

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Edited by
Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth





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Contents

Preface	<i>Rev. Dr. Setri Nyomi</i>	
Editorial	<i>Rev. Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth</i>	
Greeting	<i>Rev. Dr. Osbert James</i>	
Bible study training guide	<i>Rev. Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth & Rev. Doreen Wynter</i>	1
BIBLE STUDIES, STORIES AND POEMS		12
“You have to stand on crooked and cut straight” - reflections on Tamar	<i>Rev. Dr. Marjorie Lewis</i>	13
“She pass her place” - The Marjorie Lewis story	<i>Rev. Doreen Wynter</i>	19
Resist and work for change	<i>Rev. Paulette Brown</i>	23
My struggle to serve	<i>Hon. Joan M. Purcell</i>	32
The greatest love song - a Bible study on women and sexuality	<i>Dr. Anna Kasafi Perkins</i>	37
Good... Love for Anita	<i>Dr. Anna Kasafi Perkins</i>	47
Reverent sex	<i>Dr. Anna Kasafi Perkins</i>	48
Matriarchs	<i>Dr. Rachele Evelyn Vernon</i>	53
Rev. Dr. Adlyn Sessing-White	<i>Rev. Dr. Marjorie Lewis</i>	59
Reconfiguring the Caribbean family	<i>Rev. Olive Sampath Mahabir</i>	64
Margaret: A woman of faith and fortitude	<i>Rev. Olive Sampath Mahabir</i>	71
Homeland mountains	<i>Mrs. Maureen Weekes-Gumbe</i>	74
Ruth and Naomi – making their story of solidarity our story	<i>Dr. Aruna Gnanadason</i>	75
Their story is our story – in our unity is our power!	<i>Dr. Aruna Gnanadason</i>	86



Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

The anguish and terror of rape and incest	<i>Rev. Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth</i>	90
Rape, a lifetime of hurt	<i>Jamaica Gleaner</i>	97
Not a mumbling word	<i>Rev. Robina Marie Winbush</i>	100
Taking back my yesterdays	<i>Rev. Dr. Valerie J. Bridgeman Davis</i>	114
Womanhood: a Bible study on Proverbs 31	<i>Rev. Dr. Gillian Wilson</i>	115
Rev. Winifred Rhoden-Rutherford	<i>Rev. Dr. Marjorie Lewis</i>	120
Women, beauty and personal empowerment	<i>Ms J. Ayana McCalman & Ms Simone Singh</i>	124
Caribbean woman!	<i>Rev. Doreen Wynter & Hon. Joan M. Purcell</i>	129
Women, leadership and power in church and society	<i>Rev. Joy Abdul-Mohan</i>	132
“Struggling to be born again”	<i>Rev. Joy Abdul-Mohan</i>	138
The young, dynamic Joy Evelyn Abdul Mohan	<i>Mrs. Vera Hajarysingh</i>	139
Resilient women: a Bible study on Miriam	<i>Rev. Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth</i>	143
Lena Christina Ramjattan	<i>Rev. Dr. Dale Bisnauth</i>	151
Women’s rights activist Karen de Souza is a ‘special person’	<i>Kaieteur News, Guyana (Story by Sharmain Cornette)</i>	152
Dorcas: an agent of change and transformation	<i>Rev. Doreen Wynter</i>	158
Mama Joy	<i>Rev. Doreen Wynter</i>	162
Casting stones	<i>Rev. Nicole Ashwood, Rev. Dr. Gillian Wilson & Rev. Doreen Wynter</i>	166
“When home is a dangerous place”	<i>Rev. Robina Marie Winbush</i>	174



Miss Gurti's daughter meets the Samaritan woman	<i>Ms Lillian Burgher</i>	181
Blues of a migrant	<i>Mrs. Maureen Weekes-Gumbe</i>	185
Women in the delivery room	<i>Rev. Nicole Ashwood</i>	186
For Moses' mother	<i>Rev. Nicole Ashwood</i>	193
Brawta Moses	<i>Rev. Nicole Ashwood</i>	194
Women as channels of grace, healing and service	<i>Rev. Dr. Margaret Roberts</i>	200
God's grace in the inner-city - Doreen Wynter's story	<i>Rev. Nicole Ashwood</i>	204
Women critiquing culture: the story of Abigail and a guerrilla	<i>Rev. Anna Joycelyn Shrikisson-Sharma</i>	209
A grieving mom	<i>Rev. Anna Joycelyn Shrikisson-Sharma</i>	215
Telling my story - a woman of courage, determination and hope	<i>Ms Denise Shrikissoon</i>	216
The gift of a garment	<i>Rev. Dr. Marjorie Lewis</i>	219
Take action to end violence against women and children	<i>Rev. Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth</i>	222
LITURGICAL RESOURCES		225
Introduction to liturgical resources	<i>Rev. Nicole Ashwood</i>	226
A service of healing and reconciliation	<i>Rev. Nicole Ashwood</i>	226
Mother's day/Women's day	<i>Rev. Nicole Ashwood</i>	238
A service for Women's Sunday	<i>Rev. Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth</i>	242
A service to celebrate Emancipation	<i>Rev. Robina Marie Winbush</i>	246
Glossary		255
References and further resources		260



Preface

Rev. Dr. Setri Nyomi

General Secretary, World Communion of Reformed Churches

Reading the Bible has been a key characteristic of the Reformed way of life for centuries. Personal and community reading of scriptures in the context of worship has been an important way of how the Reformed live out our affirmation of *sola scriptura*. Unfortunately how the Word of God has been read has not always been liberating. There are too many instances in which the Bible has been read in a manner that perpetrates violence and exclusion especially of women.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story comes as a refreshing wind to point in the direction of transformation inspired by the rereading of scriptures. While it focuses on one part of the world, the Caribbean, the insights from this book can be applied to all parts of the world. Reading the scriptures in a manner that is consistent with the liberating power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ will free women and men to build communities characterized by justice and genuine love. The stories told and the principles of biblical interpretation recorded in this book can inspire all towards the exciting journey of reading and rereading the Bible for new insights for living in a just and inclusive world.

I am grateful to God for those who participated in the workshop in Grenada in January 2011. We thank all those who contributed articles. As this book gets published we take this opportunity to thank God for the life and visionary leadership of the Rev. Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth who for eleven years has served the Reformed family worldwide – inspiring and challenging churches in the area of gender justice as well as climate and economic justice. She has been a gift of the Caribbean churches to the worldwide Reformed family, for which we are grateful to God.

Geneva, March 2011



Editorial

Rev. Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth

The Bible plays an influential role in the Caribbean, together with the scriptures of other religions, primarily of Islam, Hinduism and the Bahai faith. Reading the Bible is critical for the Christian and for the Rastafarian communities. Many people find meaning in biblical texts for their lived realities as they seek God's presence in their lives and for discernment regarding what God is saying to them in these times. *Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story* is a Bible study book on women, which provides refreshing ways to read the Bible, enabling women and men to rediscover its richness and its ability to help them reflect theologically on their faith and experience. It is envisioned as an instrument that will contribute to building the critical consciousness of women and men and in fostering women's leadership. The book includes stories of women who have played significant roles in their churches and communities.

Caribbean women have contributed greatly to the survival of their families and communities by finding ways to resist injustices, bringing healing, providing food, shelter, hospitality, comfort as well as avenues for peace and reconciliation. They have acquired survival skills in situations of poverty, violence and social decay. There are many examples of how women have found ways and means to be resilient in the face of harsh economic times, very often working beyond the boundary of state mechanisms.

The Caribbean has a high prevalence of violence against women. There are frequent accounts of rape, maiming and killing of women. Recently churches have begun to be attentive to this issue in small ways but there is still a significant silence and lack of initiative. The process of developing this book took into serious consideration strategies to empower churches to take actions to end violence against women. This issue is addressed in several Bible studies, including four which deal directly with domestic violence, rape and incest. As part of the project to prepare this book, some practical steps were also taken: some churches organised events to raise awareness and to develop a campaign to end violence against women and children. This includes a group of young men from the Reformed churches in Guyana.

The Bible study resource, *Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story* is written in a popular style, addressing key issues and concerns of women. It also promotes ways in which women are resisting and overcoming injustices, carving out paths towards partnership and wholesome communities.



Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Topics and issues discussed in the book include: the theology of gender justice and partnership; sexuality; marriage and family; violence against women; women's resistance; leadership and power; women as channels of grace, caregivers and nurturers of life; women, beauty and personal empowerment; culture; healing and building community.

The book contains a Bible Study Training Guide, twenty Bible studies with accompanying stories and poems. It also has liturgical resources and a glossary. The Bible studies were written by lay and ordained women from Baptist, Congregational, Evangelical, Presbyterian, Reformed, Roman Catholic and United traditions. Writers are mostly from within the Caribbean region, and include two women from the Caribbean Diaspora in North America, one Asian woman from India and one African American woman from the United States.

The Bible study writers have used a variety of popular approaches and methodologies for contextual Bible study which are helpful in engaging the readers with the Bible and strengthening their pedagogical skills. Reader response and community based approaches are used to facilitate a high level of participation, with a consciousness of social location and life experiences. These approaches will enable a process of reflection and conscientization; serving as tools for transformative education and women's empowerment. See Bible Study Training Guide (page 1) for more on reading the Bible, methodology and the five steps in preparing and facilitating a contextual Bible study.

The process of developing the book included a peer review process and a Bible study workshop, which was held in Grenada in January 2011. The workshop participants were lay and ordained women and men who reviewed a selection of Bible studies and made critical comments and suggestions to make the Bible studies more engaging, culturally authentic and challenging for church and society. They discussed ways in which the Bible is read in their contexts and critically reflected on principles of biblical interpretation, the changing interpretative framework in the Caribbean and key challenges for women today. They also wrestled with difficult and controversial texts on women, for example, the issue of submission (Titus 2.5), silence in the church (I Corinthians 14.33-4) and equality of women and men (Gal. 3.28).

I would like to thank all the writers who contributed Bible studies, stories of women, poems and liturgies and those who were involved in the peer review, namely: Rev. Nicole Ashwood, Rev. Paulette Brown and Rev. Olive Sampath Mahabir. I would like to acknowledge the good partnership with Rev. Nicole Ashwood, Coordinator, Caribbean and North America Council for Mission



(CANACOM) who journeyed with me throughout this project. I express my deep appreciation to Nicqi for her good ideas, hard work and for her moral support and friendship.

I would also like to thank Rev. Dr. Osbert James and the Presbyterian Church of Grenada for hosting the Bible study workshop. Thanks also to all resource persons and participants, including the Young Women's Christian Association and the UN Women. Your work was important for the development of the material for this book. I would also like to recognize and appreciate the partnership with the Swiss Women's World Day of Prayer and the Fondation Pour L'aide Au Protestantisme Reforme, Switzerland for granting financial support for the project.

Finally, I'd like to express my deepest thanks and appreciation to my colleague, Ms Daphne Martin-Gnanadason for her good work, enthusiasm and support. Daphne assisted with organising the Bible study workshop and managing the documents, proof-reading and production. I would also like to thank Dr. Aruna Gnanadason for doing the final proof reading of the whole document and for all her helpful feedback. Thanks also to Rev. Dr. Setri Nyomi, General Secretary of the World Communion of Reformed Churches for his encouragement and support.



Greeting

Rev. Dr. Osbert James

Moderator, Grenada Presbyterian Church

In January 2011, under the auspices of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Presbyterian Church in Grenada served as host to a group of church folk - lay and ordained, old and younger, women and men - as we sought to reflect on the methods of reading the Bible in our Caribbean context. While we sometimes had a hard time coming to a common understanding, I feel that this project helped us to critique some of the ways in which the Bible has been used as a tool to oppress rather than as a means of proclaiming the sovereignty of God.

The perspectives from which one understands the Scripture will be largely flavoured by his or her story. Even though the Caribbean society is predominantly matrifocal, the Caribbean woman has and still does contend with issues of male hegemony, male dominance and social and economic inequalities. A Caribbean woman's hermeneutic will necessarily demand that the scriptures be viewed from a perspective unique to her; this is inescapable.

These Bible studies written by Caribbean women reflect their understanding of the biblical text from the cauldron of their experience first as women and secondly as women in the Caribbean. They reflect their perception of a God traditionally conceived of as male as they live out their lives in a male dominated society. They also reflect their experience of God as liberator, co-conspirator and androgynous.

The Presbyterian Church in Grenada has been in existence since the 1830's. Over these years women have played a pivotal role in the leadership of the congregation. Today, the majority of members are women. We were therefore extremely excited to host the Caribbean Women Bible Study Workshop and to be part of this exercise where women and men wrestled with an understanding of scripture which has been passed down to them from the perspective of those who have had both economic and political power and the ability to shape one's world-view and even how one thinks about one's self.

It is therefore my pleasure to commend these studies to you. I trust that as you read, you will hold in creative tension that with which you resonate with, as well as that which causes dissonance. You may find that these studies will not only provide a frame work from which you might understand the scriptures but also cause a troubling of the waters. May the Holy Spirit be your guide as you wade through these Bible studies.

