Closing prayer

Feedback

Because Mitt Romney has just lost the presidential election and this area is strongly Republican, two people ask me if I think that he lost the women's vote because of backlash women have against Christianity. I ask them if they thought so and both nod affirmatively. They both say, "The loss may inspire the Republicans to listen more to the women who are changing their role."

Class Four: Tamar

Scripture Reading Genesis 28

Opening Prayer

Handouts provided.

Housing keeping duties: I remind them that next week we are half way through the study. I have copies of handouts for those who missed a class. I ask them to bring questions they may have to class next time.

Discussion topic: share the story of your first experience with prostitution or prostitutes. People laugh at the question but then go about telling stories of early memories of knowing a prostitute, seeing a prostitute, or hearing about prostitute. Variety of opinions emerge when in rural areas, people considered a loose woman a prostitute, though she probably is not. The stories set in a city defined professional prostitution better. The conflict between real prostitution and a woman sexual behavior set up the story of Tamar very well. I tell them that we will deal with actual prostitution in two weeks when we tell the story of Rahab, but Tamar was not a prostitute.

I start the story of Tamar with the end of the story of Dinah in Genesis 34: 31. Her brothers call her a prostitute. Clearly, they are referring to her sexual behavior, which they regarded as loose, rather than her profession. Something very similar is happening to Tamar. The difference between a loose woman and a professional prostitute remains knowable. Tamar had sex outside of married, (except under the provision of levirate married), but she did not serve as a prostitute in or out of a temple. However, she did take the role of a temple priestess.

What adds to the confusion in the Tamar story is the translation of Qedeshol as temple prostitute. I share the article in NIDB that says no evidence exists that proves temple prostitution existed. Priestesses did exist who worked in the temples of Goddesses and some of them were married or otherwise engaged in sexual activity outside their duties (NIDB 2009, 4:652).

A more correct reading has Tamar serving as priestess to the Goddess and that her rights and freedom play out in the story. She beds with Judah because she sees it as a way to inherit what belongs rightfully to her. The fact that Judah supports her rights in the end indicates his submission to her authority. When men try to condemn her to death after she conceives, it was under the Hebrew law that they judge her, not under the law of Goddess.

Three facts deserve mention: She is in Jesus genealogy; she is Canaanite; Ruth asks for a blessing in her name.

The class says that this story does not victimize Tamar. They caught on to her as a powerful priestess of Goddess. This represents a complete reversal of the story they knew prior about Tamar.

Discussion ensues about veils being a sign of purity not prostitution.

Closing Prayer

Class Five: Miriam

Scripture Reading Exodus I

Opening Prayer

Handouts provided.

Q & A: Before addressing the topic of Miriam, the class leads a spontaneous one-hour discussion. This is the first class where the participants lead.

Questions they ask: Is Jesus related to Moses? If there was a Matriarchy, why was the Old Testament genealogy recorded through men only? Where do the early stories of war come from? When did people write the stories in *The Legends*? When did we have a Bible? How do these new stories square with the preaching of the Puritans?

The class makes the following statements:

“I like the back stories of these people that come out in *The Legends*.”

“I like hearing more about the women. I only have heard about the men.”

Thought the lens of the Bible Study, the following statements came.

“Balaam’s donkey was a she.”

“Women did not lead Hebrews into Baal Peor, but really it was sexual adultery, not idolatry. The nuance is lost. Adultery becomes idolatry and the Jews become guilty of it, blaming the women.”

Scholarship Moment: I introduce Zornberg and her book *The Particulars of Rapture*. I retell the full story of Miriam as told by Zornberg (Zornberg, 2000, 17-80) particular about the mirrors.

Closing Prayer

Observations Made

At this state of the project, the following new ministries suddenly blossomed: a monthly newsletter, a monthly men's group, and a woman volunteers to contact new visitors, another woman wants to use the art of sketching in pastels during worship to augment the sermon. In addition, three people who have been coming to Bible Study want to join the church.

Class Six: Rahab

Biblical Reading Joshua 2

Opening Prayer

Handouts provided.

Q & A: I ask the class if the Bible stories appear differently to them, especially those of the women. They respond affirmatively.

Because someone had asked about women and Puritan preaching, I address the question. I read a passage from "Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God" by Jonathan Edwards in which sinners stood guilty of all sexual sin. I then compare that to the story of Tamar and Rahab accused of Biblical sexual sin, but whom the Bible clearly redeems. How does this relate to Edwards preaching the Gospel? People respond that women, sexuality, and sin interconnect in Christianity.

Discussion Question: Can we recall some of the stories we told about our first acquaintance with professional prostitution. They know many of these women support

family. I explain that Rahab supported her family and in fact, the place she uses for the business is her father's home.

I ask the class about the seediness of these houses of prostitution and ask them whether it could be a place to go if one is a spy? They thought it a place to go for information but stay undercover. I tell them that Joshua's spies go to Rahab for the same reason. More than other places, people tell secrets in such places so gathering information comes easily.

I then ask the class if people who work in houses of prostitution view the prevailing social structure as hypocritical and unfair. They say yes. They think that prostitutes had a raw deal in society. I told them that Rahab thought no differently than they.

I share with them that in Canaanite society's view of indebtedness and prostitution stood as similar (NIB 1998, 2:592-593). Indebtedness plagued poor people so much that they the rich considered them prostitutes. Therefore, Rahab's prostitution appears the same as those in debt. However, Rahab behaves in powerful and self-sufficient ways. She sees in the spies ways to overturn the current power structure that make her, her family, and her community so miserable (NIB 1998, 2:592-593).

I tell them the story about Rahab latter marrying Joshua and attaching her whole family to the tree of the Jews, much to the chagrin of many orthodox Jews (Ginzberg 1956, 6:174). She is also on two lists: the most beautiful women and the women of valor (Ginzberg 1998, 4:117 and 5:258). I ask them if there was an effect to domesticate

Rahab to make her more includable on that list. Marrying Joshua would do that. In other words, was the valor of Rahab only acceptable if she married a Jewish man?

Discussion Question: What experience do you have that demonstrates feminine qualities of God? Their responses include a man who mentored another man, that Mother Nature is God, that God is spirit and not male or female, men who care for children as women do, and men to braid their daughters hair. Further discussion ensues about the changing roles of fathers and mothers. One woman points out that the younger people who have these changing roles are not coming to church.

We hold an Ash Wednesday Service.

Class Seven: The Canaanite Woman

Scripture Reading Matthew 15:21-28

Opening Prayer

Handouts provided.

Discussion forms around the topic of Gnosticism. We review the handouts on views of Gnosticism. I address their earlier questions on this subject and teach them a possible new way to understand Gnosticism.

After that, discussion turns to Elaine Pagels work and the reading in the handout on the Divine Feminine represented in the Nag Hammadi texts. The class read aloud *Thunder Perfect Mind*.

Attention now dwells on how women lived during the years of Jesus. We review the handouts on the multiple roles of women, their rights, and freedoms, the continuation of worship of Goddess. We review the articles provided them on these subjects.

I ask them how they see Jesus deal with women. Each one has a favorite story that reveal the respect he had, i.e. Mary and Martha, woman at the well. We then go to the story of the Canaanite women. I make the point that this woman comes from the same tradition of Tamar and Rahab. She possibly worships at the Temple of Artemis who was a popular Goddess. The fact that Jesus uses the metaphor of a dog while talking to her might indicate that he believes she worships there as well. Artemis (Diana) has a dog as a companion.

We image the situation. A woman, clearly feeling powerful, addresses Jesus while he is with a group of men. She shows no fear. Even when the friends try to get rid of her, she holds her ground and continues to ask. At first, Jesus follows the lead of his friends trying to dissuade her because he comes not for the dogs. Still unafraid and leaning forward, she challenges Jesus comment by altering the metaphor he himself uses. She gives him a reason to help her daughter, by speaking about the crumbs that fall to the floor around a dinner table. The dogs get those crumbs.

Discussion ensues about women who act and speak forcefully and not shy away from conflict with a male position on a topic. We discussed the contemporary women and the old fashion women who would always concede to a man's point of view. The story of the Canaanite women illustrates that women were not to be like that. This story

clearly shows a powerful, forceful woman, who most certainly worshiped a Goddess, who gained the respect of Jesus who does heal her daughter.

Class Eight: Mother Mary

Scripture Reading Luke 1:26-38, 46-56; 2:22-51; 8:19-21

Opening Prayer

Handouts provided.

I open up class by telling the story Clarissa Pinkola Estés relates in *Untie the Strong Women* about the Latino church in Denver, Colorado who lost their beloved Virgin of Guadalupe mural above their altar (Estés 2012, 108). The point of the story is the devotion that people have to the Virgin of Guadalupe and their passion for images of Mother Mary.

The story opens up conversations about how Catholic Christians have a Divine Feminine image in their faith. One man speaks up and asks why that image did not carry over into Protestantism. I answer that reformers saw her as a Saint, and like all saints, they struck her from the faith.

The people in the class with Catholic heritage speak about their experience with Mary, and how it shapes their concept of the Divine. People share their observations about the Divine Feminine found in Mary all around the world.

I introduce the class to the monasteries in the eleventh century, which used the image of the Mother to depict Jesus. I explain the work of authors like Caroline Walker Bynum and her books *Jesus as Mother* and *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. I explain that

many theological texts reveal the very feminine nature of the Divine. The class appear stunned however when I explain that the feminine nature extends to Jesus himself. I distribute an image of *The Savior* by Quirizio da Murano that portrays Jesus with milk flowing from his breast (Bynum 1987, loc. 45, e book).

The revelation leads to a discussion about why churches stopped teaching it. Again, after now understanding how the Divine Feminine and independent women reside in Scripture, and how the history of the church contain the same, why is this not talked about more?

Most people conclude a deliberate effort came from part of the church to continue a bias against the feminine. Discussion continues about the role of Protestantism on the deflation of this type of theology.

Closing Prayer

Class Nine: Mary Magdalene

Scripture Reading Mark 15:40-41, 47; 16:1-11, John 19:25; 20:1-2, 20:11-18

Opening Prayer

Handouts provided.

I begin by asking permission from everyone to receive a confidential call from a member of the LAC to ask him or her to share his or her thoughts on the Bible study. I explain that this input would be part of the dissertation and that thought they may be quoted, no names would be placed with it. They all agree to the interview.

Opening the discussion on Mary Magdalene covers the different perspective on her as provided by Elaine Pagels, Margaret Starbird, and Barbara Thiering. As we

review the handouts and talk about how they understand her in light of non-canonical texts like those of Nag Hammadi and the Dead Sea Scrolls, people's minds and hearts so tune into this that they quickly digest it. We move the *Gospel of Mary* as I tell the story of her conflict with Peter. We discuss how several texts talk about Mary's leadership and the hatred that emanate from many Disciples, like Peter.

They all ask, "Why?" Why is something so beautiful and precious like the Divine Feminine trashed and disposed of so quickly?

The fact that the class so universally poses this question indicates that they embrace these concepts well and fully.

We move to a summary of the class. We go over the aspects of the Divine Feminine in the handout that we had discussed. I then give them a test. I devise this test mostly out of curiosity to see if they will share my opinion. I speak two words and ask which one they associate with the Divine Feminine and which they associate with the Divine Masculine. Those pairs of words are Belief/Faith, Forgiveness/Grace, Redemption/Salvation, Love/Compassion, and Doctrine/Story. Except for some questions regarding definition of the different between some of these words, the class unanimously agrees that the first words were masculine and the second ones were feminine.

I then ask them to consider some of the issues we discuss in class: abuse and violence against women, equality, ordination, and marital status. I ask them if they thought that these were the main issues or if something more foundational lay underneath

them. They all agreed that there was a bigger problem. They grasped the theological and Biblical issues regarding the Divine Feminine, which shines as the problem's root.

The class ends with people talking about marriage and the clergy, the role of celibacy, and the continuation of the church.

Closing Prayer

APPENDIX B

HAND OUTS FOR BIBLE STUDY

Introduction to Bible Study: A New Look at an Old Book

Bible Study created by Rev. Laura O'Neil

Through story, a journey through selected Scripture and ancient texts will offer a view of women that shows they are powerful and divinely created in the image of the Divine who is equally Male and Female. The ancient texts do not supplant Scripture, but to inform its interpretation.

Goals

1. Create a new excitement for Scripture study.
2. Open an opportunity for a deeper relationship to God.
3. Introduce and instruct on issues regarding Biblical Scholarship
 - a. Translation and language issues
 - b. Literary, Form, and Source analysis
 - c. Ethical Evaluation
 - d. Use of Metaphor and Allegory
 - e. Power of traditional interpretation
 - f. Oral Material
 - g. Influences of other ancient culture
 - h. Historical and sociological analysis

- i. Texts outside of Canon: Nag Hammadi, Dead Sea Scrolls, Jewish writings, other old texts.

Questions Explored

1. Is there a Biblical image for the self-actualizing woman who stands in direct relationship to God? Can this woman be single?
2. Does this image suggest a power of the Divine Feminine within God the Father?

Process Followed

1. A Bible story will be the focus during each class. Participants will read Bible texts prior to class.
2. Non-Canonical resources will be used each class to fill out the story.
3. They will hear the narrative of other stories offering a different perspective to the Bible story.
4. Each class member responds to what they hear in the story and what it means to them.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Jan. 9: Creation

Genesis 1 &2

Jan. 16: Sarah

Genesis 17:15-18:16

Jan. 23: Dinah	Genesis 34
Jan. 30: Tamar	Genesis 38
Feb. 6: Miriam	Exodus 1:2-10
Feb. 13: Rahab	Joshua 2
Feb. 20: The Canaanite Woman	Matt 15:21-28
Feb. 27: Mary, the Mother of God	Luke 1:26-38, 46-56; 2:22-51; 8:19-21
March 6: Mary Magdalene, the first Apostle	Mark 15:40-41, 47; 16:1-11
	John 19:25; 20:1-2, 20:11-18
March 13: Discussion and Review	

Readings for Lesson on Creation

Legends of the Jews, Louis Ginzberg, vol. 1, 3-4

“In the beginning, two thousand years before the heaven and the earth, seven things were created: the Torah written with black fire on white fire, and lying in the lap of God; the Divine Throne, erected in the heaven which later was over the heads of the Hayyot; Paradise on the right side of God, Hell on the left side; the Celestial Sanctuary directly in front of God, having a jewel on its altar graven with the Name of the Messiah, and a Voice that cries aloud, ‘Return, ye children of men.’ When God resolved upon the creation of the world, He too counsel with the Torah. Her advice was this: ‘O Lord, a king without an army and without courtiers and attendants hardly deserves the name of king, for name is nought to express the homage due to him.’ The answer pleased God exceedingly. Thus, did He teach all earthly kings, by His Divine example, to undertake nought without first consulting advisers? The advice of the Torah was given with some reservations. She was skeptical about the value of an earthly world, on account of the sinfulness of men, who would be sure to disregard her precepts...Nor is this world inhabited by man the first of things earthly created by God. He made several worlds before ours, but He destroyed them all, because He was pleased with none until He created ours.”