Grenada, March 2011





BIBLE STUDY TRAINING GUIDE

Rev. Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth & Rev. Doreen Wynter

Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth and Doreen Wynter studied Theology at the United Theological College of the West Indies, Jamaica. They were the first women in their denominations to be trained for the ordained ministry: Patricia, with the Guyana Presbyterian Church (1980) and Doreen with the Jamaica Baptist Union (1990).

Reading the Bible

The Bible is regarded as a divinely inspired record of the history of God's dealing with God's people, a history that extends to the entire cosmos and which reflects diverse historical, cultural, political, economic, social and ecological contexts. It is also the living word of God that speaks about God's love, compassion and liberation for humanity and creation. It contains poetry, songs, history, laws, liturgical resources, letters and stories which need to be read with the insights and understanding of the writers and the contexts in which the texts were written. It also needs to be read with a critical consciousness of the reality in which it is being read today.

In reading the Bible we realise that it is an exciting, frustrating, rewarding and puzzling exercise, because we discover, that who we are, our social location and life realities, significantly impacts how we read and interpret the scriptures. People read with various lenses as they discern how God is speaking to them in a particular situation or context, regarding issues that are critical to their communities. We also discover that the Bible should not be regarded as simply a book of laws, quotations and pronouncements which are meant to be taken literally. This can be harmful when used to justify evil, such as violence, destruction of the earth, slavery, racism, homophobia, xenophobia and oppression of women and other marginalized communities.

For example, if we look at the place and role of women in both the Old and New Testaments, questions are raised and texts are read with suspicion, with a keen eye for what lies inside and beneath the mind of the writer, his motives and what agenda he is promoting. If the Old Testament describes patriarchal families as though they are the norm, and if the New Testament says that women should be submissive to their husbands (Titus 2.5) and be silent in church (1 Cor 14.33-4) does that mean that God created women to be subordinate to men? Church leaders have used passages like these to propagate a power construction with male authority and domination.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

How then do we address Titus and 1 Corinthians *vis à vis* the situation of women and their own prejudices and propagation of a male agenda?

How do we read the texts in light of the baptismal formula in Gal 3.28, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female for all are one in Christ?” How do we address the contradictions within the texts and the many Bible stories of women as prophets, preachers, healers, leaders, mothers, sisters, and nurturers of life?

The Gospels tell of ground breaking encounters and experiences of women with Jesus, their brother and friend, who demonstrates his solidarity with their struggle in a patriarchal society. Jesus was remarkably open to women, sitting and talking with Mary and Martha and with the Samaritan woman at the well, surrounding himself with women and men as disciples, defending their non-traditional actions - like the woman who anointed him with very costly ointment, the woman with a flow of blood who touched his garment in search of healing, and the women who were the first to receive the good news of his victory over death and were charged to go and spread the good news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

How then do we address Titus and 1 Corinthians *vis à vis* the situation of women and their own prejudices and propagation of a male agenda?

So, even as we read the Bible, we encounter some challenges. How then should we read the Bible?

Approaches to reading the Bible

In seeking to understand the biblical text, different methods are used in the interpretative process. Questions are asked such as: Who is the author, when was it written, what was the intention of the author, and how did the author arrive at the finished product? It is anticipated that responses to these questions would lead to the author’s intentions and eventually to the original meaning.

This emphasis on the author and the context of the author leads also to the study of the historical, social, economic, political contexts of the period when the Bible was written. This historical critical methodology, as it is called, has not always focussed adequately on the text itself or the reader of the text. Invariably the reader is not considered, and importance is not given to the meaning of the text, for the reader. Instead the emphasis is on what the text meant in the context of the time it was written.

A shift in methodology occurred with the text itself becoming the focus. The text was seen as a finished product and was analysed as such, taking into consideration its place in the canon, and its position within its immediate context. The emphasis was on the world of the text. This approach was critiqued as being too subjective and open to multiple readings which may arise from *eisegesis* of the text, that is, reading into the text what is not there.

In this interpretative process, the reader engages the text and there is interplay between text and reader. Emerging from this were several ways of reading the text as each reader responded differently to the text. Reader response approaches are used for feminist, womanist and postcolonial reading of texts.

Yet another shift in methodology emerged when answers were sought to the question: what is the role of the reader in all of this interpretative process? This new method was founded on the premise that no one comes to the text with a 'blank slate', rather we are informed by our location which is influenced by the values, ideologies, politics of our time, by who we are, and our perceptions of reality. Therefore, everyone comes to the text with some preconceived ideas influenced by their background, social location and life experiences. And the world of the reader became important.

In this interpretative process, the reader engages the text and there is interplay between text and reader. Emerging from this were several ways of reading the text as each reader responded differently to the text. Reader response approaches are used for feminist, womanist and postcolonial reading of texts.

With each approach there is the mistaken belief that we have now found the way to read the Bible. Is there a right way to read the Bible? Is there only one way of reading a biblical text? These are questions which may arise. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, each has its weaknesses and strengths and often times a combination of two or all has been used in the interpreting of the Bible.

Whatever approach is used there is a common thread. It is the focus on the context, whether it is the context of the writer, of the text itself or the context of the reader.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Reading the Bible in the Caribbean context

Who are we as Caribbean readers?

What is the social location of Caribbean readers? We recognise that each reader has her/his own particular social location, but there is a common factor in the social context of the Caribbean which informs our reading of the Biblical text.

A brief overview of our Caribbean reality reveals that the Caribbean is a melting pot of cultures – of Amerindians, Africans, Asians, Europeans and a significant population of mixed ethnicities. The dynamics of multi-ethnicity, multi/inter-cultural realities and inter-religious characteristics are all important influences in this region. The Caribbean has had a bloody history of genocide of its Indigenous Peoples, Slavery of Africans and Indentureship of Indians, Chinese and Portuguese. It also has a legacy of resistance, emancipation and struggle to build community. The legacy of slavery still haunts the region as people struggle for emancipation of the mind and for a spiritual renewal, as they have been challenged to do by such as Bob Marley, the Jamaican Rastafarian prophet and reggae icon.

During the period of colonialism, the peoples of the Caribbean were ruled by various empires: Spanish, English, French and Portuguese. These colonial masters subjugated the Indigenous Peoples and the era was characterised by domination and subordination, superiority and inferiority, the powerful and the powerless. This rule by the empire was of course resisted by freedom fighters and saw the formation of resistance groups such as the Maroons in Jamaica.

It was in the 1960's that the Caribbean nations began to achieve independence, ushering in a postcolonial period. However, the question has been raised as to whether with the rise of neocolonialism things have really changed in the Caribbean or is it that the empires have only changed faces?

The Bible was introduced as a tool to “civilize” enslaved Africans, indentured Asians, Portuguese and Amerindians and to maintain the *status quo* of the Plantation and its system. Christianity was transmitted as a foreign religion, with a God who favoured the planters. The hierarchical segregation of race, economic and social classes was seen as the accepted order. Individualistic salvation was propagated as key to live out the Christian calling. Christianity was preached as a “pie in the sky” religion with a separation of people’s lived realities from the spiritual. They were taught that this

As Caribbean readers of the biblical text, whether we reside within the Caribbean or in the Diaspora, how do we read and interpret the Bible?

world is not their home and that God awaits with open arms in heaven to receive them, heal all their wounds and to set them free. Such a theology was used as a way to make the people compliant and complacent, accepting the hierarchical structure and systemic injustice as the given order. However, the same Bible was also read by slaves to promote the cause of their own liberation - to claim their dignity and God-given worth and to resist and revolt against the oppressors.

As Caribbean readers of the biblical text, whether we reside within the Caribbean or in the Diaspora, how do we read and interpret the Bible?

In the 1970s the methodology of biblical resistant reading was developed as a strategy for emancipation, transformation and renewal. This methodology enabled a process of uncovering the ideological agenda of the oppressors - engaging a paradigm shift from a Euro-centric imperialistic Christianity to an indigenized theology, which was relevant to the Caribbean. This methodology seeks authenticity in culture, history, people's struggles, sense of self and life experiences. It critiques Christianity as a white Western and patriarchal religion.

The biblical resistant reading strategy addresses the disconnection between reality, faith and spirituality, and also between people, creation and God. It seeks to deal with the real issue at hand - about whether there will be life after birth rather than the fixation on life after death.

The biblical resistant reading strategy addresses the disconnection between reality, faith and spirituality, and also between people, creation and God. It seeks to deal with the real issue at hand - about whether there will be life after birth rather than the fixation on life after death.

Reading the Bible in the Caribbean context has often focused more on the meaning of texts for lived realities. It is based in the interplay of reader and text. The interpretative framework in the postcolonial context, using the reader response approach, is grounded in the context of people's struggles, hopes, celebration of life and dreams. It engages critically with gender, racial, economic and ecological injustices and takes into account the socio-cultural, economic and political reality as well as the historicity of the people.

A historical approach is seen as an important tool of analysis with a critical consciousness of who we are, our social location and the paradigm of power which continues to oppress and impoverish the majority of people, and which fuels division and brokenness. It also seeks to draw out alternatives for a life-giving civilization, acts of transformation and building community.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Such a reading uses the tools of remembering and imagination. It is remembering which embraces the historical context of the Caribbean reader as it considers the narratives of courageous women and men who led revolutions for freedom from slavery; visionary leaders who have led communities, churches and nations; marginalized groups, especially women who struggle for recognition, rights and justice; and persons whose prophetic voices and actions are significant for justice, for right relations and for betterment of communities and families.

Remembering is important in grounding people and their communities in their history, identity, culture, family, community and their connectivity. It not only addresses the past, but it moves beyond it to become an interpretative lens through which to understand current social dynamics. It also has good possibilities to bring healing and to mend broken relationships. It provides space for difficult conversations, outpourings and steps for persons to hear each other and feel each other's pain and joy.

Whereas remembering takes into account the context of the reader, imagination addresses the text. Imagination moves the reader to explore beyond the parameters of the text itself - to hear the voices of those who have either been silenced or left out by the text and its historical interpretations.

Imagination enables the reader to uncover the hidden details, characters and influences of the story, which are missing in the text. For example, see the Bible study "Miss Gurti's Daughter Meets the Samaritan Woman" by Lillian Burgher, where she invites readers to imagine the untold details about the Samaritan women. What about the "husbands"? Did she have children?

The reader also enters into the world of the text and persons are invited to participate in the story by connecting their stories with those in the text. This

Imagination moves the reader to explore beyond the parameters of the text itself - to hear the voices of those who have either been silenced or left out by the text and its historical interpretations.

creative process enables the readers to draw out key messages of the text that speak to them and their community. It draws parallels between the experience of the reader and that of the characters in the text.

Methodology

The methodology used in this Bible study book includes stories of women in the Bible, which are read alongside stories of women in our communities and churches. This form of contextual Bible study is helpful in creating space for new insights into the

meaning of Scripture which the Holy Spirit offers us today. It helps us discern God's word and find meaning in our lives as God speaks to us through the Bible, through each other and through creation, strengthening our faith and giving us guidance, wisdom and courage.

Contextual Bible study moves us beyond acquiring knowledge and insights to experience the sacredness of all life and all experiences. In this process each person's experience is important and adds to the collective experience of the group. It engages the group critically at the levels of the head and the heart. Through sharing of personal stories participants establish a relationship with the text as well as with one another and as a community.

The Bible study writers have used various principles of biblical interpretation and methodologies. The Bible studies are contextual, written from the Caribbean reality within the Caribbean region and in the Diaspora and also from India and the United States. Each Bible study has its own approach, rhythm and writing style. But what they all have in common is women's diverse ways of reading the Bible and connecting with the texts and messages.

Helpful steps for rereading the Bible

The following steps are helpful in reading the text and preparing contextual Bible studies. It is important to recognise the guidance of the Holy Spirit in each of the steps outlined below, knowing that the Bible is living and not static, and that over the centuries the Spirit has brought us new understandings of the message of the Bible. God speaks today with relevance for people and their life experiences.

1. Ground work

- ④ Who are the participants and what is their reality, including critical issues they face?
- ④ Read prayerfully the Bible texts provided. Use a concordance to find out what other passages in the Bible say about the topic and issues.
- ④ Research resources such as commentaries, stories, art, songs, news items or articles that can help to understand the meaning of the text.
- ④ Design a space for an interactive Bible study, using methodology that would be most engaging and participatory.

2. Exegesis- exploring the text and realities of its context:

Read the text several times using different versions of the Bible. As you read, enter into the story and jot down any questions which may arise.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

- ⑨ What is the story in this text? Is there a central idea? And are there sub themes?
- ⑨ Who are the people? Identify the different characters. What was the power construction?
- ⑨ Analyse the power relationships? Who benefited and who were marginalized, who are the outsiders?
- ⑨ What was the era? (I.e. the social, political and economic context in which the text was written.) What were the signs of those times?
- ⑨ What do these say about the situation, people and God and about their relationships with each other?
- ⑨ What are the missing pieces, persons and voices?
- ⑨ Note the repetition of phrases, dialogue, ideas.
- ⑨ Research unfamiliar words cross reference the use of sayings and phrases. How were some words used in another context? Is it the same in this passage?
- ⑨ What thoughts, words, phrases or concepts make it difficult to understand the meaning of the text? What questions and suspicions do they raise?
- ⑨ Read the text in its context, look at the passages preceding the particular text and the passage immediately following.