Sefer Yetzirah, The Book of Creation, Kaplan, Aryeh, trans. Maine: Samuel Weiser, INC, 1997, 30-31

“These are the three letters, Alef, Mem, and Shin...These letters are called “Mothers” because they are primary. Essentially, Alef is the first letter of the alphabet, Mem is the middle letter, and Shin is the second from the last...One reason why these letters are called “Mothers” is because, in general, the letters are derived from Understanding (Binah). As discussed earlier, Understanding is the primary feminine principle, and is therefore called Mother. This is alluded to in the verse, “For you shall call Understanding a Mother” (Proverbs 2:3).”

“La Loba,” by Clarissa Pinkola Estés, in *The Women Who Run With the Wolves*, 25-26

“There is an old woman who lives in a hidden place that everyone knows in their souls but few have ever seen. As in the fairy tales of Eastern Europe, she seems to wait for lost or wandering people and seekers to come to her place.”

“She is circumspect, often hairy, always fat, and especially wishes to evade most company. She is both a crower and a crackler, generally having more animal sounds than human ones.”

“I might say she lives among the rotten granite slopes in Tarahmara Indian territory. Or that she is buried outside Phoenix near a well. Perhaps she will be seen, maybe she will be spotted standing by the highway near El Paso, or riding shotgun with truckers to Morelia, Mexico, or walking to market above Oaxaca with strangely formed boughs of firewood on her back. She calls herself by many names: *La Huesera*; Bone Woman; *La trapera*, The Gatherer; and *La Loba*, Wolf Woman.”

“The sole work of *La Loba* is the collecting of bones. She collects and preserves especially that which is in danger of being lost to the world. Her cave is filled with the bones of all manner of desert creatures: the deer, the rattlesnake, the crow. But her specialty is wolves.”

“She creeps and crawls and sifts through the *montañas*, mountains, and *arroyos*, dry riverbeds, looking for the wolf bones, and when she has assembled an entire skeleton, when the last bone is in place and the beautiful white sculpture of the creature is laid out before her, she sits by the fire and thinks about what song she will sing.”

“And when she is sure, she stands over the *criatura*, raises her arms over it, and sings out. That is when the rib bones and leg bones of the wolf begin to flesh out and the creature becomes furred. *La Loba*, sings some more, and more of the creature comes into being; its tail curls upward, shaggy, and strong.”

“And *La Loba* sings more and the wolf creature begins to breathe.”

“And still *La Loba* sings so deeply that the floor of the desert shakes, and as she sings, the wolf opens its eyes, leaps up, and runs away down the canyon.”

“Somewhere in its running, whether by the speed of its running or by splashing its way into a river, or by way of a ray of sunlight or moonlight hitting it right in the side, the wolf is suddenly transformed into a laughing woman who runs free toward the Horizon.”

“So remember, if you wander the desert, and it is near sundown, and you are perhaps a little bit lost, and certainly tired, that you are lucky, for *La Loba* may take a liking to you and show you something—something of the soul.”

Biblical References to Laugh and Laughter

How many of these references give laughter a positive connotation?

Gen. 18:12, 13, 15; 17:17; 21:6, 38:23

Exo. 32:25

Job 5:22, 8:21, 12:4, 39:7, 39:18, 39:22, 41:29

Ps. 2:4; 37:13; 52:6, 59:8, 126:2

Pr. 1:26, 14:13, 31:25

La. 1:7; 3:14

Ecc. 2:2; 3:4; 7:3, 7:6; 10:19

Jer. 51:39

Eze. 22:4

Hab. 1:10

Mt 9:24

Mk 5:40

Lk. 6:21, 25, 8:53

Jas 4:9

Readings for Lesson on Sarah

The Story of Baubo, Estés, *Women Who Run With Wolves*,” 364-366

“The earth mother, Demeter, had a beautiful daughter called Persephone who was playing out in the meadow one day. Persephone came upon one particularly lovely bloom, and reached out her fingertips to cup its lovely face. Suddenly the ground began to shake and a giant zigzag ripped across the land. Up from deep within the earth charged Hades, the God of the Underworld. He stood tall and mighty in a black chariot driven by four horses the color of ghost.

“Hades seized Persephone into his chariot, her veils, and sandals flying. Down, down, down into the earth he reined his horses. Persephone’s screams grew more and more faint as the rift in the earth healed over as though nothing had ever happened.

“The voice of the maiden crying out echoed through the stories of the mountains, bubbled up in a watery cry from underneath the sea. Demeter heard the stones cry out. She heard the water crying. And then, over all the land came an eerie silence, and the smell of crushed flowers.

“And tearing her wreath from her immortal hair, and unfurling down from each shoulder her dark veils, Demeter flew out over the land like a great bird, searching for, calling for her daughter.

“That night an old crone at the edge of a cave remarked to her sisters that she had heard three cries that day; one, a youthful voice crying out in terror; and another calling plaintively; and a third, that of a mother weeping.

“Persephone was nowhere to be found, and so began Demeter’s crazed and months-long search for her beloved child. Demeter raged, she wept, she screamed, she asked after, searched every land formation underneath, inside, and atop, begged mercy, begged death, but no matter what, she could not find her heart-child.

“So, she who had made everything grow in perpetuity cursed all the fertile fields of the world, screaming in her grief, “Die! Die! Die!” Because of Demeter’s curse, no child could be born, no wheat could rise for bread, no flowers for feasts, no boughs for the dead. Everything lay withered and sucked at parched earth or dry breasts.

“Demeter herself no longer bathed. Her robes were mud drenched, her hair hung in dreadlocks. Even though the pain in her heart was staggering, she could not surrender. After many askings, pleadings, and episodes, all leading to nothing, she finally slumped down at the side of a well in a village where she was unknown. And as she learned her aching body against the cool stone of the well, along came a woman, or rather a sort of woman. And this woman danced up to Demeter wiggling her hips in a way suggesting sexual intercourse, and shaking her breasts in her little dance. And when Demeter saw her, she could not help but smile just a little.

“The dancing female was very magical indeed, for she had no head whatsoever, and her nipples were her eyes, and her vulva was her mouth. It was through this lovely mouth that she began to regale Demeter with some nice juicy jokes. Demeter began to smile, and then chuckled, and then gave a full belly laugh. And together the two women

laughed, the little belly Goddess Baubo and the powerful Mother Earth Goddess, Demeter.

“And it was just this laughing that drew Demeter out of her depression and gave her the energy to continue her search for her daughter, which, with the help of Baubo, and the crone Hekate, and the sun Helios, was ultimately successful. Persephone was restored to her mother. The world, the land, and the bellies of women thrived again.”

For further reading on Baubo, see chapter three in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, by Olender Maurice (David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, Froma I. Zeitlin, editors, Princeton University Press, 1990). Included in this full description are references to the early church Fathers who wrote about Baubo.

Readings on Abraham's Daughter

Abraham took a wife after Sarah named Keturah (Gen. 25:1).

“Abraham was now old and well advanced in years, and the Lord had blessed him in every way”, which in Hebrew is Bakkol. In the Midrash, “in every way” or “in all things” indicates the name of his daughter Bakkol Rabbi's say that because Abraham did not have the Torah, he could not have had all things, so the Hebrew word indicates the name of his only daughter (*Legends of the Jews*, vol. 5, 258).

Luke 13:16 and I Peter 3:16 makes reference to Daughter of Abraham.

Readings on Goddess

The Hebrew Goddess, Raphael Patai, Wayne State University Press, Michigan, 1990, 23-27.

“Goddesses are ubiquitous—this, in a nutshell, is the conclusion one reaches from a perusal of the voluminous and still growing literature on history of religion.

“The stood by the cradle of Homo Sapiens, and testified to his earliest known appearance in Europe, some thirty to forty thousand years ago, as evidenced by the discovery in Aurignacian deposits of statuettes of nude women with enormous breasts and buttocks and protruding abdomens. These figurines, representing in a highly stylized and exaggerated form women in an advanced stage of pregnancy, are usually referred to as paleolithic Venuses—of Willendorf, Mentan, Lespugne, Laussel, to mention only a few—and are generally regarded by students of prehistory as having had religious significance.

“They are strikingly paralleled by finds of a later provenance, unearthed as Mesopotamia and Syria, and dating from the so-called Halafian age of the 5th millennium B.C.E. Both the European Old Stone Age and the Near Eastern Halafian figurines served the same purpose; to ensure fertility and delivery...

“At least as old as the Near Eastern nude statuettes are myths in which goddesses play a larger, more universal roles. The earliest answers to the great question of “Whence?” all reiterate, in various forms the same idea: it was out of the body of the primordial goddess that the world-egg emerged, or that the earth was born, or alternately,

it was the goddess' body itself that provided the material from which the earth was made. Thus the oldest cosmogonies, like the oldest worship of concretely represented deities, typically start with a primal goddess.

“Once these phenomena were ascertained, and long before the data were adequate, attempts at explanation began. One of the earliest was that of the 19th-century cultural evolutionist who posited an early matriarchal social order in which the supposedly general predominance of women was assumed to have paralleled by a similar situation in the divine realm. The family was ruled by the other, the people by queens, and the heavens by goddess” (23-24).

“In view of the general human, psychologically determined predisposition to believe in and worship goddesses, it would be strange if the Hebrew-Jewish religion, which flourished for centuries in a region of intensive goddess cults, had remained immune to them. Yet this is precisely the picture one gets when one views Hebrew religion through the polarizing prisms of Mosaic legislation and prophetic teaching...Historical scrutiny, however, shows that for many centuries following the traditional date of the Sinaitic revelation, this religion, idealized in retrospect, remained a demand rather than a fact. Further study, undertaken in the present volume, indicates that there were among the Biblical Hebrews other religious trends, powerful in their attraction for the common people and their leaders alike, in which the worship of goddesses played as important a role as it did anywhere else on comparable stages of religious development. It will also be attempted to show that the female deities of the early

monarchic period did not subsequently disappear but underwent transformations and succeeded in their changed forms to retain much of their old sway over religious sentiments” (25-26).

“The average layman, whether Jew or Gentile, still believes that the official Hebrew religion was a strict monotheism beginning with God's revelation of Himself to Abraham. Scholars date the origin of Hebrew monotheism a few centuries later, during the days of the great prophets. As we shall see, even this qualified statement must be modified somewhat in view of certain doctrines, which succeeded in being admitted into the literary depositories of the official religion during Talmudic times, and in view of the Kabbalistic adumbration of a plurality of persons in the deity. Let us here stress the fact that in addition to “official” Judaism—that crystallization of the religion which represented the consensus of most of the religious leaders of a certain time and place—Judaism has always comprised heterodox variants as well. Moreover, since there was no hard-and-fast dividing line between official and non-official versions of the faith, there was constant interaction between the two. The feminine numina discussed in this book must, therefore, be considered part of the Hebrew-Jewish religion, whether they were admitted into the “official” formulation of the faith or accepted only by the simple people, against whose beliefs and practices the exponents of the former never ceased to thunder” (27).

Introduction to Biblical Tools and Methods in Interpretation

Written by Laura O'Neil

Biblical interpretation offers lenses through which one views and therefore understands Scripture and its meaning. Sometimes its basis rests on analysis of Scripture (Criticism) or axillary research, like archeology. Interpreters can gaze through many lenses.

The Bible itself contains interpretation from rewriting of stories, including more than one rendition of a story, or offering internal interpretation of a story within a rendition itself. For example, the Old Testament frequently gives more than one version of a story. Those written later, often editorializes an earlier version. Compare for example Daniel 9:12; 24-27 with Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10. In the New Testament, Paul takes Old Testament stories and gives them a specific interpretation from the lens of early Christianity. In Gal 4:21-26, the writer interpreted the story of Hagar and Sarah as allegories of Jewish and Christian covenants.

Allegory evolved as one of the earliest ways to interpret a story. It suggested a deeper meaning that usually relates the text to a new reality in a different time. Rabbis did this when they interpreted the old stories from Genesis, and wrote Chronicles, during a later time with different needs. Christians did the same thing with the Jewish scriptures, by interpreting it to fit Christian theology.

Within the first 500 years of Christianity, people believed that the Bible story had more than one meaning. A variety of interpretations can offer more than one answer.

Sometimes we need a choice to help edify a passage. Literal interpretation does not always help, especially if it seems to hatred of others. We can use our own common sense and purpose to evaluate when the outcome of a certain interpretive method helps us or not.

As time moved into the early Middle Ages and beyond, the Church Fathers formed the chain of acceptable interpretation. Each church Father's commentary had to adhere to those who went before then. Interpretation of Canon, from the line of Church Fathers, formed the actual Canon for most Christian believers, since they could not read the Bible and alternative interpretations taken out of consideration. People fought heresy in any form. For most Christians, the chain of interpretation rather than the Biblical text became sacrosanct.

During the Renaissance and Reformation periods, new knowledge of ancient languages and cultures invited new translations in native tongues. The Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Greek Septuagint, had functioned as the accept version of the Bible for over 1000 years. When people translated it anew, scholars found errors. One of the errors caused Martin Luther to reframe Christian belief that gave birth to the Reformation. Other translations into native languages allowed more people to read the Bible for themselves. The anchor of tradition was pulled up to which many hung. Many people who found their faith under the capricious waves of change.

By the 17th century, new ideas formed the basis of interpretation. First, they understood the Bible to be an ancient group of books, each requiring a historical

understanding. Each book likely had more than one author or editor, spanning over several centuries of rewriting, editing, or translation. The final form and content of each book illustrates the author's own conceptions, intentions, context, and beliefs. By the 18th century, Biblical scholarship struggled to free interpretation from the old dogmatic dominance. The foundations of interpretation became historical. Archeology, sociology, comparative religions, became authentic ways to understand Scripture.

In the 20th century, new discoveries of ancient texts at Qumran (Dead Sea Scrolls) and Nag Hammadi (with previously unknown early Christian texts), and new archeologically finds, brought a Christian Renaissance in interpretation. Although still in the midst of this Renaissance, interpretation the new perspective of pluralism dominated. Each person or groups of people view the Biblical narrative from their own eyes and life histories.

Through many voices, new perspectives and interpretations can reveal new Biblical truths, thus adding to the infinite quality and eternal Divine Presence in Holy Scripture with ongoing revelation of the Word of God.

STREAMS OF BIBLICAL CRITICISM, INTERPRETATION, AND RESEARCH

Written by Laura O'Neil, based on articles found in NIDB.

Allegory: A story is symbolic of a deeper meaning, often having nothing to do with the actual subject of story.

Historical: A story is understandable only when seen in its own historical setting.

Theological: A story is a lesson supporting a theological belief.

Traditional: A chain of interpretation developed by inherited authority of Church Fathers.

Form: Each part of the Bible has a certain form of literary or oral discourse that dictates its use and therefore meaning.

Linguistic/Semantic: How a language defines a word, how the word is used in a passage, and how the word is later translated, all point to various interpretive issues. Interpretation of a passage may depend upon understanding of one key word. Knowledge of ancient languages and linguistics has helped broaden this category of analysis.

Comparative Religions: The comparison of ancient near Eastern religions, some of which are dead, offers insights into the formation of Hebrew, Jewish, and Christian religious expression as described in Biblical text.

Literary: The Bible has many authors. Each author leaves his or her signature in the text. Their motivation and context can be indicated from this research.

Metaphorical: Religion can be viewed as an artistic expression of a spiritual relationship. That artistic expression took the fundamental form of metaphor in Sacred Scripture. In addition, it found expression in building, art, song, and dance.

Personal: People can interpret the Bible in whatever way makes sense for them. All rational and evaluative methodology is disregarded in favor of personal opinion. There is no right or wrong.

Literal: Text is plain and ought to be viewed one dimensionally.

Archeological: Artifacts and physical sites are studied as ways to either authenticate or call into question Biblical stories and their meaning.

Anthropological: The Bible, as religious expression, tells the wider story of human beings growing into high spiritual selves, implying a changing and growing relationship with the Divine. In this view, the image of God changes, not because God changes, but because our understanding of God changes.

Ancient Cultures: Cultures surrounding the Hebrews, Jews, and Christians most certainly influenced them. Egyptian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Sumerians, Persian, Greek are examples.

Liberal/Progressive: The Bible is a Call to Action for social justice causes. This perspective would argue that everything in the Bible is a progressive unveiling of social justice within the human context.

Thematic: Certain ideas are so central to the Bible that it goes back to them repeatedly. Atonement, love, forgiveness are common themes.

Socio/Economic/Political: People have basic needs of food and shelter. They also have needs of governance as a community, and binding values and moral codes. These types of research look at how these needs are addressed as circumstances changes.

Geological/Climate: Geography and climate affects how religions form and change. Examples are the explanations given for the Plagues of Egypt, parting of the sea, or pillars of fire.

Existential: Can we walk in their shoes? Can they walk in ours? Everything is based on human experience. The origin of everything Biblical is human experience. The origin of everything about interpretation is human experience as well. Can we get down to the basics of mutually shared human experience?

Hermeneutics: Every human being has their own experiences that they bring to the table. Those experiences will affect the way they interpret a story or the Bible as a whole. Sometimes there are communities of human beings who share a specific hermeneutic, or perspective. For example, wealthy and powerful men, royalty, Latinos, the Poor, the Oppressed, Women bring a specific hermeneutic that affects interpretation.

Readings for Lesson on Tamar

INTRODUCTION, by Laura O'Neil

Dinah's important story offered a paradigm that continues through Scripture and continues even today. Male and female, creation hung on the image of the Divine: Male and Female. Stated in the beginning, healthy coexistence continued in Hebrew and later Jewish worship throughout Biblical times. Good archeological evidence indicated Asherah coexisted with El. As Divine Mother and Father, they ruled heaven and earth. Whether during the early prehistory stories of Genesis/Exodus, the stories of Judges and the Kingdom or during the time of the Divided Kingdom, worship of the female aspect of the supreme deity formed part of worship. No one doubted the integrity of the female as a true partner though increasingly people questioned Her equal status.

Starting with the time of Judges and the story of Gideon, an effort grew to extinguish the worship of the Goddess as the supreme deity and to squelch the authority of women in the Temple. At the same time, the gender equality found challenge. An idea emerged. Women ought to be under the authority of a man. A man stands only under the authority of God.

The tree and the snake kept close association with Asherah. It is no wonder that in the time of the Exile, when Jews put together a far more patriarchal story, the Garden of Eden story took center stage. As great mother, Eve remained associated with the tree and the snake, the man's presence creates a different story that would lead toward disaster.

The prophet's favorite image of the failures of the Kingdom was the worship of false idols (Asherah idols?) and marrying the wrong sort of person. Both Adultery (and harlotry) and Idolatry (Goddess worship) can be traced back to Dinah, a free and loving girl setting off to participate in a Canaanite goddess ritual, then committing to marry a man outside her clan. The brothers Simeon and Levi's actions to stop all association to Goddess worship and intermarrying in such a nihilistic way laid down the model for the patriarchal way. However, this was not going to be easy. The Hebrews and later Jews continued to intermarry. The Jews never stop worshipping the Goddess, even during the time of the Temple and long after that in Kabbalistic belief.

Simeon and Levi became the teachers and the priests. From them the drive would come to block women from worship and personal freedom. From them came the patriarchal order in Judaism and later Christianity. Through ruthless methods, they would rip the feminine out of the Godhead, and the woman out of leadership. They would even strip her of her fundamental right of being a child of God/Goddess, made in "their image." They wanted her made according to man's wants and needs, just as they tried to do with Dinah.

Readings

“*Asherah*”, by Susan Ackerman, in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, pp. 297-299

“*Asherah*...was particularly known as a mother goddess, the consort of the high father and god El...the goddess is, in addition, associated with the images of snakes...and...with trees. In the Garden of Eden story...a serpent and two sacred trees are closely associated with Eve, who epithet ‘mother of all the living’ closely mimics the role of the mother goddess *Asherah*. Even more significant are the approximately forty times the term *Asherah* occurs in the Hebrew, occasionally as the proper name...but more often as...a religious icon in the shape of a stylized pole or tree... Although there is some debate, a vast majority of biblical scholars quite reasonably presume that this tree like icon represented the Canaanite mother goddess *Asherah*. The biblical writers condemn the presence of an *Asherah* icon in Israel (and, by implication, the presence of the goddess the icon represents) as foreign and inappropriate in the worship of the Israelite god Yahweh.”

“Many scholars assume that the viewpoint of the biblical writers represents the typical viewpoint in ancient Israel. Archaeological discoveries made in the late 20th century, however, have caused other scholars to reconsider the role of *Asherah* in ancient Israelite religion...including three inscriptions that refer to Yahweh in conjunction with his ‘*asherah*,’ ...suggests *Asherah* was worshipped alongside Yahweh.”

“To be sure, not all ancient Israelites accepted this sort of worship, and we have already noted that within the biblical text, there is manifold opposition to it. According to Deut. 16:21-22, e.g., the Israelites are forbidden to erect an image dedicated to the goddess Asherah. Deut. 7:5 and 12:3 further command that any Asherah icon the Israelites encounter should be hewn down. The books of I-2 Kings follow suit by lavishing praise upon several kings of Israel’s Southern Kingdom of Judah who do just that. Josiah is also praised for removing the vessels that were used to offer sacrifice to Asherah from the Temple in Jerusalem and for breaking down the houses within the temple compound in which women wove garments that were draped over the goddess’s icon.”

“Yet the fact that biblical writers find it necessary to condemn repeatedly Asherah worship, and the fact that kings Asa, Hezekiah, and Josiah are said to have repeatedly destroyed an asherah icon... suggests that whatever the opposition of the biblical writers to Asherah worship, many if not most in ancient Israel found devotion to Asherah to be an appropriate part of their devotion to Yahweh. The Asherah icon that Josiah destroyed was said to have stood in Yahweh’s Temple in Jerusalem. In addition, sacrifice was offered to the goddess there, and the Temple provided housing—and presumably financial support—for women who were in Asherah’s service. Thus it appears that, at least in Josiah’s day (ca. 640-609 BCE), there were some associated with the Temple in Jerusalem (priests?) who saw Asherah worship as an appropriate part of the worship of Yahweh...”

“In Israel’s Northern Kingdom, evidence also suggests that many, even among the priestly and prophetic elite, worshiped Asherah side by side with Yahweh...”

“Why might Asherah worship have been accepted by so many in Israel? Most scholars recognize that at least some portions of the people of Israel emerged out of the Canaanite culture in ca. 1200 BCE, in the waning years of the Late Bronze Age. Many aspects of ancient Israel’s religious language and tradition consequently also had roots in Canaanite culture, especially in Canaanite motifs and traditions concerning the god El that were appropriated by the ancient Israelites seem to have assumed they should appropriate for Yahweh the traditions concerning El’s consort Asherah. For these ancient Israelites, then, Asherah is worshiped as Yahweh’s consort; for as Yahweh supplants El as an object of worship, Yahweh lays claim to El’s wife.”

“*Prostitution*”, by Susan Ackerman, *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4, 650-652

“Female prostitution—a woman’s participation in sexual intercourse outside of marriage, typically in exchange for payment... is well attested in the Bible... Equally well attested is a profoundly ambivalent cultural attitude toward prostitution... There is no doubt that, at one level the prostitute was stigmatized and even ostracized in the societies... Rahab is subsequently lauded in biblical tradition... Similarly, the Bible treats the widowed Tamar’s assumption of the role of prostitute as praiseworthy... In the New Testament, Tamar and Rahab are two of only four women listed in Matthew’s presentation of Jesus genealogy. Jesus praises prostitutes for their faith in the baptism of

John and, eventually, in the message of Jesus ministry, and Jesus likewise praises the faith of the sinful woman—often taken to be a prostitute—who washes and anoints his feet... There is ambivalence... The institution of prostitution is something ancient near eastern societies (or at least the males) perceived as needed and even desired, and therefore the prostitute is accommodated. The prostitute’s role as financial agent...she controls the financial transactions...able to function independent of male authority...”

“In the New Testament, the Old Testament metaphor of ‘apostasy as prostitution’ continues to be deployed... Revelation’s metaphorical prostitute is however, never portrayed as an unfaithful spouse to Yahweh, as in the Old Testament prophets... As in the Old Testament, there, the brutal punishment of the Whore of Babylon (Rev. 18:1-24) offers a religious justification for violence in relationships between men and women.”

“An issue concerning prostitution in the Old Testament requires discussion: the alleged existence in Israel of both male and female cult prostitutes, religious functionaries, that is, who participated in sexual acts within a ritualized context and for a religious purpose. Such behavior, it is alleged, although condemned by the biblical writers, was engaged in by some ancient Israelites in imitation of Mesopotamian ritual practices. Recent commentators, however, have argued that there is no clear evidence for an ancient near eastern or biblical ritual of cult prostitution.”

“The Hebrew terms commonly translated as ‘cult prostitute’ or also ‘sacred prostitute’ and ‘temple prostitute’ are qadhash and qedheshah. Both stem from a root meaning ‘to be set apart, consecrated, holy,’ which,, obviously,, has no explicit sexual

connotation. But because female qedheshoth show up in conjunction with prostitutes (zonoth), in Hos 4:14, scholars have argued that the 'holiness' of at least the female qedheshoth must involve ritual sex. The fact that Mesopotamian equivalent to the Israelite qedheshoth, the qadishtu, has commonly been understood as a function of the goddess...further suggests a connection between the role of qedheshoth and ritualized sexual behaviors... Yet there is no evidence that the sexual activities of the Mesopotamian qadishtu were ritual in nature. Students of Mesopotamian religion have also questioned whether other Mesopotamian ritual functionaries sometimes described as 'sacred prostitutes' in fact performed such a role. Finally, regarding Hos 4:14, some scholars argue that the term zonoth (prostitutes) is used metaphorically...as...those who commit apostasy...All that is revealed in the juxtaposition of zonoth and qedheshoth...is the ritual activities of the latter are viewed by Hosea as religiously inappropriate; that the nature of the inappropriateness is sexual misconduct is, however, not indicated."

Review of Classes

Written by Laura O'Neil

The purpose of this study is to view the Bible from the eyes of an powerful and independent woman...a woman who does not have to look to a man to find her definition or role. The study will show powerful and independent woman, who could make choices and define themselves. However, the study will also reveal the conflict with men who sometimes want to define them or use them for their own purposes.

Part of understanding these woman means we need to views ancient history in terms of a matriarchal time-period when the Goddess existed as the consort of God. The Divine Feminine revolved around the evolution of the woman and particularly her relationship to men. As the God of the Hebrews became more distant from images of the Goddess or characteristics that are Divinely Feminine, so the standing of women among men sinks to lower levels. However, the final blow to woman's power and to images of the Divine Feminine came in the second and third century of the Christian era. The images still exist in forbidden texts, but women increasingly succumb to subordination.

One can view the Bible stories from the eyes of embolden women, looking for other emboldened women who naturally believe in her power. To reach successfully that view, presuppositions need to drop off the radar. One supposition to drop states that Biblical woman had no power and were dependent upon men. That is an assumption that I will suspend.

There is much evidence for the Goddess worship in the Ancient Near East. Belief in Her clearly helped form who the Hebrew, Jews, and Christians were. There is much evidence that translations of early Hebrew words, suggest an effort to cast woman in a negative light. In I Timothy, the sinful nature of women comes out. Only a husband might save her. That kind of thinking pops up also in Number 25, when Midianite women receive blame for leading the Israeli men astray. However, in the original Hebrew, the woman does not suggest anything more than idolatry and sex. The metaphor may not suggest a woman at all, but that worship of another god was the adulterous act. This connection between idolatry and adultery often and always gets confused, just like harlotry and priestess duties. This confusion happened early and often, leading us down a path of woman's corruption, which puts her in need of control. It is important, if one is to set the Bible woman free from corruption, to go beneath these textual and word problems.

Is there any part of the Bible penned by women? Being open to the possibility that women wrote parts of the Bible, give woman a new voice in the forming of sacred scripture.

Further Readings

The Book of J, by Harold Bloom, NY, 1990, p. 9.