Read the text several times using different versions of the Bible. As you read, enter into the story and jot down any questions which may arise.

3. Interpretation - Understanding the meaning of the text:

You need to recognise that several factors influence interpretation and meaning, such as age, gender, culture, socio-economic and political situation, church and other traditions. By using the points/notes from the exegesis, the reader will be able to move beyond what the text meant to what God is saying to us for these times.

- ⑨ Draw out key points, contradictions and points of connection. Wrestle with this for a while. Are these consistent with the principles outlined in other biblical texts?

- ④ Who is the writer and what is his story? How did the writer convey this message? What are his intentions and agenda?
- ④ What is the text saying about the people of that time? Is a command being given or principles outlined?
- ④ How is God portrayed by what is written or omitted? What questions do you have about this image of God?

4. The Bible study session

Facilitate a re-reading of the text using the tool of imagination, locating it within the context of the participants. You may arrange for a bibliodramatic reading of the text or you may tell the story in your own words, using songs, choruses, poems, drumming, etc. to bring life to the story and to engage the group. Make sure you involve the participants in the reading.

- ④ Ask participants to identify the different voices, characters - those that speak and act, those that do not. Ask them to share briefly what they have heard both explicitly and implicitly.
- ④ What is the intention of the writer? Ask participants to examine the power relations and consequences for people. Identify where these are questioned and resisted.
- ④ Ask the group for their insights. What grabbed their attention? What emotions did the text elicit? Are there any parallels in their own context, situations?
- ④ Then ask them to identify themes and issues.
- ④ Ask the group to interact with the text, characters and situation, discussing the relevance for their situation. This may be best done in small group conversations.
- ④ What does the text tell them about God, Jesus and the work of the Spirit for their lives and in their community and church?
- ④ Read the text in conversation with a story of the local context, e.g. reading the story of Dorcas in conversation with Mama Joy.

5. Implications for witness and mission

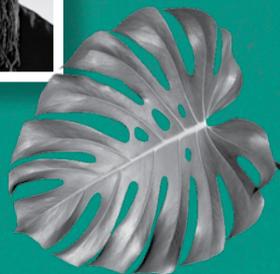
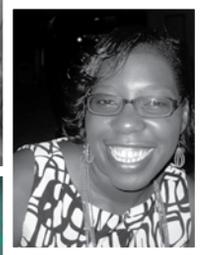
- ④ Have a minute of silence for personal reflection.
- ④ Ask participants to share very briefly one new insight gained from

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the Bible study. Ask them what is most critical for him/her and their community and church? How are they called to act? (For example, doing a Bible study on violence against women and children may inspire a campaign against such violence.)

- ⑨ Summarize briefly and keep notes on implications for witness and mission.

End in song and prayer.



BIBLE STUDIES,
STORIES AND
POEMS



“YOU HAVE TO STAND ON CROOKED AND CUT STRAIGHT” - REFLECTIONS ON TAMAR

A BIBLE STUDY ON GENESIS 38

Rev. Dr. Marjorie Lewis

Marjorie Lewis is the first woman to be appointed as president of the United Theological College of the West Indies. She is former general secretary of the Jamaica Council of Churches and has served in ecumenical contexts with the Caribbean Conference of Churches. She also served as a missionary to the United Reformed Church in Britain, as the Multi-Racial, Multi-Cultural Development Worker. While in Britain she received an award in an event sponsored by the “Voice” newspaper in Britain, in recognition of her outstanding contribution to the Black community in Britain.

The Bible can be read and interpreted through different perspectives or lenses. Approaching specific passages in the Bible from different angles can help to deepen our understanding of who God is, how God is working in the world and what we are called upon to do as people who seek to be faithful to God’s call on our lives.

First moment

We can approach the Bible by contemplation, in a devotional way, using our imagination and intuition as a means of communication. God can communicate to us through our emotions, helping us to understand what God is calling us to do and who God is calling us to be. To read a passage such as Genesis 38, and stories in the life of Jesus in this devotional way involves assuming the role of one of the characters in the story, noticing the sights, smells, sounds, what you see others doing and how they are

The Bible can be read and interpreted through different perspectives or lenses. Approaching specific passages in the Bible from different angles can help to deepen our understanding of who God is, how God is working in the world and what we are called upon to do as people who seek to be faithful to God’s call on our lives.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

relating to you in order to gain new insights from ‘experiencing’ the story.

Second moment

We can also read the passage on multiple levels focusing more on analysing the text and applying the text to our daily lives and to contemporary society. There is a Jamaican saying “you have to stand on crooked and cut straight,” which means that you have to respond with the appropriate ethics even when the odds are against you. This saying seems to describe the plight of Tamar who we read about in Genesis 38. How can we read this text?

I offer five lenses through which we can read it: a Caribbean postcolonial lens, a gender lens, a social class lens, a HIV/AIDS lens and a family systems lens.

We need to ask: Does Genesis 38 offer an understanding of God that is for or against the systems of domination of its time? Does the text involve a search for justice, a life-giving way to live in the midst of nations and powerful groups and leaders who dominate and enslave others? From whose perspective do we read the text – from the perspective of the dominant groups/persons or from the point of view of the subjugated people?

1. A Caribbean postcolonial reading

The Caribbean experienced colonization by Europeans starting in the 15th century. The colonizing European powers in their quest for wealth and power affected genocide on the Indigenous population in many countries, enslaved Africans to work for Europeans in the Caribbean and with the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century, brought in Indentured labour from Asia who worked under harsh conditions. The Caribbean in the 21st century still carries the legacy of colonialism. While chattel slavery does not exist now, power and control over the choices made in the Caribbean countries is heavily influenced by the nations and institutions that wield global economic power while the Caribbean and other countries in the global South have very little influence on the decision making. The dynamics of resistance, collaboration, internalization of colonial values also remain.

We need to ask: Does Genesis 38 offer an understanding of God that is for or against the systems of domination of its time? Does the text involve a search for justice, a life-giving way to live in the midst of nations and powerful groups and leaders who dominate and enslave others? From whose perspective do we read the text – from the perspective of the dominant groups/persons or from the point of view of the subjugated people?

“You have to stand on crooked and cut straight” - reflections on Tamar

Questions to ponder:

- ⑨ Jacob had settled in the land of Canaan (Gen 37.1). How are the inhabitants of the land treated, even when the incoming folk marry the indigenous populations?
- ⑨ In the Caribbean what have been the patterns in the relationships between the indigenous population and incoming colonizers?
- ⑨ What are the ethical considerations that ought to govern relationships between different ethnic groups, as well as relations with the incorporation of migrants, refugees and colonizers into an existing society?

2. Gender

Gender relates to the roles that society gives to men and women. These roles are different in various societies and can be changed. Unlike one's sex (male or female) which cannot be changed, a person's gender (what women or men should do and how they should behave) can be changed. For example, in some societies, only women cook, but in others men do cook. In some societies women are not allowed to lead in politics or in the Church while in other societies women perform these functions.

In Genesis 38 it is worth noting that:

- ⑨ Shua's daughter who married Judah is not named. Telling a person's name is an important way of saying that someone is a person of worth and importance.
- ⑨ This was a patriarchal society, so women had relatively less rights than men. Respectable women were either virgin daughters in their father's household, wives who bore sons and were under the authority of the patriarch of the husband's family or under the authority and protection of their sons in their old age.¹ Women on the margins of society included prostitutes, and widows like Tamar who were sent back to their father's house without the rights of the Levirate provision (Deut 25.5-10) in which the brother-in-law would perpetuate his deceased brother's name by having sexual intercourse with the widow so that the brother would thereby have sons to inherit and perpetuate the brother's name.
- ⑨ Tamar is tacitly blamed and suspected by Judah of having supernatural powers leading to the death of her husband and brother-in-law (Gen 38.11) when the text clearly states that Er sinned and God punished Er by death (v.7) and subsequently Onan sinned and was also punished by death (v.10).

1 NEWSOM, Carol A., & RINGE, Sharon, H., (Eds.), *Women's Bible Commentary Expanded Edition with Apocrypha* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), pp. 24-26.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

- ⑨ The exceptionally harsh punishment of death prescribed by Judah on hearing that Tamar was pregnant ‘as a result of whoredom,’ (v 24) is noteworthy. The usual penalty for adultery – to be applied both to the man and the woman involved – was stoning to death (Deut 22.23-24). Judah pronounced an extremely harsh punishment – burning to death, which was only usually applied in the exceptional case when a priest’s daughter ‘profanes herself through prostitution.’ (Lev 21.9).² Judah also made no mention of the man when he pronounced his first verdict.
- ⑨ A woman in the society of Tamar’s time had limited options. Decision making and economic power for the most part were the prerogative of men, especially the patriarch who was head of the household or clan. His decisions determined the fate of those under his rule.

3. Social class

In many societies people are generally divided into at least two ‘classes’ or groups: those who have more status and power and those who have little or no status and power. These groups have sometimes been referred to as the ‘Haves’ and the ‘Have Nots.’ Often this division is determined by the wealth and rank different people have in the society.

Power is also expressed in the failure of the justice system of the State to deliver equal access to rights for the poor. How can the poor cope? In Jamaica, notably from the late 20th century to the early 21st century, a common form of protest has been demonstrations by poor people who block roadways, bearing placards with slogans protesting the latest perceived unjust act. “Me want justice!” is often the cry and a common slogan on placards. Very often these demonstrations take place when citizens are of the view that the police acted illegally in shooting or detaining a citizen.

Adrian McFarlane, a Jamaican writer is of the view that oppressed people in Jamaica in most cases assume a stance of either “Anancy” or “Quashie.” The Anancy mentality, so named for the folk tales originating in West Africa, is that of the trickster who outwits the system by use of quick thinking and cunning. Sometimes the strategies of “Anancy” are of questionable ethics and morality. In some ways the Jamaican saying, “You have to stand on crooked and cut straight,” speaks to this use of intelligence in surviving when you are among the powerless and the odds are stacked against you.

The other option McFarlane describes as “Quashie” which in the Jamaican context signifies people who are too simple to understand when that they

2 COONAN, Michael D., (Ed.), *The New Oxford Annotated Bible New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha Third Edition* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 64-65.

“You have to stand on crooked and cut straight” - reflections on Tamar

were being exploited and therefore unwittingly comply with their oppressors. These people are not self confident or courageous enough to control their own future.³

Contrasted with Anansy and Quashie, in McFarlane’s view is the Rastafari concept of the *I-an-I* which denotes someone taking control of themselves thinking for themselves and acting to control their own destiny.

How does Tamar respond to injustice? Note the following regarding Genesis 38:

- ⑨ Those in power use power and knowledge of the law to reap the benefits of the law while escaping the obligations of the law, for example, Onan who benefited from the privileges of the law but shirked the responsibility.
- ⑨ Judah used his power and knowledge of the law to avoid implementing the legal provisions for Tamar who was relatively poor and powerless. Judah seemed to avoid being just with impunity, getting away with it, or at least not facing the full consequences of his decisions and actions.
- ⑨ Tamar gives birth to twin boys, which marks her out as among the very special female characters in the Hebrew Bible. Her younger son Perez becomes the one from whom Boaz, David and then Jesus all descend. This is recorded in Matt 1.3ff and Tamar is recorded as one of a small number of women named in a genealogy in the Bible.

4. HIV and AIDS lens

The Caribbean has the second highest incidence of HIV and AIDS in the world, second only to sub-Saharan Africa. A troubling trend in Jamaica is that infection rates are increasing among young women in the 15 to 25 years age group. Persons and organisations working to end stigma and discrimination and promote safe sexual activity, have noted that in many cases, young women are having unprotected sex in exchange for financial support from men. This is referred to as ‘Transactional Sex.’ There are those who work among commercial sex workers to help them prevent HIV infection.

Attention has also been given to married women, some of them in church, who are faithful to their husbands but become infected because of the infidelity of their husbands. Sometimes because of cultural practices married women hesitate to demand that their husbands use condoms.

3 McFARLANE, Adrian Anthony, “*The Epistemological Significance of ‘I-an-I’ as a Response to Quashie and Anancyism in Jamaican Culture,*” in MURRELL, Nathaniel Samuel, SPENCER, William David and McFarlane, Adrian Anthony (Eds.), *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1998), pp. 107-121.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Very often, there are groups of people who are oppressed on many levels for example by social class, gender and ethnicity at the same time. When this happens, issues such as the ability to control one's own sexuality in a way that is life-giving becomes a difficult goal to achieve. In the modern world we often see that:

- ⑨ Women are in relatively powerless positions and sometimes engage in transactional sex which puts their life at risk – not of stoning or burning but through infection with HIV/AIDS and being affected by stigma and discrimination.
- ⑨ Men and women sometimes have casual sex, but there is a double standard, where the sanctions against this tend to be harsher for women than it is for men – in some cases, the men are even praised for their prowess.
- ⑨ There is need to identify the factors in Caribbean society that lead to increased vulnerability to HIV infection, and to ask: “What is the role of the church?”

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5. Family systems lens

The Family Systems Theory⁴ in psychology notes that patterns learned in one's family of origin tend to be perpetuated in succeeding generations and are played out in new relationships with friends and romantic partners, in church, at the work place, etc. We can see that certain patterns of relationships are repeated in the families that we read about in Genesis chapter 38. You may want to reflect on the following:

- ⑨ Go back three generations in Judah's family. What patterns do you see repeated in the way family members relate to each other? What are the similarities and differences in the ways men and women responded to family and societal challenges? Who are the persons with power, and how do they use their power? Who are the “tricksters”?
- ⑨ Many writers point out that people who are oppressed often internalize the oppression and believe what the oppressors say about them. What ideas from colonialism, Slavery and Indentureship can you identify in the

4 RICHARDSON, Ronald R., *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership and Congregational Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

“You have to stand on crooked and cut straight” - reflections on Tamar

destructive behaviour of some Caribbean people in the family, the Church and the wider society?

- ⑨ What do you think is the significance of Tamar being identified in Jesus’ genealogy (Mat 1.3)?
- ⑨ What sense of hope is there for Caribbean families at the level of kinship, household, ethnicity, multi-ethnic and multi-faith expressions?

Questions to ponder:

- ⑨ How did you feel and what did you learn by experiencing the story using your imagination?
- ⑨ What are the advantages and disadvantages of reading the Bible from different lenses?

Prayer

Lord, grant me grace to follow Jesus: to allow the Spirit of the Lord to anoint me to take good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour. Lord, I am available to you. Amen. (Luke 4.18-19 adapted.)

“SHE PASS HER PLACE”: THE MARJORIE LEWIS STORY

Rev. Doreen Wynter

The story of the Syrophoenician woman is remembered as that of the woman who ‘pass her place’, she who dared to challenge Jesus, the master; the one who stood her ground and would not let go in spite of the negative comments and open hostility.

That Biblical story finds its counterpart in the story of the Rev. Dr. Marjorie Lewis, first female president of the United Theological College of the West Indies (UTCWI). Marjorie, Madgie, Rev. Dr. Lewis all refer to this woman who has tackled and is tackling the empire of patriarchy from both outside and within the system.

Marjorie considers herself a realist for she knows that there is no one way to address the issue of power in the religious sphere. This can be done standing

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

on the periphery, on the outside when one removes one's self from the system or by staying within and working for its incremental dismantling. This has been Marjorie's story.

She was a candidate for the pastoral ministry, while a student in the upper six form at St. Andrew High School for girls. It was not easy for Marjorie, as a high school student, to make this life changing decision especially as her personal desire was to become a lawyer. She struggled with the call and received guidance from her pastor, and mentor, Rev. Dr. Derek Davidson. Upon graduation, this teenage girl went immediately to UTCWI. For the next four years the theological seminary became the place not only for her spiritual formation but where she transitioned from teenager to young adult. To quote her it was a "great place to grow up".

This young, energetic woman who was always actively involved in her church, and was already serving at the regional level as part of the Caribbean Conference of Churches (CCC) involved in ecumenical youth work, was not intimidated by her older peers, nor would she become overawed and take a 'back seat'. Instead, she was involved in every area of the college's cultural life touching the choir, drama, and sports, in particular volleyball.

Her ordination service in 1980, (after graduation in 1979) previewed the kind of ministry to be offered by this the second female pastor of the Disciples of Christ. The four ordinands, two females and two males wore non-traditional garb: black bottom and African tops. The sermon "Many are called few are chosen" was preached by Rev. William Watty, a Methodist minister. And after their vows, the ordinands danced barefoot to one of the contemporary hymns of Catholic Father HoLung's. It was ecumenical, creative and radical - eliciting mixed reactions. The teenager now pastor, 'pass her place'.

After her ordination, Rev. Marjorie served in the Castleton, St Mary Charge and then Bull Bay, St. Thomas. The Disciples of Christ had accepted Marjorie as a pastoral candidate, but this did not mean that there would be no challenges with the leadership. In 1983 she became dissatisfied with the leadership of the denomination, resigned and accepted the post of regional programme officer of the Caribbean Conference of Churches (CCC), and later joined Oxfam, UK as project officer. She stayed with the CCC for five years, and God blessed her during that time with her daughter, Kismet.

While working outside the system was a fertile time for Marjorie. She was engaged in counselling with NGOs, offering pastoral counselling for persons who were also disillusioned with the institutional church, while constantly reassessing her call to pastoral ministry. Ministry on the periphery was

“She pass her place”: The Marjorie Lewis Story

productive but God had other things in mind for this woman. The ‘reluctant captive’ yielded.

In the early 1990’s Marjorie applied for re-instatement in the Disciples of Christ. But things had changed. By this time the Disciples of Christ was in dialogue with the United Church in Jamaica and Grand Cayman for the two to merge. Therefore, her application was to the United Church. The ecclesiastical empire, sought to strike back at this ‘uppity woman’.

A persistent call was being echoed for her to be re-ordained. This did not materialize, and instead she was asked to re-affirm her vows. And so in about 1994 under the leadership of the Rev. Dr. Adlyn White, Moderator of the new United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands, Marjorie became a part of the system once again.

Would she remain silent? The voice of Rev. Dr. Marjorie Lewis was appointed as the general secretary of the Jamaica Council of Churches from 1994 to 1997, after which she again served as a missionary in the UK with the United Reformed Church (1997-2000), dealing with racism and working for inclusiveness.

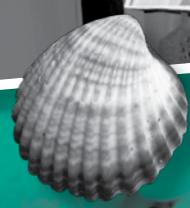
For Rev. Verna Casells, she was the “little sister who mothers me”.

She served as Vice President, responsible for training, with the Jamaica Women’s Political Caucus, and is member of the Public Theology Forum (ecumenical group of theologians).

Her call to the presidency of UTCWI was influenced by the late Rev. Dr. Lewin Williams, former President, Rev. Dr. Lesley Anderson, and supported by the members of faculty.

In a male-dominated, traditionally male-headed institution this radical move was not without opposition. However, Marjorie holds on to the motto of her alma mater of the need to live life to its fullest, and to strive for self-actualization despite the odds. She tries to remain focused on what God has called her to do, understanding the core of ministry as working for the Reigndom of God.

With all the challenges she has encountered, the question was asked “do you have any regrets?” “Regrets? No! I have tried to live every day. There have been sorrows, frustrations, disappointments, but I have come to experience God’s grace in surprising ways”.



RESIST AND WORK FOR CHANGE

1 Peter 2.18-3.7

Rev. Paulette Brown

Paulette Brown was born, raised and schooled in Jamaica. Paulette is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC). She is executive director of Flemingdon Gateway Mission. Mother of 3 children, grandmother of 4, Paulette and her husband Luther reside in Toronto. She is now completing her PhD studies in postcolonial feminist hermeneutics at Knox College. She is interested in reading from a (Canadian) African diasporic perspective. Her thesis proposal is "Canaanite-ism and its function in Mt 15.21-28: a 'Door of No return' perspective."

Introduction to Bible Study

Prayer: Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. Creator God, be with us as we read and interpret this Bible passage, we pray. Open our hearts and minds to new ways of reading the Bible. May we be inspired with courage and hope as we seek to find your transforming word for us from this biblical text.

The Bible is our book of faith and we read it for the purpose of finding inspiration to enable us to work for changes in our lives and in our communities. In reading the Bible we cannot leave out the nitty-gritty of our daily experiences, for Bible reading is always about "What is God saying to us through the texts, and how are we motivated to act in our specific locations and circumstances?"

One of the challenges we face in reading the Bible is the nature of the biblical texts themselves. While they contain the word of God for us, this 'word' is embedded in the dominant patriarchal cultural values of the ancient world from which the biblical texts emerge. We must find ways to strip away the cultural trappings

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Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

(values and assumptions) that biblical stories are often embedded in and ask questions of the text that will help us discover what the word of God is for us, in our times.

The word of God can be a word of affirmation, but not always. It can also be a word of challenge and disturbance, calling us to re-think some of the understandings that we have taken for granted.

In the book of Genesis we learn that women and men are created by God in God's own image to live in partnership with one another and with God's creation. That women and men bear the image of God implies that any form of violence that is perpetrated on our bodies, minds and spirits must be seen as violence effected against God's own image. From this perspective, violence against women is a faith problem.

The aim of the Bible study on 1 Pet 2.18-3.7

This Bible study has two aims. The first is to help us see how 1 Pet 2.18-3.7 has the effect of encouraging violence against women in men-women relationships. The second is to share one way of reading that can help us raise new questions about ourselves, our contexts and the text itself. Together these two aims

The word of God can be a word of affirmation, but not always. It can also be a word of challenge and disturbance, calling us to re-think some of the understandings that we have taken for granted.

help us to read critically and discern how the text can be a transforming word of God for Caribbean women and men.

Methodology

We can always ask - who wrote 1 Peter, for whom was it written, what did the writer have in mind, or what was the problem in the church that the writer was addressing?

Even if we are able to answer all these questions 'correctly', without any speculation (which is highly unlikely) we still have the challenge of its relevance and meaningfulness to women. How can the text be meaningful to countless Caribbean girls and women who are living in the contexts of male violence in girlfriend-boyfriend, common law and marital relationships?

This Bible study uses an approach that focuses on the reader's lived experiences, the nature of the biblical text, the discourses that are embedded in reader's contexts and the discourses operating in the biblical text. This approach requires that we always ask the following critical questions: How does my interpretation of the text fit the understanding of a God who creates

women and men in God's own image and requires just relationships between women and men? What are the discourses that are functioning in the text? What are the discourses functioning in the readers' context and does the interpretation promote just and transforming values for women and men?

Discourse is used in this context to refer to cultural statements and understandings that a text makes, (implicitly and explicitly), the hidden assumptions that the statements contain and the understandings that the statements exclude.

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An example of discourse functioning in a Jamaican text:

The following Jamaican folk song that children sing at school concerts and comedians perform on stage is a good illustration of how discourse functions in texts.

“Woman have heavy load...
When Sat'day mawning come
When de money no nuff...
She call yu dutty bway, ...
But when de money nuff...
She call yu sweetie pie, honey bunch ...”¹

Focusing only on the individual words in the song, will cause us to miss the dominant discourse in the song – that is the statements it makes about women in intimate relationships, and the “truths” that are declared about women and men. We will also miss out on the understandings that the statements ‘leave out’.

For example, the discourse in the song constructs women as manipulative and even abusive. Women manipulate men for money. Women ‘cuss them out’ and ‘sweet them up’, based on how the money flows. These understandings about women are not limited to that particular song, but they appear in many folk songs, local songs, jokes and everyday Jamaican talk. What the discourse does not tell us is why Saturdays are burdensome for women, or why the idea of “money no nuff” is significant to women. It does not say whether

1 Meaning, “Women have heavy loads... when Saturday mornings come. When the money is not enough, she calls you dirty boy... When the money is enough she calls you sweetie pie, honey bunch”

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

the “money no nuff” situation results from rum shops getting first claim on the money. The discourse leaves out important parts such as, who has the responsibility for stretching the dollar in families. It does not say to whom the shopkeeper looks to receive payments on Saturdays, or who has to face the landlord about rents on Saturdays. It does not say whether after putting in her share of work and money, the man’s share is missing. These details are left out of the discourse, yet they are important to get a fuller meaning from the song. When we pay attention to the assumptions, claims and the one-sidedness of the discourse that is functioning in the song, we gain greater awareness of the various meanings that are communicated by the song. It puts us in a position to raise critical questions about the transformative value of the song.

Using this methodology in a Bible study group

Reading steps

- 1 Pray for guidance.
- 2 Read the text through making a list of what it prescribes for slaves, slave masters, wives and husbands.
- 3 Mount the list in a prominent place.
- 4 Name and reflect on known instances of violence against women in your Caribbean context.
- 5 Display newspaper clippings of actual situations of violence against women in a visible area.
- 6 Recall and reflect on examples of violence against women that you have witnessed or heard about. Add to the list.
- 7 Recall songs, or statements, or folk stories that make fun of men’s violence against women.
- 8 Go back to the biblical text.
 - Identify one dominant discourse about women and men in the text
 - What are some of the values that the discourse regards as proper in husband-wife relations?
 - How does power function in the dominant discourse – for example, is there a window for collaborative decision-making, how and where do we find the woman’s voice? Is authority shared? How does power operate in a context of submission?
 - How can an uncritical living out of these values and power

relations help to create and set in motion the conditions for men's violence against women in marriages, common law or boyfriend-girlfriend relationships?

- ⑤ Ask, "What is the word of God to us from this text?" "How does this text challenge us to act for change?"
- ⑤ Remember that the Word of God might be a confirmation, a call to re-think some of the understandings we take for granted or it can be a call to work for change.

Reading the Bible is a political act because it does not stop at reading. It demands actions for change.

An example of how to read the text using this approach: the context for reading is Jamaica. Identify and reflect on violence against women in the Jamaican context.