“In Jerusalem, nearly three thousand years ago, an unknown author composed a work that has formed the spiritual consciousness of much of the world ever since. We possess only a fragmentary text of that work, embedded within what we call Genesis,

Exodus, and Numbers, three of the divisions of Torah, or the Five Books of Moses...ultimately we must rely upon our experience as readers to justify our surmises as to what it is that we are reading. Scholarship, however deeply grounded, can reach no agreement upon the dating of what I am calling the Book of J... For reasons that I will expound, I am assuming that J lived at or nearby the court of Solomon's son and successor...My further assumption is that J was...an immensely sophisticated, highly placed member of the Solomonic elite...But my primary surmise is that J was a woman..."

The Harlot by the Side of the Road: Forbidden Tales of the Bible, Jonathan Kirsch, New York, 1997, 214

"Another scholar entertains an even more startling scenario, Judges may be 'the literature of a feminist intelligentsia' in ancient Israel..."

Readings for Miriam

The Particulars of Rapture, Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, New York, 2001, 57-58, 68

“You find that when Israel was in harsh labor in Egypt, Pharaoh decreed against them that they should not sleep at home nor have relations with their wives... What did the daughters of Israel do? They would go down to draw water from the river and God would prepare for them little fish in their buckets, and they would sell some of them, and cook some of them, and buy wine with proceeds, and go to the field and feed their husbands... in the field. And when they had eaten and drunk, the women would take the mirrors and look into them with their husbands, and she would say, ‘I am more comely than you,’ and he would say, ‘I am more comely than you.’ And as a result, they would accustom themselves to desire, and they were fruitful and multiplied... They bore two children at a time... And all these numbers from the mirrors... In the midst of those mirrors which they showed their husbands to accustom them to desire, from the midst of the harsh labor, they raised up all the hosts... When God told Moses to make the Tabernacle, the whole people stood up and offered whatever they had... The women... brought the mirrors to Moses. Moses... was furious with them... What do they need mirrors for? Then God said to Moses, ‘Moses, these you despise! These mirrors raised up all those hosts in Egypt! Take them, and make of them a copper ewer with a copper stand for the priests to sanctify themselves... And he made the ewer of copper and its stand of copper, of the mirrors of those who created hosts.’”

Readings for The Canaanite Women

Women in the Ancient Near East, by Christine Neal Thomas, NIDB, vol. 5, 879-882

“Markers of high social status cut across gender lines.”

“When Sargon of Akkad seized power over Sumer...he installed his daughter as high priestess...Successive high priestesses...were also royal women...”

“The Naditu are a relatively well-documented group of women in the Old Babylonian period...Naditu were dedicated for life to a particular god...and would receive a share of the patrimonial estate upon entering the service of the god. They bought and sold property...”

“Although rarely mentioned in surveys of the male rulers who devastated Israel and Judah... Neo-Assyrian royal women were influential in the politics of the empire.”

Women in the Apocrypha, by Judith Newman, NIDB, vol. 5, 882-885

“There is no uniform depiction of women in the literature of the Apocrypha. In addition to their customary familiar roles as wives, mothers, and daughter, women are independently mentioned...Some of the authors ‘think with women,’ that is to say, females are epitomized, idealized, metaphorized, and stereotyped in order to express larger cultural values or ideals.”

“Women characters play central roles in a number of the narratives: Greek Esther, Judith, Tobit, and Susanna.”

“The book of Sirach is unique among Jewish books...The book also contains the most negative characterization of women in the Apocrypha. Women are blamed as the origin of sin and from his perspective have a propensity for wickedness.”

Women in the Apocrypha, by Bonnie Bowman Thurston, NIDB, vol. 5, 885-888

“The greatest differences among women were not cultural or religious but economic...Because wealthier women had more choices and opportunities, we know more about them. On the other hand poorer rural women and those involved in a family trade or shop in towns and cities had more freedom of movement than women who belong to the more comfortable groups...”

“Jewish women...in the second Temple period...is complicated by variant pictures...Most NT women lived in villages in Roman Palestine where families survived by farming, fishing, and running small businesses. Female labor was essential to the family’s survival...Women had an important role in domestic religious practice, local festivals, and funerary rites...wealthy women supported synagogues financially and sometimes held leadership positions.”

“The position of Greek women was much less restricted... They could inherit and manage wealth... Education was available to the wealthier... some of whom were citizens with political rights... Elite women were deeply involved in the economic, political, and religious life... divorce was as readily available to women as men... Both Greek and Roman women had many religious options: the concept of belonging to only one religion was unusual.”

“About one-quarter of Mark’s characters are women... Women were present in the Markan ‘crowds’ who approved of Jesus and were among his disciples. Initially, women disciples are portrayed more positively than males who misunderstand and disobey Jesus... The account of the Syrophenician woman instructive... this single mother... elicits a christological troubling response from Jesus, but her quick witted reply... implies the Jesus learned from a Gentile woman.”

“...John tells Jesus’ story differently... Its author’s knowledge of Judaism is extensive... Several important texts feature women... The Samaritan woman... argues like a theologian... she is treated with the same seriousness as Nicodemus... John places his most fully developed Christological confession on the lips of Martha... Women are depicted as strong, independent followers of Jesus who sometimes play unconventional roles...with Mary the mother of Jesus as model disciple.”

“A two part work, Luke-Acts contains an extraordinary amount of material on women...Written by a Gentile Christian...the Gospel has thirty passages dealing with women...Luke’s Jesus kingdom parables treating women’s and men’s activities...a crucial text indicates women traveled with Jesus and financed his ministry...”

“...the Acts of the Apostles is a primary source of information about the early church. Twelve women are mentioned by name; they are married, single, professional, homemakers, Jews, Greeks, Romans, goddesses, sisters, mothers, mothers-in-laws, queens, slaves, martyrs, and of questionable reputation...women are missionaries, prophets, disciples, and leaders of house churches...”

Alexandra Salome, by Tal Ilan, NIDB, vol. 1, 98-99

She was “A Jewish queen of the Hasmonean dynasty between 76-67 BCE...the last fully independent Hasmonean monarch. She inherited the throne from her husband...The Jewish historian Josephus’ appraisal of his reign is surprisingly positive...The rabbis also failed to comment on her gender and praised her reign profusely as a time of God’s bounty to His people. Recently it has been ascertained that the queen is also mentioned in the literature of Qumran...The members of the Qumran sect, unlike Josephus and the rabbis viewed the reign of the queen as violent and illegitimate.”

The Gnostic Gospels, by Elaine Pagels New York, 1979, 48-55

“Unlike many of his contemporaries among the deities of the ancient Near East, the God of Israel shared his power with no female divinity... The absence of feminine symbolism for God marks Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in striking contrast to the world’s other religious traditions... The men form the legitimate body of the community, while women are allowed to participate only when they assimilate themselves to men... In texts discovered at Nag Hammadi demonstrate one striking difference between these ‘heretical’ courses and orthodox ones: gnostic sources continually use sexual symbolism to describe God.”

“How do these texts characterize the divine Mother? We may sketch out three primary characterizations. In the first place, several gnostic groups describe the divine

Mother as part of an original couple...in one part of the Ineffable, the Depth, the Primal Father; and, in the order, of Grace, Silence, the Womb, and Mother of the All.”

“A second characterization of the divine Mother describes her as Holy Spirit...The Greek terminology for the Trinity, which includes the neuter term for spirit (pneuma) virtually, requires that the third ‘Person’ of the Trinity be asexual. But...the Hebrew term for spirit, ruah, a feminine word...”

“In addition... a third characterization of the divine Mother: as Wisdom. Here the Greek feminine term for ‘wisdom,’ Sophia, translates a Hebrew feminine term...”

“Even more remarkable is the gnostic poem called the *Thunder, Perfect Mind*.”
This text contains a revelation spoken by a feminine power”:

The Thunder: Perfect Mind, in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, San Francisco: Harper, 297-299

“...For I am the first and the last.
I am the honored one and the scorned one.
...I am the whore and the holy one.
I am the wife and the virgin.
I am (the mother) and the daughter.
I am the members of my mother.
I am the barren one and many are her sons.
I am she whose wedding is great, and I have not taken a husband.
I am the midwife and she who does not bear.
I am solace of my labor pains.
I am the bride and the bridegroom, and it my husband who begot me.
I am the mother of my father and the sister of my husband, and he is my offspring...
...Why you who hate me, do you love me and hate those who love me?
You who deny me, confess me, and you who confess me, deny me...”

...For I am knowledge and ignorance.
I am shame and boldness.
I am shameless; I am ashamed...
...Why have you hated me in your counsels?"

Readings on Gnostic Scriptures

Introduction, by Laura O'Neil

In response to the questions regarding Gnostic writings, I put together some expert's thoughts on the subject.

My own thoughts are these. Texts that were not included in the Canon many consider unclean, or heretical, not of true faith. I suggest that we think of these texts as being Sacred and Holy for many, many Christians through the ages. For that, minimally, we can respect them. Whether or not they speak to us is something that only you can decide. Most decidedly, though, one cannot lump together all texts that did not make it into Canon as Gnostic, nor can one consider all heresy as Gnostic. In fact, what exactly qualifies a text as Gnostic is under scrutiny today and hotly debated. NOT one qualifying definition works.

In 1965, I took my first college level theology class. I remember the professor, a Doctor of Theology from Yale graduate, saying, "About heresy, remember, that in every person's faith lays some heresy."

It is better to be honest with what has meaning than in being afraid of an inquisition.

Readings

The Other Bible: Ancient Alternative Scriptures, edited with introductions by Willis Barnstone, HarperSanFrancisco, 1984

“The Gnostics were serious rivals of orthodox Christians. The most systematized and organized Gnostic cult was Manichaeism, which spread from Mesopotamia through Asia Minor to North Africa and the European territories of the Roman Empire. It extended to eastern Iraq and into Chinese Turkestan, where it became the state religion of the Uigur Empire. Western China remained Manichaean until the thirteenth century. In the West it arose here and there as various medieval sects, such as the Bogomils and Cathari, and the Albigensians in South France. Today in Iran and southwest Iraq the Mandaean, a Gnostic offshoot of heterodox Jewish sects originally from eastern Syria and Palestine, continue in the Gnostic faith. The most serious conflict between Christians and Gnostics was in the first four centuries of the Common Era... Leaving aside speculations, we can say categorically that the Bible, with the absence of sacred texts from the entire intertestamental period, with its acceptance of a small and repetitious canon for the New Testament, with the exclusion of all later Christian Apocrypha, and the total rejection of gnostic scriptures, has given us a highly censored and distorted version of ancient religious literature.” (xviii-xix)

The Gnostic Bible, edited by Willis Barnstone and Marvin Meyer, Introduction by Marvin Meyer, Massachusetts, 2009

“The gnostics were religious mystics who proclaimed gnosis, knowledge, as the way of salvation. To know oneself truly allowed gnostic men and women to know god directly, without any need for the mediation of rabbis, priests, bishops, imams, or other religious officials.” (1)

“The term gnostic is derived from the ancient Greek word gnosis, ‘knowledge.’ Gnosis is a common word in Greek, and it can designate different types of knowledge.”

(8)

“On the other hand, gnosticism is ‘a coherent series of characteristics that can be summarized in the idea of a divine spark in man, deriving from the divine realm, fallen into this world of fate, birth and death, and needing to be awakened by the divine counterpart of the self in order to be finally reintegrated.’ Gnosticism is thus a religious movement.” (10)

“More recently scholars have questioned these ways of describing and defining gnosis and Gnosticism. Here we shall consider three significant attempts...1... Elaine Pagels draws conclusions about the social and political concerns that motivated the gnostics...the gnostic teaching ‘claimed to offer to every initiate direct access to God.’ ...2....Bentley Layton distinguishes between two meanings of the word... board...religious movements...and the other meaning...is narrow and... historical, a self-given name...but primary texts classified by Layton as classic gnostic scripture do not refer to themselves as gnostic...3...Michael Williams is more negative in his assessment of the word Gnosticism. He argues for ‘dismantling a dubious category...’” (11-13)

Readings for Mary Magdalene

The White Goddess, A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth, by Robert Graves, New York, 1948

On the back cover: “The earliest European deity was the White Goddess of Birth, Love and Death, visible appearing as the New, Full and Old Moon, and worshipped under the countless titles. She was beautiful, generous, fickle, wise, and implacable. The White Goddess is far more than a long-discredited pagan deity. She is still alive, and her worship takes many strange forms both inside and outside the conventions of Western morality.”

Jesus the Man: a New Interpretation from the Dead Sea Scrolls, Barbara Thiering, Great Britain, 1992

From the Foreword by Dr. Leonie Star: “On Palm Sunday, 1990, a television documentary outlining the work of Dr. Barbara Thiering was broadcast throughout Australia...It concerned the connection between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament gospels as they impinge on the foundations of Christianity...The views of innovative thinkers add value to every society. Only by questioning traditional beliefs can those beliefs be either reaffirmed or modified.” (xi, xiii)

“Over the years of testing it became clear that a technique of interpretation suggested by the Dead Sea Scrolls fit the gospels in a way that the writers of the gospels themselves intended.” (9)

“It is accepted also that the scrolls were written within the general period. They belong then to the time of Christian origins...It soon became apparent to those studying the scrolls that the writers were similar in many ways to the early followers of Jesus Christ.” (12-13)

“An obvious hypothesis—which depends on knowing the date of the relevant scrolls—is that the Qumran sect represented the form of Judaism, out of which Christianity came.” (15)

“The account of the marriage of Jesus with Mary Magdalene lies very close to the surface of the gospel narratives. It is easy to sense an erotic element in the story of the woman with the alabaster flask of pure nard, who poured it over Jesus...The gospel of Philip, which has signs of being written at an early date, give more. ‘There were three who always walked with the Lord: Mary his mother and her sister and Magdalene, the one who was called his companion. His sister and his mother and his companion were each a Mary.’ When the Essene marriage rules are brought together with the passage on the woman with ointment, the actual history becomes clear. This was not a purely a spiritual relationship, but a real marriage, following the rules of the dynastic order. Jesus had to marry in order to continue his family line...” (117-118)

“It will be seen that when the crisis concerning Mary arose later on, the issues included the question of whether the marriage was valid according to Essene law. Judas Iscariot, who raised an objection...was of the opinion that it was not.” (120)

The Goddess in the Gospels: Reclaiming the Sacred Feminine, Margaret Starbird,
Vermont, 1998

“In my earlier volume, *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar*, I presented extensive circumstantial evidence for the existence of the lost Bride of Jesus... This present book describes my personal search for this forgotten Beloved and provides direct evidence of the *hieros gamous* (sacred marriage) union at the heart of the Christian story.” (xiii)