My home church in a small village

Sister Williams is absent from prayer meeting again. It's nothing new. When Sister Williams gets beating from her husband, she hides from the public and from the church until the swellings go down. Everybody from the village and the church knows this routine. Children going to the post office peek through the thick hibiscus fence to see the excitement.

Men playing dominoes at the shop next to the house of Sister and Mr. Williams slam the dominoes louder as if to compete with the sound of the strap on Sister William's body. The strange thing is that there is no sound from Sister Williams. We children think "she is dead now!" From the domino table, one man says "Dem ya woman can tek licks sah!"²

Reading the Bible is a political act because it does not stop at reading. It demands actions for change.

Villagers go about doing their business as usual. My grandmother and the other women and men at church say nothing about it. But then comes the prayer meeting night! One hell of a bawling and praying! Women beg God to give Sister Williams strength to persevere and to wrap her in "his everlasting arms". They pray for the day when Sister Williams' faith would "bring him to the Lord". When the circuit minister comes, he visits Sister Williams and her husband as usual. He prays with them and encourages Mr. Williams to "give his life and his heart to the Lord". The minister is well received and entertained. The issue of violence is not touched. In my home church, Sister Williams is

2 Meaning, "These women can certainly take beatings"

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

promoted to a model of faithfulness for Christian women who marry un-Christian men, for in her 'trials' she imitates Christ. But when Sister Rose in the church, marries a Christian man, the same thing repeats itself! Both women bond together: praying, fasting, and hoping for a breakthrough.

Biblical texts consist of more than words and sentences.

My home town, little princess in trouble!

Up the road, a few yards from the church, is another site of violence. Princess, the teen-age girl, who runs away from home to live with her boyfriend and his family, tries to run again. She doesn't get far. Her boyfriend catches her and gives her a beating with a cutlass and takes her back to his home. The women nurse the wounds. Nothing is said about the violence. The village people shake their heads, "Dis likkle gal no hav' no ambition!"³ Her family members are angry with her because she leaves high school to be with this young man and according to them, "sweet nanny goat must run 'im belly"⁴. Moreover most people are afraid of the cutlass-wielder and the power of his cutlass.

How do women like Sister Williams and Little Princess, who live in conditions of violence, read this text to find meanings for their lives? How might women and men who are concerned about male violence against women in Caribbean societies read this text to find meanings?

Identify discourses that are operating in the biblical text.

Biblical texts consist of more than words and sentences.

The biblical text itself consists of discourses.⁵ A prominent discourse in this text is the discourse on submission. What is important to note is that submission is presented as the duty of wives and slaves, but not of husbands and slave masters (2.18, 3.1). As well, it is presented as the mark of a holy life with respect to slaves and women, but not with respect to men and slave masters (2.19-21, 3.1). We must ask questions such as, from where might this understanding come? To what extent might biblical writers be depending on

3 Meaning, "This little girl has no ambition"

4 A proverbial way of saying that appearances are deceptive - what looks nice and enticing will bring you much pain.

5 By discourses, we mean statements, or ways of speaking or writing that communicate understandings that are regarded as "truth". This 'truth' is hardly ever questioned because it is presented in a convincing way and it tends to fit certain dominant understandings. Because of these characteristics, what is key is to pay attention to the discourses in the text, what they say, what they leave out and what assumptions they make. This understanding of discourse represents a combination of Edward Said's view of "Othering" and Michel Foucault's view of how language functions

the prevailing patriarchal cultural values to provide them with understandings to explain the proper behaviour of Christian women?

One strategy is to pay attention to how the discourse makes the redemptive suffering and death of Christ the model that slaves and women must adopt (2.21-25). What is also important to note is that the discourse does not mention other understandings of Jesus' suffering and death. For example, it excludes the prominent understanding of Jesus as co-sufferer with us for the sake of strengthening our resolve to resist unjust suffering.⁶

Consider, for example, how an endorsement of unqualified submission makes it easier for Christian women who are victims of violence to 'spiritualize' violence, rather than consider how it fractures the image of God in them.

The way in which the discourse endorses "passive submission" and excludes any understanding of "God in-solidarity" with us working for changes, alerts us to ask more questions about the values and understandings that the discourse is endorsing. Not only do we ask about the endorsement, but we also ask about the kinds of understandings it excludes and the implications of all these. In other words, what are the implications of this endorsement or the exclusion?

Consider, for example, how an endorsement of unqualified submission makes it easier for Christian women who are victims of violence to 'spiritualize' violence, rather than consider how it fractures the image of God in them.

Consider also how difficult it is for Christian women to even think about resisting violence in their marriages when they believe that their faith requires that they submit unconditionally to their husbands. The case of Sisters Wynter and Rose clearly demonstrates the spiritualization of male violence against them. Very often it is an uncritical reading of the instructions in this text that influences Christian women to stay in violent and abusive relationships. Many lose their lives while holding on to this text's teaching on women's submission to men.

The discourse on submission presents a disturbing picture of the 'ideal' wife. Her finest attribute is her gentle and quiet spirit. Her mentor is "Sarah who obeyed Abraham and called him 'master'" (3.5-6). The discourse on submission here, presents Sarah only from the perspective of an obedient and subservient wife. But according to the Genesis texts, Sarah is much more complex and her

6 This is an important piece in womanist reading of scriptures as well as feminist and different strands of liberationist readings.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

struggles are much more complicated than the discourse admits. Sarah struggles in Genesis as a woman in a patriarchal culture that treats her as an object of disgrace because she couldn't have children. While the discourse on submission is trying to make her into a subservient and obedient wife, the Genesis story shows her as making decisions and negotiating her way out of the Abraham-Hagar-Sarah situation. We must ask how it serves the discourse on submission to construct Sarah as the ancestral mother of obedience and subservience. How is this understanding of Sarah expected to shape women's lives? Marriages? Does it matter that there is a close relationship between women's submission and subservience to men, and men's acts of violence against women? Can a subservient and obedient Sarah be a positive role model for transformative marriage relationships? Do these instructions fit our understandings of God's concern for the well-being of women and men? How might these instructions reflect the understandings of leaders in a patriarchal culture, thinking within the box of patriarchy, and as such failing to present to the community a satisfactory understanding of what God requires for our relationships?

Discerning the difference between the voice of God calling us to just relationships and the voice of discourse calling us to reproduce the unhealthy values of past communities

Caribbean women readers, who are aware of how Christian teachings of submission were used to keep the systems of Slavery and Indentureship in place, have ready-made lenses to read this text critically. As women of faith we do not cast out the text. Instead we sharpen our lens and try to distinguish the differences between the voice of God calling us to just relationships in families, churches and communities and the voice of the dominant discourse that is reproducing the unhealthy values of past communities.

Discerning the difference between the voice of God calling us to just relationships and the voice of discourse calling us to reproduce the unhealthy values of past communities.

When we pay attention to how the discourse leaves out the dominant Christian claim that male and female are created equally in the image of God, it causes us to become suspicious of what is going on in the text. In one breath the discourse on submission suppresses all understandings of "being made as equal partners and bearing the image of God" and promotes hierarchal relations that maintain subservience of women and slaves to husbands and slave masters!

Overall we reject the claims of this discourse on submission for several

reasons. It fails to consider men-women relations in just ways, and in so doing it paves the way for men's abusive use of power and exercise of violence against women in these relationships. More importantly, it functions to effectively degrade the image of God in both women and men. On the surface it might appear that men are benefiting, but in reality, the image of God is fractured in Mrs. Williams, her husband, Little Pat and her boyfriend.

With violence against women, the image of God is fractured in women, men and children

With violence against women, the image of God is fractured in women, men and children

What is the word of God to us from this text?

1 Pet 2.18-3.7 can be seen as a text that presents a dominant discourse on submission that distorts the biblical understanding of women and men being created in the image of God as partners in God's plan for a new creation. It affirms hierarchy and submission as correct values for family, church and society. This text has the effect of creating and normalizing men's violence against women and sanctioning the domination by the 'powerful'. Rather than presenting good news, this text presents troubling and disturbing news for women and men. How do we respond to this text?

Resist and work for change: (1) resist all interpretations of this text that tend to make women's submission appear normal; (2) hold every interpretation under the scrutiny of God who desires just relations between women and men; and (3) work for change.

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Actions for change

Following up on the Bible study:

- ⑤ Seek out places and groups in your location where God is already using other people to help in resisting violence against women. Invite a speaker from these places to your Bible study group.
- ⑤ Have a special session on "forgotten sisters" – women with disabilities. Invite someone from a local organisation that works with women with disabilities to talk to the group about the way violence impacts this special group of women.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

- ⑨ Contact organisations such as YWCA, Women’s Resource and Outreach Centre and other women’s organisations to learn about resources and ways of partnering for the sake of struggling to end violence against women.
- ⑨ Dedicate a Lenten season to focus on the issue of violence against women.

MY STRUGGLE TO SERVE

Mt 5.13-14, Gen 16.8-9

Hon. Joan M. Purcell

Joan Purcell is President of the Senate in the Parliament of Grenada (2008-) She has been involved in politics for the past twenty years and has served as an elected member of Parliament for the period 1990-1999. Joan Purcell is an Evangelical Christian, a faith-based advocate and educator in transformational politics and development.

“The small number of women who have reached the top in their professions and are in powerful positions, and the steadily increasing number who are moving up into important managerial and administrative positions have been able to do so through hard work and determination, often against tremendous odds.”¹

I have certainly lived this reality. I’ve walked every difficult step in my own journey into leadership.

“My experience as a woman executive in the NGO community (prior to public office) was one of hard-work, yes, determination, undoubtedly...

As I have reflected however on my leadership/management style, I realized that something was missing. It was not until several years later as I entered electoral politics that I identified the missing factor and for the first time confronted the issue of “power” – what it was, what it meant to me

“The small number of women who have reached the top in their professions and are in powerful positions, and the steadily increasing number who are moving up into important managerial and administrative positions have been able to do so through hard work and determination, often against tremendous odds”

1 ELLIS, Patricia (Ed.), *Women of the Caribbean*, (Zed Books Ltd., 1986), p.6.

and my ways of dealing with it. It was a terrifying experience!”²

As women we are afraid of power and unwittingly enter corridors of power, especially political power, believing that we would be permitted to make meaningful contributions through the exercise of creative power within our spheres of influence and in keeping with our vision of change. We realize all too late that there is little space for fresh ideas and new ideals.

It is my submission that despite the fact that more and more of us women are now being involved in the political process and have taken our places in parliament not much has changed. Our impact remains limited, our best efforts dogged with difficulties and misunderstandings and our loyalties firmly tied to the status quo.

Caribbean feminist, Dr. Peggy Antrobus underscores the above fact: “Many call for women’s leadership, but we all have experience of women in leadership positions who act no differently from their male colleagues. Indeed, many women in formal positions of leadership are constrained in their ability to act in the interests of the majority of people, and specifically in the interest of women. Most of the women in political leadership owe their position to their conformity with male models of leadership and their acceptance of the status quo. They can be trusted to play the game according to the rules, trusted not to rock the boat.”³

Added to that public challenge faced by female politicians, is the three-pronged personal challenge of family, fear and finance. These continue to haunt every aspiring female politician.

In an informal survey done in 1994, of attitudes to politics among fourteen highly eligible women – professionals and community leaders, nine feared the ugliness and corruption of present day politics, eight felt constrained by commitment to and lack of support from family (husband and children), and eleven indicated that they could not “afford” politics as they had no independent means. Having faced all three challenges, I can endorse the tensions of my “sisters”.

My call to public office began at a time of tragic political turmoil in my beloved country – the demise of the Grenada Revolution 1979-1983, with the execution of Prime Minister Maurice Bishop and several of his Cabinet colleagues and the death of dozens of Grenadians. This led to what is described by some as an “intervention” and others an “invasion’ between a United States and

2 *Ibid.*, p.6.

3 ANTROBUS, Peggy, *The Global Women’s Movement: Origins, Issues and Strategies* (Zed Books Ltd., 2004), p.200.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

East Caribbean fighting force and the army of the Revolutionary Military Council of Grenada.

I responded to the call trusting God to see me through!

It was a moment of shock for me when invited by the then Governor General to be a member of an Advisory Council - considered necessary for the swift return of the country to Constitutional rule. I was unable to speak, overcome with awe. "Me?" To be quite honest my deepest initial reaction was – "No way"!

Panic-stricken, I sought counsel from two Christian friends. In their wisdom, they assessed the situation carefully and counselled wisely pointing out that they saw it as a call of God on my life to serve at a time when Grenada needed people of faith and courage.

I responded to the call trusting God to see me through!

On November 15, 1983, I was sworn in as the lone female member of the Advisory Council of the State of Grenada, in the company of eight others. My time of service – one year - as a member of the National Advisory Council was one of preparation - the Lord was preparing me for a much longer and broader assignment!

Four and a half years later, I became involved for the first time in partisan, electoral politics. It was a dramatic and life-changing decision, being moved by Jesus' challenge to be "salt and light" (Matthew 5.13-14).

After much prayer and soul-searching, I responded to what I felt was a strong call of God to be 'salt and light' in my country's politics. In so doing, I lost the respect of many in the evangelical community who thought "Christians" should not be involved in politics, and an already fragile marriage came to an abrupt end after twenty one years.