“The Jesus of Christian creeds formulated in later centuries is victor, ruler, and judge... only begotten and of one substance with the Father... The Jesus Christ of institutionalized Christian tradition is a male solar divinity par excellence... Then there is the other Jesus—the Jesus of the Gospels, a historical Jesus who was a gifted Jewish teacher from Galilee... This Jesus walked the dusty roads of Palestine... He was baptized under the sign of a doze (ancient totem of the Goddess), anointed by a woman at Bethany... This Jesus fled whenever the people tried to proclaim his king. Parallel to the orthodox and canonical story of Christianity there is another story, a secret version of the life of Jesus, branded heretical by the church and forced underground.” (124)

“On purpose, they spelled his Hebrew name, Yeshua, in Greek letters so that the sum of the letters by their system of gematria would equal 888 the fullness of eights... the practice of gematria so prevalent in the New Testament, a level of interpretation of the sacred texts that had later been abandoned. But it was still there, encoded in the original Greek of the Gospels.” (128)

“As we have seen, direct evidence for the sacred union indigenous to Christianity is found embedded in the gematria of the New Testament texts themselves... For those initiated into the meaning of the sacred sums... the meaning is as clear today as it was in the first century... Partnership—the freedom, equality, and fraternity of both sexes and all individuals—was the original message of the Gospels, embedded in the gematria... From the dawn of the Christian era the sacred partners, Christ and Magdalene, were intended to provide an archetypal model for loving service and mutual devotion. Together these Beloveds incarnated the covenant of the eternal Bridegroom and the cosmic Bride—an image of the Divine as loving partners...” (143-144)

“All the New Testament women named Maria (May) are associated with this important feminine principle by virtue of the gematria of their shared name Maria, 152. But the epithet of one Mary, the Magdalene...bears the exact sum 153. Can it be an accident that the gematria for ‘the Magdalene’ is the universally recognized number of the...archetypal feminine. She was thus specifically designed as the Goddess in the Gospels, a profound truth...” (160)

The Gospel of Philip: Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and the Gnosis of Sacred Union,
translation and commentary by Jean-Yves Leloup, Vermont, 2003

“The bridal chamber is not for animals, nor for slaves, not for the impure; it is for beings who are free, simple, and silent.” (105)

“What is the bridal chamber, if not the place of trust and consciousness in the embrace? It is an icon of Union...If woman had not been separated from man, she would

not die with man. Her separation was at the origin of death, Christ comes again to heal this wound, to rediscover the lost unity, to enliven those who kill themselves in separation, reviving them in union.” (109)

“Truth is our mother, knowledge (gnosis) is the promise of our union with her. Those who do not go astray are called free by the world; the knowledge of truth lifts their heart, making them free of all bonds’ it is love which makes them act...” (139)

“What God harvest is also composed of four elements: faith (pistis), hope (elpis), love (agape), and contemplation (gnosis).” (147)

“While hidden, truth is like ignorance: it keeps to itself. But when it is revealed, it is recognized and glorified...It brings freedom, The Logos said, “IF you know the truth, the truth shall make you free.” Ignorance is slavery, knowledge is freedom...when we unite with truth, it shared its fullness with us...” (165)

“The bridal chamber, where Union is realized, is bidden from us; it is the holy of holies. The veil conceals what we cannot see...When the veil is torn and the inner is made manifest, we will abandon our house of desolation...” (167)

The Gospels of Mary: The Secret Tradition of the Mary Magdalene the Companion of Jesus, Marvin Meyer, editor, HarperSanFrancisco, 2004

“Peter said to Mary, ‘Sister, we know the savior loved you more than any other women. Tell us the words of the savior that you remember, which you know but we do not, because we have not heard them.’ Mary answered and said, ‘What is hidden from you I shall reveal to you’. When she said this, she became silent, since the savior had

spoken this much to her...Peter voiced...concerns...'Did he really speak with a woman in private without our knowledge?' ...then Mary wept and said to Peter, 'My brother Peter, what do you think? Do you think that I made this up by myself or that I a lying about the savor?' Levi answered and said to Peter, 'Peter, you always are angry. Now I see you arguing against this woman like an adversary. If the savior made her worthy, who are you to reject her...?' (20, 22)

The Futures of Women: Scenarios for the 21st Century, Pamela McCorduck and Nancy Ramsey, New York, 1996

“All over the world, women recognize this internal change in themselves and they are preparing to seize—if forced, they will battle for—their own futures. When the full depth of this change is widely understood, even more powerful reactions will come. But should women be temporarily impeded suppressed, and denied, the world will not revert to its old ways, where women were obsequious and accepted male entitlement without a murmur. It is too late, far too late, for that. Women’s transformed view of themselves, combined with other global seismic shifts—the restructuring economy and the rapid spread of information technology—means that this is a very new future we all face. This book takes it from there. It offers four main scenarios of how the future might look...Women in the twentieth century, and perhaps more in the twenty-first, are emblems of change—and now they are agents of it, as well.” (5-6)

“Scenario of one future for women: Backlash... many women and men worldwide began to express fear and anger that things had gone too far... disguised in

various code words such as family values, they implied that most of the troubles people were suffering—poverty, failing schools, adolescent anomie... could be laid squarely at the feet of women... All combatants found a common scapegoat in women, and fundamentalist-style repression became the rule not the exception. Scapegoating women led to a pattern that recurred across many religions and in many countries; secular politicians, needing the support of fundamentalists, would enter into compacts with them that effectively traded women’s rights for political support.” (27-30)

“Scenario 2: A Golden Age of Equality... A profound shift in consciousness has permitted both women and men to begin to think of women as different from, but not less than, men.” (90)

“Scenario 3: Two Steps Forward, Two Steps Back...we call this stagnant state of affairs.” (173-174)

“Scenario 4: Separate—and Doing Fine, Thanks!...it is no secret that those at the top are mainly captive to self-interest, which usually translates to accumulating personal wealth...Women are generally educated, but excluded from the top levels of decision making and power.” (241)

THE DIVINE FEMININE

Summary of the Bible Study

By Laura O’Neil

The Divine Feminine has different aspects. Through the study, we have excavated these aspects from the stories of old and now we can state them.

1. The Divine Feminine is the original material upon which God the Father placed His creative pattern. She is the Void, the cauldron of which creation came. The creation in her cauldron is all of Life and all of the Word, the Torah, and the Law. Upon her belly, God the Father wrote the Book of Life and Law.
2. (Sarah) The Divine Feminine is fertility and love. She is the very ground of the Great Mother of all there is. She nurses and nourishes. She produces the progeny for all futures to come. She is Joy.
3. (Dinah) The Divine Feminine receives wounds. Human sin will always happen within Her cauldron and the wounds will be Hers. However, God the Father controls retribution as the judge. The Divine Feminine brings justice more gently within the hearth of family. In the end, the Divine Feminine always survives and comes back. No harm can finally end Her. Her fertile nature will always find a way to reemerge, though in a different form. She is Endurance.
4. (Tamar) The Divine Feminine understands and engages in family relationships and responsibilities at the deepest level. She finds the way to fulfill the commandments of God the Father while protecting the rights of women. She is Holy Power.

5. (Miriam) The Divine Feminine is Defiance itself, against oppression and tyranny. She finds no power can ultimately make Her surrender Her own fertility.
6. (Rahab) The Divine Feminine exists just on the boarder of society. There, She can bring about change that those in the middle of society cannot. Though often labeled as an outsider and not acceptable to society, Her Singularity produces the very sprouts of change. She is Freedom itself, wild and naturally interacting with human society.
7. (Canaanite Women) No human culture survives in a patriarchal society. The Divine Feminine always holds sway. For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, She moves within every culture educating, and challenging the status quo. She is the Challenge to men to include Her in the Divine Pattern. Her challenges emerge from within the old stories of myths and legends, which holds Her legacy.
8. (Mother Mary) The Divine Feminine is the Holy Spirit manifesting the essence of God the Father. She brings the Son of God. She therefore is Sophia, wisdom of mercy and compassion made manifest in order to bring humanity back into the arms of their Divine Family.

APPENDIX C

SERMONS

The Color of Goats

Scripture: Genesis 30:29-43

Three animals played a central role in the care and feeding of the ancient people of Canaan: the goat, the sheep, and the donkey. The goat plays a more important role in the Old Testament time than in Gospel time. One can see that when one looks at the Biblical references for goats, there are mostly in the Old Testament. One reason for this may be that goats go feral very quickly, therefore are good animals for the nomadic lifestyle: they adapt to wild conditions. Sheep, on the other hand, need more care, and are better on pastures around more urban areas, like is the case in Palestine of Jesus' time.

The Old Testament refers to liturgical use of goats often. Eleven goats skin hung in the Tabernacle; an image of the goat was on the third step leading up to the throne in the Temple of Solomon, reminding people to be honest; and of course, it is only the blood of a goat that cleanse people from sin during the Day of Atonement.

When one looks further at the Old Testament references, one sees that many of the stories about Jacob concern goats. You remember who Jacob is. He is the son of... (Congregation says Isaac). He had a brother name... (Congregation says Esau). Now these two brothers could not have been less alike. Esau was the man's man. He was big and physical. He was the man whose natural qualities seemed to fit the early nomadic lifestyle of the time. He was rugged and hardy. Jacob, on the other hand, was not. He

was small, weak, and tended to stay indoors rather than outdoors. Jacob was clearly much, much, smarter than Esau. Jacob was a different type of man. One who qualities may help the people adapt to a new age that was coming. The acknowledgment of that fact may have gone a long way in the willingness of the parents to allow Jacob, but Esau to have the birthright.

You remember the story. In order to deceive his father about to pronounce the birthright blessing, Jacob, at the bidding of his mother, put goat's skins on his arms, so that his father would feel them and think that he was Esau. The trick worked. Jacob received Esau's inheritance. However, his success was short lived. Jacob needed to get out of Dodge to avoid his brother's wrath. He left home and went to the place of Laban.

There of course, he married his two wives, had a bunch of kids that were to become... (Congregation fills in "12 Tribes of Israel"). At some point, he decided he wanted to go home. I am sure that as he looked at all of the children he had, the question of how he was going to support them all entered his mind. He needed to build some wealth.

Now the next part of the stories provides the method of how Jacob multiplied his wealth through increasing his herd of sheep and goats. We will stick to the goats. He gave Laban all the solid color goats, and he took all the striped or spotted goats. He moved his herd away. Then he stripped some bark off savory tree limbs and placed them next to the watering spring. His goats multiplied very quickly. Some suggest "sympathetic magic" makes this work. He believed that what the goats saw would affect

the birth color. I disagree with this explanation. I think something else was going on: animal husbandry that anthropologists tell us was developing during this period. He practiced selected breeding.

There most common type of goats during this early time-period in the Middle East was the Bedouin goats. They were small, black, could go a long time within water, could feed off the land, but produced little milk. The other type was the Damascus goat, which was brown, needed more water, and needed a lot more care in the hand feeding of grasses, but it produced more milk. Because Laban got all the solid color goats, he had to have one of both of these types, probably the black goat.

However, in the hills of Canaan, there were other breeds of wild goats. What Jacob did was to set up a Bed and Breakfast for these wild goats to come and mate with the females he set out for them. When goats come from two difference species, they are multicolored. The production of a better goat gave more milk, but one that was still hardy and needed less water. If one looks at the goats today, experts tell us most modern goats comes from the Bezoar goat, which is multicolored. Smart, clever, Jacob gave us a new and better breed of goat.

The success of his enterprise resulted in the way his herd multiplied. He became a wealthy man. Later, the revelation comes of the long-term effect of the introduction of this new breed. When Jacob and his sons go to Egypt for long stay in that country, they left the new species of goat behind in Canaan. After many generations, the Hebrew left Egypt to go to the "Promise Land." When Moses sent out spies to survey the land

promised them, they came back with the summary that it was a Land of... (Congregation says Milk and Honey). Where did the overflowing milk come from? Goats.

Let us go back to Jacob. We now have Jacob using goats to deceive his father, but also using goats to multiply his wealth. One more part of the story is left. Because of jealousy, Jacob's sons threw Joseph, Jacob's favorite son, down a cistern. Upon returning to the cistern later, they found Joseph gone, but his coat still there. Wanting to hide their transgression, the brothers, led by Judah, smeared goat's blood on the coat of many colors, and gave it to their father. Thinking that the blood was that of Joseph, Jacob went into deep mourning as he held the bloody coat. The man who deceived with a goats was now deceived himself with a goat.

There was a penalty put on Judah and the others. They had to sacrifice the blood of a goat to atone for their sins. Nothing else could cleanse sin. The very object of their deception, become the only means of their redemption.

As I look at the meaning of all of this, I am reminded that all God created He deemed good. Nothing is bad, except how we use it. Someone used the goat for deceptive purposes so one cannot blame the goat. The bounty they give us also shows that we have everything we need to multiply. God always gives us what we need to be successful. The problem is that we do not realize it. We think we need something more. The story of the goats shows us that if we look at what we have, often, what we overlook, we will find a way to utilize that in new and creative ways that will lead to success and multiplication. Often the simplest most mundane of items can be creatively implements

for the greatest success. God gave us a world, not to rape and pillage, but to use creatively for the benefit of all.

During the Middle Ages in Europe, how did people depict the devil?

(Congregation says goat). The poor goat. What a tragedy to fall upon it. The goat is created as good, like all of God's creation. Let us multiply that creation with creativity and respectful use of the bounty.

BALAAM'S DONKEY, PART I

SCRIPTURE: NUMBERS 22:21-31

The story of Balaam interests one on several levels. First, it represents a story established in history. One of the oldest archeological sites currently in the process of excavation is Balaam's temple. The inscriptions on the walls seem to match some of the story found in Numbers. That is amazing cooperation of the Balaam narrative and suggests a closer look at the story. Second, the story gives a meaning that often falls below our consciousness. It is not a story about the Hebrew. It is a story about a non-Hebrew and God's relationship with him. Many people understand the Bible as a story about God's relationship with the Hebrews, the Jews, and the Christians. However, Balaam reminds us that many stories in the Bible God exist for all people, and God's love and care extends to them.

Before talking about Balaam further, let us notice the sermon series theme: animals in the Bible. To introduce the theme for today, let me ask you to say aloud how the English language uses characteristics of animals to illustrate human behavior, like "busy as a bee." (Congregation speaks up giving examples of use of animals in everyday language). Great! You thought of some great ones. Now, how is it that we incorporate animals in such a fashion in our language? We do so unconsciously. Twenty-first Americans certainly do not live closely with animals, except for those farmers and ranchers. Except for a pet, we live apart from animals and have for some time. Even so,

our language betrays the truth: we identify with the animal kingdom. They are part of our self-understanding.

If that were true for us, think of how much more true it would be for the Hebrews three thousand years ago. They lived in constant companionship with animals. They provided food, shelter, clothes, warmth, and companionship. Wild or domesticated, animals were part of the life and reality. Just as we do with language today, the Hebrews associated certain characteristics with animals. These characteristics represented virtues for human beings. They even became part of the character building enterprise that makes the Hebrews unique and stand out from other people and cultures. At the end of Genesis, the twelve sons of Jacob received blessings and or curses. Right away, Simeon, Levi, and Reuben set aside because of the evil of their actions. They were unrepentant their sins and so were not blessed. The other nine received blessings.

Five, of the remaining nine, received identification with animals. A doe stood for beauty and gentleness; a wolf stood for hunger and family bonding; a snake stood for the quick bit of justice that can make the might fall; a lion stood for the strength and fierceness; and a donkey stood for wisdom and a great work ethic. Animals possess traits considered so admirable that people emulated them. That character building enterprise of the Hebrews makes them stand out from their neighbors. It is less about their moral codes, which other cultures possessed, and more about the character one possessed that implemented the moral code; and more importantly what to do when one broke the moral code. Does one acknowledge the failing? Does one ask forgiveness? Make retribution?

These groups of nomads, cropping up from nowhere, having no civilization, no possession, no culture, no political, military, or economic power, stood out among everyone as powerful because they held themselves to a high standard. They were willing to stand before God and be accountable for whom they were and what they did.

In the time of Balaam, the Hebrew people were regrouping after a period of wandering over a much larger area of land than we often assume. They were coming together to move into the promise land. Why would anyone pay attention to these people? Well for one thing, there were a lot of them. Additionally everyone in the area knew that these people brought Egypt to their knees. How was such a thing possible?

The King of Moab was one of the first to see this threat. He was worried about these people on his boarder. They had a reputation of being a people of God. That seemed to be their strength. The King called upon the best man to fight that: Balaam. He was the great prophet of that time, anywhere in the whole area. People knew he understood the names of all the Gods. He followed Yahweh, El, Elohim, and El Shaddai. He talked with God and God talked to him.

The King wanted Balaam to use his powerful relationship with God to curse the Hebrews. This was all out religious war! Now, Balaam was an authentic prophet. He knew that he must consult with God and get his go ahead. When he did, God said no. Balaam was unwilling to accept that answer, so he kept returning to God with the same question. The answer was always the same. The king, who was sending messengers to Balaam, was unhappy with his unwillingness. The king believed a good prophet could

manipulate God. Balaam thought he could fall in synch with what God wanted for his own purposes, so he also believed he could manipulate God. For His part, God wanted to teach Balaam, raise him up to a high standard. You see Balaam, like others in the region, believed in God, but could not understand that belief required them to grow in character and integrity and not continue on a selfish self-interested path.

Finally, God gave up his attempts to change Balaam, and allowed him to go the king, though god knew it would do no good. Taking his trusted donkey, Balaam started out. Always interested in giving people another change, an angel appeared on the road. Balaam did not see the angel. After all, he was not hearing God, so why should he see God? The donkey did. The donkey was female...indeed wise and hard working. She quickly stopped in her tracks. Balaam, not understanding what was happening, got out and beat the donkey. Two other times that happened on the road. Three times the angel appear; three times the donkey saw but Balaam did not; and three times Balaam beat the donkey. Then something happens that is very strange: the donkey receives the gift of speech. There is a legend among the Jews that God gave the donkey the ability to speak at creation and never allowed them to do so in fear it would unsettle human beings. At this instance, the donkey's ban lifted and she asked, "Why did you beat me?" Did Balaam not see the angel in the road? At that instance, Balaam saw the angel and fell down on his knees.

We will leave the story there and pick it up next week. We leave it at a place, where we understand better what God wants from all of us, not just obedience, but real

character and integrity. To relate to God means one actually see and hear God with one's heart and soul, not just for self-gain or self-interest. As Jesus says, "blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

BALAAM'S DONKEY, PART II

SCRIPTURE: NUMBERS 22:31-38

The story of Balaam is a story about a prophet, a prophet who was not Hebrew, who lived in a different country. It is a story about how God worked with this man to entice him to grow as an individual and understand better, who God was and how to be His prophet.

This effort on the part of God is seen against the backdrop of the Hebrew, a people at the end of wandering 40 years in the wilderness, a people with no country, no cities, no civilization. A people devoted to a God that expected that they do more than obey laws. They needed to have integrity, character. To help shape that character, the Hebrew used animals and their traits to model how a person of character might look. Therefore, a lion was fierce; a donkey was hardworking and wise; a snake was the quick work of justice; a wolf always hungry for righteousness; and a doe was graceful and gentle. As the King of Moab saw this large group of people at this border, all he saw was oxen, ready to devour all the grasslands.

The king called upon the people most able to fight the religious fight with a religious people: Balaam, a prophet who knew all the names for God: El, Yahweh, and El Shaddai. The king wanted Balaam to put a curse on the Hebrews in God's name. In those days, if a prophet placed a curse, watch out. This was a serious weapon of mass destruction!

Balaam was no fool. He knew his power rested upon God's power. He knew God director events. What Balaam did not know and what God kept on trying to teach him was this: Balaam could not manipulate God. Balaam feel into the trap of thinking that he could manage the power of God for his own aims. Of course, God would have none of that.

The wonderful part of the story where the angel of God tries to stop Balaam traveling with his donkey to Moab shows the contrast between the two ways of thinking. In this story, whom does the Donkey represent? (Wait for a response from the congregation: the Hebrews). Yes, the donkey is a hard working laborer who is wise enough to see God. Balaam has no such wisdom. Just like his wanting to curse the Hebrews, so he does harm to the donkey that stops on the road because of the angel. When Balaam does finally see God, he receives immediate challenge about beating his donkey. Why does he want to do harm to that which does him no harm?

When Balaam arrives in Moab, there ensues a wonder climax to this story. The king and Balaam go to a mountain. Seven altars are prepared. Seven animals are sacrificed. The king wants everything just right: the liturgy completed, and all the prayers said correctly. Make sure God is pleased with this show of worship. After all, if one is going to manipulate God, one had better please Him first. After everything is ready, the King invites Balaam to say the curse, "Okay, go ahead Balaam, just do it!" As Balaam warned, he could not curse, but bless. Out of his mouth came the words of God saying that He would not curse whom He wanted only to bless.

Unsatisfied with such a prophecy, the king went to another mountain. He built another seven alters and sacrificed another seven animals. He did everything more perfectly than before. Then he said to Balaam, “OK, now! Curse those people.” Out of Balaam’s mouth came only the words lifting up the virtues of the Hebrews, declaring the Hebrews to a lion. Out of Balaam’s mouth came a challenge from God, “Do you know Me? Do you think I am a human that I can change so?”

Now the king was furious. He tried another mountain; another seven alters; and slaughtered another seven animals...all as an effort to manipulate God so that Balaam could deliver a curse. Thinking that it would work this time, he pleaded with Balaam to say the curse. Then, something amazing happens. The Spirit of God descends upon Balaam. Balaam is having an ecstatic prophetic experience. Out of his mouth comes this beautiful prophecy of a king rising up from the lion. From that king Moab would be defeated. God gave Balaam a beautiful gift of true prophetic vision.

One might think after all of this, that Balaam would have learned something. He would have understood that HE needed to change if he was going to be God’s spokesperson. As it turns out Balaam does not change at all. Further, on in the story in the Book of Numbers, we find Balaam in Median. The Hebrew people are at their board also. The Midianites had a good history with the Hebrews. In fact, they were the descendants of Abraham and his second wife, Keturah. Moses has even asked them to join the Hebrews as there were amassing themselves in the wilderness. They declined.

Now there was a new religion growing in the Canaanite countries like Midian. Unlike the God El, whom the Canaanites worshipped with the sons of Abraham, this god was Baal. One new manifestation of that worship happened in Midian. It was Baal Peor, the worship of the dead. Because Balaam was unsuccessful cursing the Hebrews, he enticed them to worship the dead, thus drawing them away from the one true God. Indeed some of the Hebrews worshiped of the dead.

God was very angry about this and told Moses to stop it. In the ensuing battles with the Midianites, Balaam was killed. He just could not grow in character or integrity. He remained a manipulative selfish person.

Now one might wonder what difference this story makes. Just this morning on Meet the Press, I heard a man talk about immigration. He said that the Bible talks about the immigrant, the alien, and foreigner a lot. This is true. It does. People are always moving into each other's territory for some reason. This man on TV argued that Israelites adapted to the ways of the greater culture in order to fit in.

Time out! No, the Bible does not talk about that. It rather challenges people to hang upon their values and virtues in the face of a non-virtuous culture. God challenged the Hebrew people to maintain their strength of character in the face of selfishness and greed, like in our story. Much later, when the Jews were in Babylonia, they struck the model of the Jewish culture in order to maintain their unique and treasured religious culture. It is not obeying the might of a culture, but about obeying the Almighty.

We need to make sure we understand what the Bible is saying. It is easy to say that it is all a matter of personal opinion, and that one can argue anything by using Scripture. I do not believe that. I believe in truth. I believe we can know the truth. I believe God is trying to tell us the truth so that we can grow in righteousness and virtues. There are as many stories in the Bible where that does not work for people. Just as many people fail that test of growth in integrity and character, than succeed.

These stories are not just fairy tales of long ago. They are stories about us now. We do not like to see that, because we do not want to see that we are the ones stumbling in the test. We need to see ourselves in the bad characters so that we can learn that God is always after us to grow in integrity. He also gives us more chances. Ultimately, the decision is ours.

A WOMAN, A DAUGHTER, AND A DOG

SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 15:21-28

In our series on animals today, I will speak on my favorite animals, the dog. Because of certain ways the New Testament talks about dogs, some believe they had no value. Jesus says not to give what is holy to dogs. In the Pastoral letters and Revelations, the writers call evil doers dogs. Part of the reason for this is that as cities grew and the region became more populated during Roman times. There were packs of wild dogs that roamed in and out of the cities. They often ate carrion, so considered dirty and even killers.

The truth is that people domesticated dogs 10 to 12 thousand years ago. They found use in the ancient near east, in the same way as everywhere else, for hunting, herding, guarding, and as companions. Although people compared themselves or others to dogs as a way to making themselves subordinate, the truth is that the Hebrews and Jews held the dog in high regard. There is an ancient story among the Jews that tell us this. Back in very ancient times, dogs always held guard at the gates of the death. So that in mythologies of several culture, dogs were the guardians for the death. During the time Moses and the Exodus, the bones of Joseph were carried back to the land of his fathers. When Moses tried to get his remains, however, he discovered two guard dogs at his tomb that would not let him pass. To them, Moses said, “Only counterfeit dogs bark. Real dogs do not bark at Hebrews.” The dogs stopped barking and Moses was able to

recover Joseph's remains. God was so pleased with the dogs that he gave them a great blessing. He said that the people would throw the Torah to them. Tanners used dog excrements to prepare every hide used to write the Torah. (A woman turns up her nose and says "yuk." I laugh) Yes, that is how hides are tanned, even today. So you see dogs had a holy duty.

In the story of the woman, her daughter, and her dog, we find Jesus escaping the anger of the Pharisees by going into non-Jewish territory. Mark also tells this story. He says the woman was Greek, but living in Syrophenician territory. Jesus felt safe there, safer in a non-Jewish land: the land of the Canaanites. Now during the time of Paul the Canaanites will become the gentiles. Both of these words, Canaanites, and gentiles are catchwords for non-Hebrew or non-Jewish people. They may belong to any number of groups of people, both religious and cultural. They were not Hebrew or Jew. During Christian times, the term changed again to pagan. If one were not Christian, people called him or her pagan regardless of the culture.

Jesus went into a land in which he felt safe. Now this happened early in his ministry. As it happened, a woman had a sick daughter who was demon possessed. We know from other stories of sick people, that demon possess is a term used when no one knew what was wrong with a sick person. Just like today, we say, "Well, they have a virus" or "they got a bad bug." Back then, they said, "A bad demon got her." As any good mother, this woman was seeking help.

Now there is no indication that this woman was married. I know that people have told us that during this time, everyone was married. That is probably not true. Divorce was very common, because it was very easy to procure, which is why Jesus talked about it so much. Also, there were many widows. So, one can assume that this was a single mother.

Now this woman knew who Jesus was. She called him Lord, and son of David. This means she was intelligent and kept up with the current news. Jesus had not done a lot of healing yet, but this woman was aware. Because she was on her home turf, she felt completely comfortable approaching Jesus. When she does, the Disciples whom Jesus is with, tell Jesus to send her away. She was a bother, a nuisance. Jesus takes their advice, but values her enough to talk to her directly. Listen to his words, "I have come for the lost children of Israel." I wonder if Jesus was setting up a teaching moment for the Disciples. He was after all calling them 'lost'.

This woman was no shrinking violet. She persisted, getting down on her knees and again asking on behalf of her daughter for her healing. Jesus responds with a metaphor, saying that bread people do not toss bread to the dogs when the children go hungry. Ouch! Did Jesus just call her a dog?

People lived in a very stratified society during Jesus time. On the top of the heap were the Romans. Second to them were the Jewish leaders in the Temple and in the Palace. Below them were other Roman citizens who were present as merchants or landowners. Below them, all the other Jewish people fought for survival. Even among

the Jews, there were clear levels of social status. We know who were at the bottom: the lepers, the prostitutes, and the lame. Jesus metaphor was indicative of the social stratification, only he was using the family: parents, children, dogs. Jesus knew that this woman was asking for help for her child, not a dog. Was he trying to show how ridiculous the disciples were? Was he challenging them by saying, “You adult men are pretending to be children, when a real child needs to receive the bread of life?”

After this comment, one might easily image this Canaanite woman backing off. Her caliper of woman stood her ground and was not afraid to argue, even with a Lord. She changes the metaphor produced by Jesus and says, “But even dogs get the crumbs from under the table.” Slam-dunk! Her intelligence, her tough skin, her worth as a woman of integrity really shows. Reward comes to her. Jesus heals her daughter. He tells the woman that her woman’s faith healed her.

But what faith? Clearly, she was not a Jew. Whom does God favor? Often we hear that Jesus favored the Jews, the Hebrews, but close examination of the Old Testament, as well as this story shows something else: people in other religions and cultures know God who does favors when they have integrity.