The decision made, I threw myself into planning a campaign strategy with help from friends both home and abroad. The strength of my campaign was based on my long years of dedicated community service and honest leadership.

I informed the electorate that I would be bringing to public office over eleven years of experience and competence in development work, leadership and management skills, a track record of integrity and sincerity, compassion and trustworthiness in my work among the rural poor and deprived of our nation state, bolstered by good interpersonal skills.

I also took the time to underscore that I had no money and that my campaign would not be based on the traditional “rum and corn-beef politics”. That such politics was demeaning both to the public and to the politician and I was committed to a new way of doing politics.

I was successful in electoral politics in March 1990 and June 1995 and took my place as a Member of Parliament (MP) for the town of St. George and member of the Cabinet of the Government of Grenada (1990-1995) and MP for Carriacou and Petite Martinique in Opposition (1995-1999). For the next eight years I was actively involved in the political process of my country.

My “new way” of doing politics was not without considerable risks and pain. I found myself once again being the lone woman in Cabinet and in the top leadership of my Party. It was an agonizing task dealing with the manipulation and machination, jealous rivalry and lack of integrity of partisan, “patriarchal”, politics. I grew tired and disillusioned, battered and bruised.

As a member of Cabinet, I operated in several ministerial positions, including the envied position of Minister of Communication, Works and Public Utilities – a traditional male domain.

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I sought on several occasions to run away and like Hagar conviction came when asked, “Where have you come from and where are you going?” And the exhortation, “Return and submit to authority?” (Gen 16. 8-9). My work was unfinished!

I’d like to conclude this very brief and condensed version of my political journey with one of my poems which reflects my feelings and experience of this significant season of my life.

The CALL came to me loud and clear,
It was a call to serve.... to be a patriot, a servant leader
My first response, like Moses, was, NO WAY, find another
Looked for excuses, there was none for a start,
The time had come, I must do my part

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

The time had come, I must do my part
CONVICTION came slowly, but steadily and surely,
From deep within the Voice spoke clearly,
I was compelled to move forward...
To be a fighter and a faithful gatekeeper!

My initial reluctance gave way thereafter,
Was ready for service, full of fervour and verve
My time was here, I'd found the nerve
Yes COURAGE it took, moment by moment, day after day
From inside and outside the forces of politics held sway.

I was challenged and chastened, cheapened and chided,
My skin grew tougher, my sinews stronger
Gave as good as I got, alas words left deep scars,
The battle turned ugly, often left me in tears
DOUBT set in silently, swiftly and tellingly,
From morning to night I pondered reality
I questioned assumptions, I queried outcomes,
Are my values being compromised, is my faith undermined?

Was this servant leadership, or just political one-up-man-ship?
DISILLUSIONMENT followed doubt and grew stronger and stronger
From beginning to end, should have heeded the danger, I chided my naivety,
I mocked my idealism
Attempts to put new wine into old wineskins, what cataclysm!
Was I presumptuous or just plain simple-minded.....

The issues were clear. I'd just failed to be guided...
Now to DISENGAGEMENT, softer and gentler,
From un-peace to quiet rest, a movement much higher
I reflect on my contributions, examine my failures,

My response is, now, what Lord are Your marching orders?
Can't run from my destiny,
God's purpose never falters,
The struggle continues, I'm stronger and wiser!⁴

4 PURCELL, Joan M., *Memoirs of a Woman in Politics: Spiritual Struggle*, (USA: Authorhouse, 2009).

THE GREATEST LOVE SONG

A BIBLE STUDY ON WOMEN AND SEXUALITY

Dr. Anna Kasafi Perkins

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A whole book extolling the beauty of human sexual love! How could Scripture more forcefully proclaim that human sexuality is not cheap, ugly, and evil, but beautiful, wholesome, and praiseworthy!¹

Introduction

This Bible study focuses on the Song of Songs (SOS) or Canticles of Canticles, a unique book in the Bible. The title for the book is found in the first verse of the first chapter and is the Hebrew idiom for the superlative, “the greatest song”. It calls to mind the very popular song in the 1980s, “The greatest love of all.” Or “The Best Reggae Album in the World Ever”! It assumes the possibility of being able to describe the greatest song ever, the greatest love song ever.

A whole book extolling the beauty of human sexual love! How could Scripture more forcefully proclaim that human sexuality is not cheap, ugly, and evil, but beautiful, wholesome, and praiseworthy!

Indeed, the Song of Songs is about love - great passionate love between a man and a woman. Nowhere else in the scriptures do we find such an unabashed celebration of sexual intercourse and erotic love. In drawing together a collection of love poems or songs, the book openly extols the beauty of sex and sexuality.

In our popular songs, love and the desire for sexual fulfilment is often a focus - “I Want to Know What Good Love Feels Like” (Anita Baker), “Sexual Healing” (Marvin Gaye), “Is this Love?” (Bob Marley), “The Way You Love Me” (Timeka

1 DAVIDSON, Richard M., *Theology Of Sexuality In The Song Of Songs: Return To Eden* (Andrews University Seminary Studies, Spring 1989, Vol. 27, No. 1, 1-19, Andrews University Press), p. 5.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Marshall), “This is Love” (Tanya Stephens and Wyclef Jean), “Lover’s Choice” (Buju Banton) - just to name a few. Clearly, the human longing for love and the experience of love is constant so the flow of love songs will remain constant, even across centuries.

Background

In SOS, the various songs are also drawn into a unity by ascribing them to a single author - Solomon; this is perhaps because his name is mentioned in 3.7ff and 8.11ff. It may also be because Solomon was a reputed lover of women (he had 700 wives and 300 concubines) and was in turn deeply loved by women, like the Queen of Sheba, hence the other name for the book: Songs of Solomon. SOS has therefore been attributed to him, although he clearly could not have written it. There are no compelling arguments, therefore, to accept a Solomonic dating. Although many scholars agree on a postexilic date for the book, many of the poems would have been composed at a much earlier date.

Throughout the history of Christianity, the literal sense of SOS was not only downplayed, but rejected altogether; intermittent attempts have been made to remove it from the Bible or circumscribe the audience to read it. This indicates the influence on the development of Christianity of Greek philosophies like Platonic dualism, and Stoicism, which accepted a dichotomy between “things of the flesh” and “things of the spirit”. Perhaps the Church Father with the most influence on Christianity’s ambivalence and outright hostility towards sexuality was Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (354-430 CE). He believed that, as a result of the Fall in Genesis 3, human beings were ruled by carnal desires. Indeed, purity was associated with sexual renunciation, and all expressions of bodily pleasure - including sexual expression - were considered evil. So, more often than not, “all erotic imagery [in SOS] was allegorized as the yearning of the soul for union with God, or an expression of Christ’s love for his church”². A key example of this allegorization of SOS is found in Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185-254), who wrote a ten volume commentary on it. Origen warned that the SOS is safe reading only for mature persons no longer troubled by sexual desires: “I advise and counsel everyone who is not yet rid of the vexations of flesh and blood and has not ceased to feel the passion of his bodily nature, to refrain completely from reading this little book and the things that will be said about it.”³

2 *Ibid.*, p.2

3 *Ibid.*, p.2

Questions to ponder:

- ⑨ What does it mean for you as a woman that one whole book in the Bible is dedicated to erotic love?
- ⑨ What ideas present in our Christian faith make an appreciation for the Song of Songs difficult?

Interestingly, God is nowhere mentioned in the text (the closest reference is the love of the two being referred to as Yahweh's flame (8.6). Human love is a flame lit from the fire of Yahweh's love. Clearly, in the discussion on love, one plus one does not equal two; as is often touted at weddings, the Divine is the third party in every marriage/love relationship. Certainly, God is not absent from the equation as God created human beings and made them sexual beings. God's

love and concern for creation is therefore very present in the celebration of the joys of sex and sexual union.

I am black, but comely,
O ye daughters of Jerusalem,
as the tents of Kedar, as
the curtains of Solomon.
Look not upon me, because
I am black, because the
sun hath looked upon
me: my mother's children
were angry with me; they
made me the keeper of the
vineyards; but mine own
vineyard have I not kept...
(1.6).

Read Song of Songs

The first song

The first song, chapter 1, which runs for seventeen verses, is the opening dialogue between the woman and her partner; it is the key text for this reflection. This opening chapter appeals to me, an African-descended Caribbean woman, especially verses 5 and 6. In these verses, the woman sings to her lover:

I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon. Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me: my mother's children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept... (1.6).

The word translated 'black' in the King James Version is translated 'tanned', 'swarthy', 'dark', even 'brown' in other versions of the Bible. However, this term does not indicate African heritage, but rather the burning which comes from exposure to the sun, as verse 6 attests. Nonetheless, the Catholic Youth

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Bible⁴ includes a brief special feature on verse 5, entitled 'African American and Beautiful'. This beautifully designed and referenced study Bible is aimed at young people in the diverse American context. This particular feature asks who is speaking out and proclaiming herself to be black and beautiful. It then goes on to say that many of the people in the Old Testament world were black Africans or of Afro-Asiatic (Asians of black African heritage). These Afro-Asiatics are described as having various skin tones ranging from dark to ruddy. The further claim is that the woman in the verse describes herself as black while later describing her love as ruddy (5.10). The writers then conclude that African descended people come in all shades that need to be respected.

The Rastafarians in Jamaica believe that they are the Israelites spoken of in the Bible, and that the Bible is written by and for Black people.⁵ Rastas conclude from the above mentioned verses (and others like Lam 5.10; Joel 2.8; Hab 2.10; Job 30.30; Ps 119.83) that Solomon is black. Dvorin highlights the problem with the Rasta interpretation of the scriptures as they take individual verses out of context; in fact, they ignore the explanation in the succeeding verse. Also, in reading the KJV English translation of the Bible, they do not take account of the fact that it is the female who is actually speaking in these verses and not her lover. Yet, the gender of the speakers is clearly indicated in the Hebrew text.

Ignoring the gender of the speaker simply serves to confirm the Rastas' prior belief that Solomon is Black, as is the ancestor of the Emperors of Ethiopia, born of Solomon's seduction of the Queen of Sheba. The Bible, however, is silent about the relationship between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and like so many other scriptural silences this begs for further readings. The Kebra Nagast, the foremost creation of Ethiopian literature (1270 CE), tells the story from a different perspective: the Queen is seduced by Solomon and bears him a son. In the Kebra, Solomon is shown acknowledging the racial heritage of Sheba and another of his wives, a daughter of the pharaoh, when he tells her that she and the Queen of Ethiopia are "black" and thus the descendants of Ham, referring to Genesis 9.18-27, a story which has often been used to justify the enslavement of African peoples).

The Rastafarian approach, much like the African American, while not being historically or literally correct, serves a key ideological function of valuing a group that has been too much denigrated or belittled, often on the basis of the scriptures.

4 *The Catholic Youth Bible*, (Saint Mary's Press; Revised edition, 2005).

5 DVORIN, Dani, "Parallelisms and Differences: Rastafarianism and Judaism". (The Dread Library. April 20, 1998), <http://debate.uvm.edu/dreadlibrary/dvorin.html>.

The Rastafarian approach, much like the African American, while not being historically or literally correct, serves a key ideological function of valuing a group that has been too much denigrated or belittled, often on the basis of the scriptures.

Questions to ponder:

- ⑨ What is the value of the Rastafarian approach to interpreting Song of Songs (SOS)?
- ⑨ How is the woman portrayed in the SOS?
- ⑨ How might that description be applied to you?

Caribbean women and sexuality

The Songs of Solomon (SOS) celebrates the ideal of committed erotic love, which allows both partners to find fulfilment and joy. Yet it may prove challenging to read SOS in the Caribbean because of the imagery it contains. We women do not relate easily to being described as “the steeds of the pharaoh’s chariot” or of having “breasts like twin fawns, the young of a gazelle that browse among the lilies”.

We have our own “terms of endearment”—douxdoux/chunkalunks/boobalups (Trinidad and Tobago), spigoo/chululups (Jamaica), sweets/sugah (Guyana), sugarcane/apple pie (Barbados).

We have our own “terms of endearment”—douxdoux/chunkalunks/boobalups (Trinidad and Tobago), spigoo/chululups (Jamaica), sweets/sugah (Guyana), sugarcane/apple pie (Barbados).

Our ways of describing the feeling of love for another are also fairly idiosyncratic: Jamaican DJ Tony Rebel, for example, tells a woman that he “loves her like a fresh vegetable”. This probably speaks to the wholesomeness of the beloved (and also perhaps to her untouched, untainted state). Jamaica’s Miss Lou is famous for saying, “I checks for you like how fly check fah sugah”. Clearly the attraction between them is magnetic. Guyanese singer Tamika laments that her heart was sitting on a shelf, but her new lover made her bitter sweet. Bajan PJ invites a woman to be his sweet potato pie and the water in his coconut with jelly. The beloved/love is sweet, sweet, irresistible, and even thirst-quenching. There is often the sense that without love or the love of a particular person death is inevitable - “I can’t live if living is without you”.