I believe that Jesus recognized something in this story. I believe that Jesus saw himself in this woman. I believe he remembered that he was Canaanite too. In his genealogy was Tamar and Rahab, both Canaanite. Perhaps there was a reason he felt save in this country; he belonged there.

There is a lot of time spent on Jesus as King of the Jews, Son of David, as the woman says, but the truth is that he represented people beyond them. It was because he could identify with those of a lower class that he was able to reach out to them so successfully. It is why the Jewish male disciples had such a hard time understanding the true ministry of Jesus. His ministry stood in opposition of the general belief of the time: the Messiah is for the Jews.

The true outsider is often those we hate; we ignore. It is wise to be very cautious about feeling self-righteous, because among those he hate the most, may be walking with Jesus. Whom we hate may tell us more about ourselves, than we care to admit.

JESUS' DONKEY

SCRIPTURE: JOHN 12:12-15

I come bearing books today. I have a Bible and a Tanakh, the Jewish Bible. (I hold up the books.) This one is has the Hebrew and an English translation and it is written from back to front as Jewish Scriptures are. Today, I am talking again about the donkey, upon whose back I will place another burden to carry. Now the scripture is from the Palm Sunday story, but this is not about Palm Sunday, rather this is a story about the Bible itself. Do you remember in early in January when I had a much of yarn up here that I was weaving together as a way to showing how many people over many centuries weaved the Bible? Well, today we are taking one of those strands of yarn and following it back in time.

Before we begin that story, I want to tell you another story. There was an old church in Mexico, about 200 years old. It was a Catholic Church build very much to the standards of the time, with big vault ceilings and ornate statures. As it happened, a falcon was able to get through some aging tiles on the roof, and got into the sanctuary. The first place he went was to the Virgin Mary hold baby Jesus in the front of the sanctuary. Then it started to fly around back and forth.

Now there were five women in the church praying. The first women saw that falcon and complained privately about the failings of the church. "It is crumbling down around us. How can live animals get into a holy place? The church is going to hell."

The second woman immediately jumped down the priest's throat. "Oh, that priest. It is his entire fault. He cannot raise enough money to fix the roof. When will we ever get a decent priest?"

The third woman saw the Holy Spirit in the falcon. She said, "Oh Mother of God the Holy Spirit is upon us. Heal me, heal me!" She prayed more fervently than she ever had.

The fourth woman saw it as a sign from God. "This is a miracle, a true act of God. Forgive me, a sinner!"

The fifth woman looked at the falcon and said to herself, "Oh look a falcon is in the sanctuary."

Now I am about to put a falcon in your sanctuary. Not this sanctuary but in the Holy place that is the Bible. The falcon lays in this story of Jesus coming into Jerusalem on a donkey. Now I got into this passage at first through a bulletin cover one time that showed Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, but he was leading another donkey, a small foal. Indeed the Gospel of Matthew says exactly that. Jesus instructs a man to go get a donkey and her foal. Jesus then rides both of them into Jerusalem. (A woman in congregation says, "I often wondered about that.")

Mark and Luke do not have two animals, only one animal, a colt. Now, I have a problem with this. Does another know why? (People nod their heads) Those of you that know about riding animals know that people do not ride a colt or foal. Though they can do training, ridding them will produce a bad back that they live with forever. I do not

believe that people 2,000 years ago would have done that to an animal. They were too important to be mistreated. So why does Mark and Luke say this?

John is says that Jesus comes in on a young donkey, which would be reasonable. All four Gospels tell the story. All versions are remarkable similar, but this question of how many donkey and the age of the donkey is a point that sticks. What is going on?

As it turns out, this passage is based on Zacharias 9:9. Zacharias was one of the Minor Prophets. It is the second to the last book of the Old Testament and talked about the coming messiah. He says that the king would come riding a donkey, a colt, a foal of the donkey. Now there are commas between these. In English, the use of a comma like this could represent a series. It would be like my saying I will eat an apple, a banana, and a pear. Commas can also be used in phrases or clauses that describe a noun. I could say, "I will eat an apple, the sweetest fruit, and the ripest on the tree." How many pieces of fruit will I eat? (Congregation says "One.")

The problem with the way this passage reads is that we do not know whether there are one, two, or even three animals. Matthew obviously thought there were two animals. Mark choose one animal, but made it a colt. Luke, a Gentile Christian, just copied Mark. John has a young adult donkey.

In order we find the underlying cause of this problem, one must ask, what translation did gospel writers use, and what is in the original Hebrew? We know that they used the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. But is this a good translation? Let us read from a present day Tanakh. It reads, "...rides in on an

ass, a donkey foaled by a she-ass.” Clearly there is one animal. There is a description of the genealogy of the donkey because, like Jesus genealogy was important, but the addition is descriptive only.”

The writer of Matthew used the Septuagint and interpreted it literally. He wanted to be as true to the Old Testament as possible so he carefully put in two animals. Mark was not a very literate writer and seemed to want to emphasize the pure, new animal for Jesus. Therefore, he had him riding a colt. Luke just followed Mark. John, however, is the best scholar of the four writers. He would have known Hebrew as well as Greek and knew the translation issue. He accurately understands that there is only one animal, but nods to the growing Christian emphases on the need to purity and make the donkey young.

This whole image, of Jesus on a donkey the image of Zechariah, may have been initiated from the end of Genesis when Jacob blesses Judah, the lion who has a donkey that is tied to the vine while the foal is with the best branch. This is another image of descendants and off spring.

Therefore, there is the falcon. When one asked about the inerrancy of the Bible, how do we respond? Yes, there are errors in the bible, typos, editing mistakes. So how do we respond to this? I will tell you how I feel about it.

I get excited about this stuff. I do not look at it and grieve. I look at it and witness the vibrancy of the Word. The Word of God is not the words of God, but the words of human beings who make mistakes. That makes the Word of God living,

approachable, more like you and me. I see that fallible people write the Word of God. So maybe one such as me can carry the Word of God. The Bible becomes a story when these mistakes are unraveled. It is alive with human circumstance and feeling. The authors of these Gospel become fallible people, just as you and I are.

God sanctifies us to be the vessels of God. You do not have to be perfect. You will not be perfect, but God knows that. It is through that imperfection that you can tell your story and transmit your version of the Word contained in your life.

The lesson here is that the most powerful container of the Word, the Bible, is not so perfect that, like a piece of crystal, it shatters if dropped. Some pliability in the Bible, a little rubber, and plastic allows it to undergo conflicts and trauma. Perfection is not in life, nor is it in the Living Word of God anywhere you find it.

SACRIFICIAL PIGS

SCRIPTURE: MARK 5:1-20

This is the last sermon in our series on animals and today it is about pigs. Now that seems like a strange animal to choose. After all, Jews consider pigs unclean. The reputation for uncleanness is what we need to pay attention to in the story.

What is the Biblical attitude toward pigs? Well the wild boar was highly praised for its characteristics. It was quick, a great hunter, and ferocious. In fact, the Roman Legion used the Wild Boar as its emblem.

The people domesticated the pig as a food source. They herded them much like goats or sheep. Pig herders would watch them in the open fields. They forged for themselves.

How was it that it became a forbidden food? We know that all the people in the ancient near east raised pigs and we find their remains at many old archeological sites. So obviously, people considered them a major food sources. Yet we believe that the Semitic groups did not eat them except for the Babylonians. The Old Testament law declares that only cloven-footed animals that chew their cud are eatable foods. Because the cloven-footed pig does not eat its cud, the list excludes it. It is possible that many times the Semitic people did eat pigs, but did not do so on holy days like Passover. I am sure that you, like me, have heard many reasons some people believe today that it is an

excluded food, like health reasons. I will tell you that scholars today really do not know why. Rabbis give the reason that God said not to. That simple.

In turning to the story, its title often indicates demon possession. This is true in the NIV translation. However, if we look at the original Greek, the word is not demonic, but rather unclean. This changes the whole story, because demonic is very different from unclean. I do not happen to believe in demon possession, so this works for me and certainly makes the situation far more tragic.

The story begins with Jesus taking a boat to a town that is Gentile. He is in Gentile territory. It reminds us of the story of the Canaanite woman, which also took place in Gentile territory. The next part of the story is an accurate description of a very sick man, a man who had degenerated into an animal. He had lost any sense of humanity. He was a crazed lunatic, who yelled and screamed. He had lost all control so that he became a danger. People tried to exclude him by putting irons on his feet and chaining him in the graveyard. There is a healthy environment for the mentally ill! This man's misery was so complete that he cut himself. This is indicative of his suicidal wishes.

His derangement and obvious pain gave him enormous strength. He broke these chains. Yet he stayed among the dead.

We do not know if Jesus went there to see this man. Jesus spoke healing words to him. The man, still screaming, was able to speak to Jesus, calling him by name. Then he says something tragic. "Please don't torture me!" Wow, this man was in pain. He was scared. He knew what torture was. At the hands of people, he knew torture. Jesus spoke

to him and asked him a very humane question. “What is your name?” The answer showed how much he had lost a sense of self. He answers, “Legion” or many. Now what does this tell us about his psychological state. (A congregant says “multiple personalities.”) Exactly. Called associative identity disorder now, it is a case where a person loses their sense of identity. The description the bible gives is so accurate about the psychological symptoms.

The man knew the power that Jesus had. He wanted healing from his enormous pain. He expressed fear by what would happen to him. He was afraid people would drive him away. He begs Jesus not to do that, but to send him into the herd of pigs on the hill. In other words, he wanted to get out of the graveyard. Living with the animals would be better, yet it shows how far he fell from his humanity. He now considered himself an animal.

Jesus does what he asked. As I understand what happens, the man goes into the herd of pigs, probably running and screaming and acting crazy, glad to be free of the living grave. The pigs were startled and started to run. In the craziness, the swine ran to their death off the cliff. The man found himself in an animalistic chaos that may have served as a moment of clarity for him. He witnessed the craziness and death in the animals and did not want to be one of them. This moment was the turning point that brought back his humanity. He came to human self-consciousness and walked back to Jesus.

The pigs sacrificed themselves for the sake of the man's healing. I do not imagine that Jesus wanted that to happen. His desire was to help the man. We can appreciate the sacrificed of these pigs for the benefit of a person.

Two thousand pigs amounts to a lot of food. The people of the town were upset and asked Jesus to leave. Certainly understandable. Jesus did what they requested. The healed man wanted to go with Jesus. Jesus said no, but then does something remarkable. He tells the man to go home. How wonderful these words must have felt. Go home. Do you mean where there is safety, caring, love, and security? Home? Being part of the human society again, was the last part of his healing.

Then Jesus said even more. He told the man to witness, to testify, and to evangelize. How far the man had come, from a crazed lunatic, to an evangelist for Christ!

The power of Jesus to heal even the most crazed is something we often overlook. I want to tell you a story of what happened to me a long time ago. I was working as a chaplain in a penitentiary in Colorado. This was in the 1970's. There were several chaplains, but on this particular day, I was there alone and an inmate asked to come and see me. I agreed. When he came into my office, I asked him why he was in prison. He explained about his drug arrest. During this time, many people were thrown in jail for any drug affiliation. As we continued to talk, I noticed he started to twitch and his eyes started to dart back and forth. He began to describe how he treated animals when he was very young. I grew afraid and realized that I was in a vulnerable position. I asked him if

he wanted to go into the sanctuary. He agreed so I quickly lead him out of my office and into the large sanctuary. We sat in a back pew. His eyes were still darting back and forth and his face still twitching. I started to recite Biblical passages, quoting whatever I could think of. I am not sure why I did that. I think I just did not know what else to do. In any case, I found that hearing the Bible verses started to calm the man's face. His agitation subsided. He grew quiet. I said a pray and ushered him out of the church back to the guard.

This experience taught me that mental illness could be very frightening and otherworldly. True insanity is something that scares us and we want to protect ourselves. We want to makes these people so unclean that we lock them up, put them away, caste them aside. In the first century, they made them live among the tombs. In the 18th and 19 century, they put them in insane asylums.

The truth is that people are not unclean. They are in need of help. We forget that the power of the Jesus is to be helpful and a force to reckon with.

Now, few of us will be exposed to cases so extreme. However, all of us find people in our families, communities, or daily lives that we want to back away from, because we think them unclean and can contaminate us. There are no unclean people. No. No. We forget that God has given us the commission to help these people. We can trust the Gospel words to be a force for healing, if we but put our trust within it. The Gospel does not intend to create barriers between those in need and ourselves, but rather serve as a powerful tool for their removal.

JESUS' PRECARIOUS PRIDE

SCRIPTURE: LUKE 4:1-13

There was a man who went to see a psychiatrist. “Doctor,” he said. “I keep seeing the devil everywhere. He seems to be following me everywhere I go. He tells me to do awful things. I am frightened and don’t know what to do.”

“Well,” said the doctor. “Do you know who this devil is?”

“No, I don’t.”

“I think I can help you there.” The doctor reached in his desk drawer and pulled out a hand mirror. He handed it to his patient.

“Look in the mirror and you will see who the devil is.”

This story shows the contemporary understanding of the devil. It is a projection of us. It no longer stands up in court for a mother who kills her child and says, “But the devil made me do it.” We know that the devil is within her.

Psychologists call it a shadow and all humans have one. It is the dark side of our nature. Jesus had one too and the story of the temptations of Jesus is a story of him facing his shadow side. He had just been baptized. For the first time, he knows and others know that he is the son of God. Whatever he may have thought prior to this, now he could not avoid facing up to who he was and what that meant. He had a test in front of him, a test that would determine how he would fulfill his destiny. He had to face his own

greed, selfishness, and arrogance. He had to face his shadow. He did this in the wilderness, alone, where he could confront the dark side of himself.

So how did Jesus pass this test?

I will tell you a story that may help us understand.

In the Midwest, there was a farming community where many of the farmhouses were clustered rather close. It was a close-knit community where all the kids played together and went to school together.

Now, a gully meandered through this community. It brought water to houses and fields. It crossed the corner of a man's house who the kids had nicknamed Mean Man, because every time you set foot on his land, or even stood on its parameter, he would come out of his house and yell to get off. He lived alone, and did seem to want any company.

Now this was a problem, because, you see, a water pipe past over the gully, right at the edge of this man's property. Because it was the shortest route to school, every day the kids would swing on this pipe to get to the other side and run across his property to school. He hated it and would always yell at him. The kids thought it was a lark and continued to swing on the pipe.

One day, when the kids came home from school they discovered something very grim. Mean man had gone around to everyone's home telling the parents, "You had better keep your kids off my pipe and out of my land or I am going to wrap that pipe in barb wire and their hands will be shredded to pieces."