Yet even among the sweetness, all is not sweet. There is much that we can learn from SOS on the divine intentions for human sexuality which is not currently fully reflected in the relations between men and women in

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

our region. Neilson Waithe, a Bajan pastoral counsellor, explores the sexuality of Caribbean men and women in *Caribbean Sexuality*. He finds that generally speaking, sex is viewed as being natural and so abstinence is thought to bring about mental illness and various other perversions. Sadly, the acceptance of the “naturalness” of sex is belied by an accepted compulsiveness that undercuts a vision of sex that truly allows for choice, including the choice for celibacy. This is compounded by the contradictory messages given to men and women about their involvement in sexual activity.

It is no wonder that many Caribbean women display ambivalent attitudes towards sex and sexuality and are unable to see their sexual organs as being good, clean and God-given.

Most Caribbean women are brought up in a very strict atmosphere, with lots of discipline and supervision; they are often given conflicting messages about the nature of sex and sexuality—“men are bad and will get you pregnant and leave you!” “Don’t have sex too early” (playing woman/force ripe), “women need to give men sex in order to get things,” “a baby can hold a man!” “A woman who loves sex is loose”. (Male socialization is the exact opposite of this!). The woman’s genitalia and bodily secretions are often viewed as unclean and destructive, as in the case of menstrual blood. At the same time, fertility and resulting pregnancy is prized, and every woman must “have out her lot”.

It is no wonder that many Caribbean women display ambivalent attitudes towards sex and sexuality and are unable to see their sexual organs as being good, clean and God-given.

Tied in with the contradictory messages conveyed is the dearth of information about sex provided to young people, which often leads to sexual experimentation in adolescence, early pregnancy and, in many instances, blighted futures. In some pregnancies, women experience a lack of emotional support from the male partner, and sometimes even outright denial of paternity. (The breakdown in the first relationship often signals the experiences many women have at the hands of Caribbean men; they are mistreated, exploited, while seemingly idolized and adored in their maternal role.) When early pregnancy occurs, the girl’s relationship with her often single-parent mother tends to deteriorate; beatings and expulsion are not uncommon. Rev. Waithe argues that “women develop an attitude of accommodation in terms of their responses to sexuality when they are not allowed to appreciate themselves as sexual persons who have a right to be sexual”.⁶ Later on in life, unlike the

6 WAITHE, Neilson, “*Caribbean Sexuality*”, *A Pastoral Counsellor Looks at Family Patterns and the Influences of Culture on Caribbean People*, (Moravian Church of America, 1993).

female lover in SOS and Sheba in the Kebra Negast, many Caribbean women come to reject their sexuality. (This will be explored further in the sections below entitled “Caribbean Mother” and “Reverent Sex”.)

Questions to ponder:

- ⑨ What are some reasons for the ambivalent messages that are sent to Caribbean girls as they are socialised?
- ⑨ In what ways do women exhibit rejection of their sexuality?
- ⑨ How can this rejection be addressed?

At the same time, this attitude of accommodation or rejection is being challenged by a wave of assertive, in-your-face female DJs like Lady Saw, Tanya Stephens and Spice, who are forthright in demanding sexual satisfaction, are explicit about sexual desire, giving and receiving sexual pleasure and making choices about sexual partners based on material possessions and/or sexual prowess. Demands are made for “stab[bing] out mi meat” (Lady Saw) and invitations are issued to “kill mi wid di cocky” (Spice). These DJs highlight the transactional nature of sex within the region generally and certainly among some lower income groups for whom the woman’s body is oftentimes the only tradable commodity. The centrality of the transactional process is captured in Macka Diamond’s “Money O” and “Tek xxxxx, gal” by Vybz Kartel, a popular male DJ. In “Boom Wuk”, Tanya Stephens sings of being willing to engage sexually with a man who has no money simply because he is a skilled lover (“have mi a let off even doah yuh bruk; love di long ding dong”).

Undoubtedly, such popular music while, on the one hand, exposing the reality of our attitudes towards sexuality and appearing to empower women around matters of sex and sexuality, may actually reinforce negative attitudes towards women, men and relationships.

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Questions to ponder:

- ⑨ How do the popular singers in your country portray female sexuality? What is unhelpful/helpful in that portrayal?

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

- ⑨ How should the church teach about the portrayals of sex and sexuality in Caribbean popular music?
- ⑨ How can the church use popular music's resources to teach about sex and sexuality?

Caribbean mother

The Caribbean mother is a key figure in the socialisation of daughters; oftentimes she is a contradictory figure. Many Caribbean mothers try to protect daughters from the negative experiences they can have with male partners, yet, while being independent and hardworking. Women are usually very financially and emotionally dependent on one male after another. Many Caribbean women engage in a transactional exchange that often involves sex and material and emotional resources. Guyanese Grace Nichols captures this graphically in her epic poem, "When they ask you about Black Women..." where Nichols emphasizes the willingness of Black/Caribbean women to do anything to ensure the survival of their offspring:

And yes we cut bush
To clear paths
For our children
And yes,
We throw sprat
To catch a whale
And yes,
If need be we'll trade
A piece-a-xxxxx
Than see the pickney dem
In de grip-a-hungry-belly.

Over time many women tend to develop a sense of accommodation in sexual relationships since they have not been able to develop an appreciation of themselves as sexual persons.

The importance of sacrifice for offspring is certainly the key among Caribbean women, but it perhaps loses its value when only women engage in this process, oftentimes owing to the lack of support from men. No doubt the sacrifice of the body and the exchange of sex serve to further alienate women from their body-selves; reduces the mutuality that is ideally to be embodied in sexual interactions. (Indeed, the value of a mother's self sacrifice seems questionable when the daughter becomes pregnant and does not fulfil her potential).

Over time many women tend to develop a sense of accommodation in sexual relationships since they have not been able to develop an appreciation of themselves as sexual persons.

No doubt the church's perception of sexuality is also at play in forming these attitudes. Some Caribbean women who reach middle age make claims of being "done wid di worl" and this is often manifested in a deeper religiosity which involves rejecting sex outright. Diane Austin-Broos⁷ sees this attitude expressed over and over again by Pentecostal women when they say, "Jesus is my only man". It seems that having been exploited and participants in unequal sexual encounters with men during their younger years, these women are left with a negative attitude towards sex. Of course, this is not the case for all Caribbean women but a significant number in all ethnic, racial, income and religious groups.

Questions to ponder:

- ⑨ How can the Caribbean mother be empowered into real love of bodyself in spite of the call to self sacrifice?
- ⑨ How is the transactional nature of sex demonstrated in your country?
- ⑨ What can be done to counteract such perceptions?

Returning to paradise

There needs to be a process of engaging Caribbean women (and men) around their sexuality that enables the relationships in which they participate to be more fulfilling, mutual and life giving. This is where the beauty of SOS is clear. SOS helps us realise that through love human beings develop and realise their full potential as human beings. Landy⁸ deepens our appreciation of SOS through a comparison with the Garden of Eden in Genesis. He argues that in SOS human beings try to recreate Paradise, unlike what happens after the Fall in Genesis and in some parts of the Caribbean today, the lovers in SOS celebrate nakedness; there is no shame in the body. Using metaphors and double entendres the lovers celebrate, reveal and conceal the beauty of sexual intercourse. "In the Song nakedness can only be spoken of through language: through the use of metaphors and metonymies that replaces the genitals with secondary sexual features (for example, eyes, breasts) and by remote and unlikely objects. The formal descriptions are in fact exercises in frustration".⁹ In SOS, their love clearly involves a mutual give and take even in the depth of longing.

Like the rest of creation, sex is shown to be good; not to be interpreted as part of fallen human nature. The lovers in the Song are presented as equals in

7 AUSTIN-BROOS, Diane J., *Religion and the Politics of Moral Orders*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

8 LANDY Francis, "The Song of Songs and the Garden of Eden" (JBL 98/4,1979), pp.513-528.

9 *Ibid.*, p.526

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

every way. The female-male relations celebrated are extremely positive and egalitarian: “My beloved is mine and I am his” (2.16).

Interestingly, SOS opens and closes with the woman speaking and she speaks most in the collection (81 verses to 49 for the man). She initiates most of the meetings and is just as active in the lovemaking as the man. There is no shame in that forthrightness. She is just as eloquent about the beauty of her lover as he is about hers. She is also gainfully employed as a shepherdess and vineyard keeper and is therefore not financially dependent on her lover in anyway. Yet her financial independence is not a barrier to love and her partner does not feel less than a man. Throughout the Song she is the man’s equal in every sense. She presents an ideal for Caribbean women.

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The lovers in the Song are presented as equals in every way. The female-male relations celebrated are extremely positive and egalitarian: “My beloved is mine and I am his” (2.16).

Interestingly, at no point is the procreative dimension of sex mentioned. Lovemaking for the sake of love is the key. Sexual union has an independent meaning apart from procreation and is not presented as inferior to that end. Sexuality and sensuality are presented as wholesome, beautiful, good—something to be enjoyed without shame or embarrassment. We may say that love and sexuality in the Caribbean has more about it of Eden than the vineyard in SOS. Clearly, it is time to change that.

No doubt, the Christian church will have a key role to teach about the nature and meaning of sex drawing on the richness of SOS. The church need not fear that opening the box will release into the world Pandora’s demons of sexual depravity and excess. Sadly, as we have demonstrated briefly, they are already out here, and luring them back into the box is not an option. The church possesses the resources of a tradition that recognises the value of the body in its faith in a God that became human through the sacrifice of a woman.

Questions to ponder:

- ⑨ Is there a sense in which some Caribbean people cheapen sex through their refusal to share it within a truly loving committed relationship? Can you provide examples?
- ⑨ How should the church go about teaching about the church’s vision of sex and sexuality which is so beautifully expressed in SOS?

- 🌀 What are the key ideas that the church needs to share concerning sex and sexuality?

Read the poem, “Good...Love” and ponder the questions below.

GOOD...LOVE

FOR ANITA

“I want to know what good love feels like... Good love...”

Intertwined bodies breaking sweat
Release[d]
Together yet apart
Joined but broken
Yearning to be one in the depths
Emptiness echoes deep long again again again.

In the beginning
Divine moulded, massaged, baked, blew
Made two
This is good
This is loved
Called for love
Made for love.
Good love
God-love[d].

In the then
Reptilian incursion, womanly guile
Manly cowardice
Fed feeds sorrow aplenty
Flesh of flesh no longer
Broken ribs
Legacy of shame shame shame.

In the fires of youth
Desire burns strong
Furtive caresses, fumbles
Inadequacy, lies, pain
Good lover

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Unsure
Good loving
Wrong
Take what you can get
Piddling exchange.

Middled years
Yearning for the day
Time tested words say
Good, love.
Good love
Good God!

Anna Kasafi Perkins, 2010

Questions to ponder:

- 🌀 How does the poem capture the divine intention for sex?
- 🌀 How does it present the differing sexual experiences at various stages of life?
- 🌀 What does good love look/feel like for you as a woman?
- 🌀 How do you get good love?

REVERENT SEX

Dr. Anna Kasafi Perkins

We Christians are still fairly squeamish about public discussions on sex - liking it; wanting it; who is having it; who shouldn't be having it; what kind to have and how to have it. Hence our overall discomfort with popular artistes in the Dancehall and Soca who are explicit about sexual desire, giving and receiving sexual pleasure and making choices about sexual partners based on material possessions and/or sexual prowess.

Few of us can recount the last time we heard the word 'sex' feature in a sermon or homily.

We can't seem to shake the feeling that there is something not too right about our sexuality. Happily, there is a woman pastor who has taken sex and sexuality seriously. She believes she has a mission to Christians in the

Jamaican/Caribbean community who struggle with issues around sex and sexuality. At the same time, she calls the church to take the lead in education on sex. She has the temerity to call herself “Professor Sex”.

Few of us can recount the last time we heard the word ‘sex’ feature in a sermon or homily.

Meet Rev. Carla Dunbar, an ordained pastor in the Church of God of Prophecy. She pastors Buff Bay and Orange Bay churches in Portland, Jamaica. An attractive, bright, vivacious, trendy woman in her mid-forties, she brings fashion, style and passion to her ministry. (She, of course, faces criticism since she “doesn’t look like a pastor, talk like one, or dress like one”). She brings to her ministry a wealth of personal experience, including motherhood at fourteen, abuse, marital infidelity, an outside child, nervous breakdowns, contemplation of suicide, and unexplained illnesses. She is a wife, mother, grandmother, pastor, sister, counsellor, and friend...a deeply sexual woman. Hers is a story of inspiration, courage, change, and most of all divine call.

Questions to ponder:

- 🌀 How are women pastors called to minister in our Caribbean church?
- 🌀 When was the last time you heard sex discussed in church?
- 🌀 How was it done?

Sex in the church

Rev. Dunbar is very explicit about sex - sexual positions, sexual desire, sexuality, sex and God. Sex jokes feature in her repertoire. Her interest in Christians’ attitudes to sex flowered in her final year at the Jamaica Theological Seminary (JTS) where she received her BA in Theology and a double minor in Guidance and Counselling and Pastoral Studies (2001).