The parents were very upset when the kids got home. Parents yelled at them and sent them to bed without supper. The kids were afraid. What was going to happen next?

Well, there was a community meeting. At the meeting, there was a lot of yelling. How were they going to keep these kids from the pipe? How were they going to appease Mr. Todd, (that was Mean Man is name.)? All the kids sat scared with eyes open wide as they heard the anger he expressed.

Then the oldest man in the community gently said, “I wonder if we can resolve this by making the pipe stronger so that the kids can swing on it?”

Then the old man’s son said, “You know, I think I can strengthen that pipe so that all the swinging in the world will never hurt it, if I had some help.”

Well, you could hear a pin drop in the room. Everyone dropped their anger and wondered why they did not thing it this. Some men spoke up and said that they would be willing to help. Mr. Todd himself appeared surprise that they were willing to help secure the pipe that was his only water source.

The men secured the pipe. In fact, it was so secure that people placed a Jungle Jim on it for the kids to play on. Mr. Todd started to like the company of people who come to help him.

Like this story, Jesus lived in a world that filled with conflict. People were hunger. There was poor food distribution. The rich got the biggest piece of the pie. The Temple was corrupt. Many righteous Jews were leaving the Temple and setting up

different worship settings preparing for God's intervention. Of course, the Roman Empire was a plague upon many, making some Jews rich, and destroying others.

Jesus was in a country where the road map was only one of conflict. His job was to change the road map. It was not a matter of use versus them. He was not going to get rid of the Roman Empire, or the Temple, or hunger. He sought a different set of roads through the land; roads that could weave the countryside together not tear them apart.

And he did. He said about Rome that it was not for or against, but rather gives to Rome what is theirs and to God what is His. He said about hunger that our hunger is not only about food. He said about the Temple that true worship is not about outward display, but about an inner holiness.

Jesus built different routes for people to follow that allowed peaceful coexistence and a working toward mutual goals. He passed his test. He confronted his shadow. The answer would not come from selfishness, greed, and arrogance. Setting up conflict that could never be resolved did not look like an option. It was about realizing there is no boogey man except what is inside of you. They if one looks, one will see a way to bring the country together with mutual respect. There are answers to conflict. It starts by realizing that faulty views of reality set up conflict. We will find a different road map when we drop the error and see things from a different set of eyes.

God's test for us is never like the Hollywood action films. It is never about big conflict. The test is quieter and less public. It requires us to confront our own shadows and stop projecting them onto others. It requires us to stop defending ourselves with

selfishness, greed, and arrogance. You see, the answer to greed is not charity. If you think it is, you are wrong. All you get is a greedy person who gives to charity. The answer is to confront our own self-view of the world and realize it is God's world and we are here to help it, not pull it into distortion.

If your life is like mine, it is full of conflict. Finding our way through it is tough. When it seems that we are at a stalemate, and there are no answers. The problem is our view. We cannot see the road ahead because we lock ourselves into one view that puts ourselves first. Getting a bird's eye view of the countryside, will help us see the hidden route. A new road map will emerge. God had it there for us all along.

RAISING OF LAZARUS, PART I

SCRIPTURE: JOHN 11:17-37

We are talking about Jesus emotions. Last week we saw how the temptation of Jesus was a story about his confronting his shadow and his own greed, selfishness and arrogance. Now not everyone feels comfortable attributing emotions to Jesus. We believe he was human, but how human was he? Do want to give him the messiness of emotion?

Researchers have said that Americans are not very emotionally intelligent. We have a hard time reading emotions in others or ourselves. We are emotion denying, thinking that rationality is better. Some of that belief may come from the unwillingness of Christianity to attribute strong emotion to Jesus.

My own view is that if Jesus is both human and divine, and he came to mend our estrangement with God, then he needs to be completely human. I cannot identify with someone who does not completely understand my experience. If we can identify the emotion in Jesus, then we can identify the emotion in others and in ourselves. In the stories of Jesus' emotions, perhaps we can see how he handles them. Perhaps we can have a model for helping us with our emotions as well.

The story in John is a powerful story about Jesus emotions. It is a story unique to John. It stands at the end of his public ministry just before he begins his final days in Jerusalem. It is also unique in that it is a story of Jesus personal life. Perhaps that is why

only John tells the story. It is a story not about something public, but something private. The story I tell is more about Jesus and less about Lazarus.

Now John was a wonderful writer, and he was very intelligent about theological discourse. He wrote his Gospel during a time when people began to argue about how human Jesus really was. This debate may have contributed to John's inclusion of so much theological discussion in the story. This story tells us about the personal life of Jesus in a private setting. Let us review it.

Jesus was well into his ministry. For three years, he had preached, taught, healed. He confronted authorities of every type and avoided some difficult situations. Not everyone liked him. He had gained many enemies. Some of those enemies were definitely in Bethany, where people had tried to stone him. This had to have been hard on Jesus because his best friends lived in Bethany, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. These are the people he loved the most, often staying in their home. The Bible speaks repeatedly about Jesus' love for Lazarus. I am not surprised that the news of his friend's sickness and death came as a shock. It is the kind of news we all understand all too well, the news about a loved one's death when we less expect it.

Jesus could not have been human at all, if he was not grief stricken by this news. If indeed this were his friend whom he loved, he would have had to experience grief. Just like us today, he would have gone through the stages of grief. The first thing Jesus does is to deny it. He continues in his ministry. Soon he starts negotiating, entering the

second stage of bargaining. Well, Lazarus is just asleep...he will wake up! When denial and bargaining does not work, he decides to go to Bethany and confront the loss.

Now in the meantime, poor Mary and Martha are deep into the funeral service. Like every family, they feel inundated with family, friends, and well-wishers. Funeral services lasted for days. They cooked food, greeted people, and probably had little time to grieve. We can understand that. We have all been there.

However, the Bible says something else. It says that people from Jerusalem came as well. Who were they? Some may have been professional mourners. Part of the funeral rites required paid professional mourners. They were for show, but necessary. Jesus had indicated how much he hated these false mourners. Some may have come from Jerusalem to spy on Jesus. They knew Jesus was close to this family. He enemies may have wanted to see what Jesus would do. How would he behave? So people were there that were not close to the family, but simply there to watch Jesus.

As busy hosts, Mary and Martha were with the guests at their home, which included a large courtyard as homes did back then. Martha was the first to see Jesus walk on the road toward their house. She immediately went to meet him.

Now we find Jesus breaking into the next stage of grief, which is guilt. Martha is the first to ask, "Why weren't you here?" You could have saved him. Did Martha understand the guilt that she was placing on Jesus? When Martha went back home and told Mary that Jesus was on the road, she dashed out to meet him. Mary does say exactly the same thing. "Why weren't you here?" You could have saved him.

Jesus guilt must have laid heavy upon him, because the next part of the story shows us the strongest emotions of Jesus. The story indicates that some of the mourners followed Mary. It is clear to me that they saw Jesus by then and was curious about him. So Jesus, in his guilt was standing next to a weeping Mary, while he was approached by onlookers that were there as spectators to a very private grief.

What John writes next is usually translated as Jesus being “moved in spirit” and “troubled.” No English translations actually gets these words right. The two words John uses are not difficult words to translate, but there are difficult to understand for many Christians. The words John uses indicate that Jesus was both angry and agitated. When one puts anger and agitation together, one gets rage, which is probably what Jesus was feeling. He was angry with himself, with the loss, and with the unsympathetic gawkers. He broke into the anger stage of the grieving process.

Beyond anger is deep hurt. Often tears accompany anger. Indeed the Bible story tracks this well because the next thing that Jesus does is to weep. The short line in the Bible states it, Jesus wept. He confronts the true source of his anger and guilt, the loss and grief of a beloved friend.

Now we will leave the story here. Next week we will explore the rest of the story. I leave you with this story to contemplate.

The story is called the Crescent Moon Bear. A husband had gone off to war. He was gone for many years. Finally, his wife gets word that he is coming home. She is thrilled and spends days cooking and getting her hair and clothes looking as pretty as

possible. Then the day comes and she watches for him, a grand meal all spread out for him. She sees him coming down the road. In her enthusiasm, she runs out to meet him, throws her arms around him and speaks of her love and happiness that he is home. Her husband walks rather slowly into the house and sits down at the table. He had not spoken a word, not even a greeting. But in his wife's delight, she did not even notice.

She pushes the food towards him, "Oh eat, eat, you must be hungry." He stares at the food, not saying anything. Suddenly he swipes the food off the table onto the floor and over turns the table. He rushes out of the house and stands slumped shouldered in the yard. His wife runs out to him. "I'm sorry. I have upset you. Please forgive me." She says. He pushes her away and lumbers off into the woods.

The wife is mortified. What is she to do? She goes to her grandmothers and tells her what has happened. "What should I do? Please help me." She exclaims.

"Well," says the grandmother. "I can help you, but you need to get me a white hair from the Crescent Moon bear."

"Oh, anything!" cried the wife. "Where do I find this bear?"

"On the big mountain."

So the wife gathers some food into a knapsack and starts out to climb the mountain.

The journey was hard but finally she made it to the top of the mountain and indeed there she found the bear that had a white crescent moon under his chin. She wondered to herself how she was going to get one of those white hairs.

She came up with a plan. She took some of her food and placed in where the bear could eat it. She hid herself far off where the bear could not hurt her. Indeed the bear eats the food.

She put out more food and this time stood closer to the bear. Each time she put out food, she would move closer and closer, until finally she stood right next to the bear when he eat. When he reached down to eat the food, she reached out and pulled a white hair out of his chin.

The bear reared up on his back legs and howled as loud as he could. The wife was frightened but did not move. The bear finally quieted down, and never hurt the woman.

Happy with her bounty, she races back to her grandmothers. There she presents her with the prize. The grandmother takes the white hair and tosses it into the fire.

“Grandmother, what are you doing?”

“Oh, my dear you don’t need that hair any more. You have already learned how to tame the great bear. Now go home and do the same to your husband.”

Next week, we will see how Jesus tames the great bear.

THE RAISING OF LAZARUS, PART II

SCRIPTURE: JOHN 11:38-43

This is the second part of a two-part sermon on Jesus and the death of Lazarus. It is part of a larger series on the emotions of Jesus. Emotions are usually not attributed to Jesus except superficially. No theologians I know of have allowed Jesus to experience the complete range of human emotion fully and completely. The exception is physical pain. We let Jesus feel physical pain at the end of his life. We usually believe that Jesus dealt superficially with his emotional life, making him rather shallow, I think. He knew of them but did not really participate in them.

Of course, if he is human, then the range of human emotion must go with it. We looked at how he dealt with the emotions of greed, selfishness, and arrogance at the temptation on the mountain. Here he faced his own shadow figure. After dealing with those emotions at the start of his public ministry, we find at the end of his public ministry his dealing with another set of emotions...the emotional spectrum that all of us experience after losing a loved one: the stages of grief.

He remained most close to the family in Bethany of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. It was a personal relationship. We saw that when he knew of Lazarus sickness and death, Jesus went through a period of denial: continue on his public ministry schedule. Then he went through a period of bargaining: "he isn't dead, just asleep." Then we left his public life and made his way to Bethany where he met with Martha and Mary, both of whom

help lead him into the stage of guilt: “why weren’t you here. You could have saved him.”

With that guilt heavy on his heart, he confronts the people he dislikes the most: Pharisees who are at the home for the family funeral service as on lookers and professional mourners. Knowing the history with Jesus relationship with the Pharisees during the last three years, we know that many a harsh word had passed between them. They were there partially to spy on Jesus in his private moment. What would he do? How would he react to this loss of his best friend?

It upset Jesus very much to see them there. When he did, he became angry and agitated. That is what the Greek words actually mean, though they usually are translated as spiritually moved and troubled. Jesus was going through his angry stage.

Soon after that, he experiences his grief and he weeps.

However, Jesus’s anger is not over. He now goes to the tomb. The Pharisees follow him and he again gets angry. Jesus targeted his anger clearly against these Pharisees. He had called them names before this. We target anger towards someone too. Never are we just angry at the universe. There is something or someone toward which we direct our anger. For Jesus it was the face of the Pharisees. He experienced that directly and fully in front of Lazarus’ tomb.

For him to move on in his stages of grief, he had to pass through this stage. Do you remember the story of Pandora’s Box? I bet you do. It is an old story about how Pandora found a box. Though warned not to, she opened it and let out all the horrors of

this world: disease, pain, grief, and loss. Now the point of the story is not that those things were not already in the world, but rather that our consciousness of those things suddenly grew more acute.

Well, Jesus, as he stood in front of the tomb, faced his Pandora's Box. When he said, "roll away the stone," he became fully conscious of all those strong negative emotions within himself. The good news is that consciousness of something, full awareness, allows transformation to happen. Because you see, the last thing that Pandora pulled out of the box was hope.

At the end of the pain, the anger, and the guilt, one will find hope, but only if those things are faced and confronted head on and completely. We know Jesus did this, because for the first in the story, Jesus prays to God. Although Jesus talks about God before this, he never actually addresses God. When he does, he allows awakening to happen. Transformation begins with the hope that things are changeable in unbelievable ways.

Now we know that what Jesus saw was his own future. He became aware of what all of us are afraid to face, our own mortality. Yet, it is only through complete awareness of it that we can move into an awakening, a re-creation of ourselves.

Jesus life changes after this. In the Gospel of John, Jesus never goes back to public ministry. He goes off with his disciples for a while. In the meantime, the very Pharisees with whom he was so enraged at the tomb agree to kill Jesus. Intensive anger always leads to violence.

Jesus then returns to the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. He is anointed. He then enters Jerusalem for his final days. He has some emotions yet to experience. He works through the cycle of grief, death, and awakening.

There is an old story told by the Inca's many, many years ago. It is a story of a Great Mother Goddess. After creation of all that there was, an awful destruction came upon the world. To protect all of creation, Great Mother Goddess started to put everything in her mouth to protect them from destruction: sunsets, mountains, lilies, babies, and old people. Everything she could find she stuffed into her mouth for protection. Now Her mouth was very full. She could not do anything with something trying to slip out. She remained busy day and night sticking things back in her mouth repeatedly.

Then Father God created dreamers. As they dreamt, Mother Goddess took the opportunity to drop the contents of her mouth into their dreams. All that once was, would be again, coming back to life in the visions of the dreamers. Because people could envision, soon all things became real again.

Great Mother Goddess' name was Esperanza. She gave hope to people. Hope always springs eternal with those who dream and have visions. In hope, all things are possible.

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