She was saddened and intrigued by what she learned from talking to different groups of Christians: some were very sad and reserved about sex; some had never seen their spouse naked; others never talk with their partner about sex. She also realised that Christian marriages are failing, even more than “secular” marriages. Sex is one of the top reasons (along with financial issues and poor communication) that such marriages fail. “Sex isn’t the only glue... but it is a very important one.”

“Sexual frequency speaks to a healthy marriage”, she says. Yet fornication, including illicit sexual engagement like adultery, is rife in the church. The reason

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

for this is lack of knowledge (“My people perish for lack of knowledge”). She tells a truly frightening story of a seventy-year old woman, who, at the end one of Rev. Dunbar’s presentations, went to the microphone and thanked her profusely for her words.

This woman claimed that she never knew the word sex was in the Bible. She always thought sex was wrong and would fast and pray after having sex with her husband. Her aversion to sex even led to her husband using a machete to coerce her into having sex. This elderly woman publicly declared that she felt liberated now that she knew that God sanctioned sex. Rev. Dunbar, to say the least, was stunned by the existence of such levels of ignorance within the church. This confirmed her resolve to minister to Christians in this area.

Questions to ponder:

- 🌀 What does your church teach about sexual intercourse?
- 🌀 Is it wholesome? Inspiring?
- 🌀 How should Christian approaches to sex differ from that of non-Christians?

She has been on talk shows such as Ian Boyne’s Religious HardTalk (TVJ), To Have and to Hold and Radio Counsellor (Love 101), The Susan Show (CVM); she has been featured in the newspapers. She continues to give seminars and workshops; visits schools; and provides one-on-one counselling in every parish and almost every Christian denomination in Jamaica (and outside Jamaica as well). Pastors approach her to talk to their congregations; she counsels pastors and their spouses who are themselves experiencing hurt in their sexual lives. Her ministry is a success as there have been many marriages that have been restored, persons enlightened, lives touched.

Of course, the ministry is not without its challenges. Pastors and overseers within her church have complained about her sexually explicit conversations on public television (She ah pastor?); her contemporary style of ministry and trendy dressing (trousers, earrings, relaxed hair, nails) has been criticized within her evangelical community; her church members fail to provide support (“she is bringing the world into the church”); her ministry to men causes a few to come on to her and this has even threatened her marriage! She often gets tired of talking about sex. Yet she presses on to answer the call to minister to contemporary people in a contemporary time.

God and sex

Pastor Dunbar is clear that God sees sex as deeply important to the point

that God devoted one book of the Bible to sex (Songs of Solomon, of course)! She declares that we are created as sexual and sensual beings; our sexuality is not bad. Our sexual feelings are not bad and should not be shunned (prayed away). We should embrace them and praise God for them. At the same time, we must learn self control; sex is to be within the confines of marriage.

In marriage there are no holds barred, no position out of bounds, so long as the spouses agree. Sex is a form of communication between the couple. She therefore encourages spouses to make time for each other and for sex.

Wives are to learn how to conduct and attire themselves so that they can be attractive to their husbands and husbands are to do the same. She models this for her congregants, those she counsels and those who attend her seminars.

Unlike what many Christians believe, she sees sex as both spiritual and physical. When we have sex our entire self - body, soul and spirit - is involved. Sex is not simply for procreation. To say this is how the Bible describes it is to take the scriptures out of context. Therefore, when two Christians in a marriage have sex and cannot talk to each other about it because they feel what they are doing is wrong, God cries!

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Dysfunctional families are the result of the church's teaching on sex. Even the families of pastors are impacted; since men are generally the leaders in the church, and they tend to focus more on evangelizing and often neglect the needs of their wives. Too often the differences in the psychological makeup of men and women are ignored. Premarital counselling often does not involve discussion about healthy sexual relationships – they are taught that men are wired to want more sex; women are wired to want more affection and this is a prelude to sex. Some Christian husbands therefore go outside to find the satisfaction lacking in their marriage. Some Christian women believe that certain positions and kinds of sexual behaviour are for women in the lower classes who try to tempt their husbands away. Children are also affected - high school students are afraid to talk about sexual organs; girls are afraid to talk with boys for fear of being labelled; inappropriate sexual activity can and does result. Age appropriate information needs to be provided to stem this tide.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Rev. Dunbar feels that Christians have much to learn from the world about sex and sexuality. The kinds of hang-ups around sex in the church are not very present in the lives of those who do not attend church. Many secular men and women have a deep appreciation for their bodies and sex that should not be discounted. With her ministry to the church, perhaps that learning has begun.

Questions to ponder:

- ⑨ What can the church learn from the world about sex?
- ⑨ What processes can be engaged to help Christians learn about their bodies, sex and sexual intercourse?

MATRIARCHS

Dr. Rachele Evelyn Vernon

Rachele (Evie) Vernon is a Jamaican Nannyish theologian and a deaconess of the Anglican Church in Jamaica. She is currently the director, Selly Oak Centre for Mission Studies, Queens Foundation, Birmingham, UK. Evie is active in the feminist/womanist movement, in ecumenical concerns and worked as a trainer for faith-based community workers to address HIV/AIDS.

Often times we see a situation unfolding, but we only see one side of the story. This often leads us to cast value judgments, without assimilating the stories of the voiceless others for whom justice is denied. A justice reading of the biblical narrative enables us to hear other voices and get other perspectives on the story.

For this study you are invited to read the various segments using ‘various voices’, each person narrating one character’s thoughts and feelings. Before looking at the questions which follow the study, discuss the impact of ‘becoming the character’ on your understanding of the biblical text.

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Gen 21.8-20

The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham held a great feast on the day Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son mocking - the one Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham. So she said to Abraham, “Drive out this slave with her son, for the son of this slave will not be a co-heir with my son Isaac!”

Now this was a very difficult thing for Abraham because of his son. But God said to Abraham, “Do not be concerned about the boy and your slave. Whatever Sarah says to you, listen to her, because your offspring will be traced through Isaac. But I will also make a nation of the slave’s son because he is your offspring.”

Early in the morning Abraham got up, took bread and a waterskin, [put them] on Hagar’s shoulders, and sent her and the boy away. She

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

left and wandered in the Wilderness of Beer-sheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she left the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down nearby, about a bowshot away, for she said, "I can't [bear to] watch the boy die!" So as she sat nearby, she wept loudly.

God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What's wrong, Hagar? Don't be afraid, for God has heard the voice of the boy from the place where he is. Get up, help the boy up, and sustain him, for I will make him a great nation." Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the waterskin and gave the boy a drink. God was with the boy, and he grew; he settled in the wilderness and became an archer.

Hear the echoes of enslaved women's experiences

Slut! Steal away the woman's husband and laugh at her!

Is it to the desert that missis (mistress) sent her to? Suppose she (is) dead?

All (those) like she (her) must dead (die)! Slut!

Oh God. Poor thing all de (the) same. To die like that. Then maasa (master) knows about it?

But of course

And he didn't stop it? Even his child he allowed missis to send her away to dead (die) in the desert? Mmmm.

And what shall he do? Missis says she (is) not having them here. Cast out the bondswoman and her son. She (is) not having them here!

Hagar

The voices screamed through Hagar's head as she tried to garner the scrap of shadow beside the rock. She heard a rustling and wondered if it were the child she had left under the slight protection of the leafless branches of the thorn bush. She squeezed her eyes shut and willed herself not to turn her head. She could not watch him die. She could not.

The women did not, could not let themselves understand. Slut? What choice did she have? When Sarai had ordered her to go to Abram's bed, what should she have done? Should she have said "No thanks. It is against my religion." Try your best! She was a slave. She would have just reached this desert a little faster.

Still it might have been better. At least that would have been her alone, and not this innocent child.

It was not that she had wanted Abram - not at first. In the beginning she had clenched her teeth and prayed for it to be over.

It was evident that Abram also did not want her at first. Poor old man - so awkward, so touchingly polite. He had only ever been with Sarah as he once confided. God, how he loved that woman! His precious Sarai. He would do anything for her. And now she had required him to do this - to sleep with another woman. And so he had done it. But he did not have to enjoy it.

It was later, after months of trying to conceive and after many disappointments that she finally admitted certainty of her pregnancy. When she shared the good news, Abram gave her a smile of such radiance, that she opened her heart a tiny crack and allowed herself to feel "just a little". He was still an awkward old man, but now he was her awkward old man. Even if "just a little" or barely.

She had really bloomed during her pregnancy, and he had been so attentive, making sure that she rested, that she ate properly, that she had allowed herself to hope a little. Just a little or barely.

And when Ishmael was born. Ah! That was a time of magic. She had felt like a queen. It was the best time of her life. Better even than her childhood before the famine when her parents had sold her to the traders for debt. They had been like one of those dream families, Abram, Ishmael and herself. He would have done anything for her at that time. Thus she allowed herself to relax and to dream "just a little".

And when Sarai, feeling particularly burdened, allowed her feelings to show briefly, in just a glance or glare. She had let down her guard just a little. And that was all it had taken. Just a look.

It was not Sarai's cruelty in throwing her out here that hurt her so much. She understood that even though she could hardly agree with it. God knows, maybe she would have done the same thing. The woman felt threatened, even though, in the irony of ironies, the decision to have her conceive Abram's child had been Sarai's idea.

For Hagar, it was not Sarai as much as it was the pain of Abram's response or lack of it. She had begged him, thrown herself at his feet and pleaded weeping,

She had really bloomed during her pregnancy, and he had been so attentive, making sure that she rested, that she ate properly, that she had allowed herself to hope a little. Just a little or barely.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

even if not for her life, to spare their son. He would not even look at her. It was then that she knew that all she had ever been to him was an incubator. A “baby machine” to satisfy Sarai’s desires.

Abram

Abram looked at his sleeping wife, her face illuminated by the glow of the campfire outside the tent. Her face was lined now with the mark of the cruel years, but to him she would always be beautiful. In the silence of his heart he spoke the words that he knew he would never have the courage to voice.

“What have you made me do now, my Sarai? Murder two innocent people, one my own child? Ah, Sarai, why have I never found the strength to stand up to you, even when you want to destroy? Sarai. My Sarai.

When did we come to this? When did I move from being your friend and your lover to being only the man who could not impregnate you? Oh Sarai... You felt that I despised you because you could not get pregnant, and only saw you as the failed mother of my “never-born” sons. The truth is that it was you who only saw me as the farmer whose worthless seeds failed to take root in your soil.

Abram cried, “Oh God, what have we become?”

Sarai

“I turned to you in the night and you were gone to her again. You were never here for me anymore. It was not supposed to be like that. The baby was to have been ours, yours and mine. She was just a womb - an incubator. This should have brought us joy. Brought us closer together. A son born to us - our son.”

You say it never mattered, but I felt you slipping away from me every time we overheard the whispers about my barrenness, and why did you not have me put away so you could get a new and fertile bride.

That is why I did it, Abram. I was afraid to lose you, so I thought we would use this way of having a child. Our law says the slave woman’s child would have been mine. She was just a thing to bring the baby into the world. You were not supposed to have loved her. That is why I threw her away. She was just a thing.

You say it never mattered, but I felt you slipping away from me every time we overheard the whispers about my barrenness, and why did you not have me put away so you could get a new and fertile bride.

An instrument to have made me a mother.

Oh God! What have I done? I have killed a woman and her child!

Abram

“Sarai, I never loved her. I only loved you. I cared for her. After all she is the mother of my child. She is not an object or thing but I never loved her. I have only loved you.

But Sarai, it is not too late. If we take the lamps and go searching for them, perhaps they are still alive. Perhaps...”

God

(In the desert) “Hagar! Hagar! Get up!”

“Who is it? Who is it?”

“You know me, Hagar. I have always taken care of you and loved you. And you have loved me. A great wrong has been done here in this desert.

Come all of you. You have each turned the others and yourself into things instead of people. You have used each other as objects instead of working together as brother and sisters.

You, Hagar, Abram and Sarai are all my children, made in my image. Ah! Here they come now, to rescue you. (So they think). They still listen to me in times when they are able to open their hearts.

Come all of you. You have each turned the others and yourself into things instead of people. You have used each other as objects instead of working together as brother and sisters.

You Sarai... You saw yourself as a broken object of no worth because you were unable to bear a child. You reduced Abram and Hagar to breeding stock, and when Hagar was of no more use, you threw her out like garbage.

You Abram... To you Sarai always remained a real person, but Hagar and even your son were only useful to you as long as they kept Sarai happy. When she decided to throw them out to die, you hardened your heart to Hagar’s cries, and they became to you as mere stumbling blocks in the path of Sarai’s peace of mind. You abandoned your responsibility as a father, as a man and as Sarai’s friend, who should have given her good counsel, because you saw yourself as less than a man, the cause of her unhappiness.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

And you, Hagar... In the pain of your slavery, you finally allowed yourself to believe that you were merely their object to be used as they would. At first you resisted in your mind although you could not resist with your body, but at last you came to believe their propaganda.

Hear me all of you. You have failed but you are not failures. You have flaws, but you are not flawed. You are all my children. And I love you. All of you.

Hear me all of you. You have failed but you are not failures. You have flaws, but you are not flawed. You are all my children. And I love you. All of you.

Questions to ponder:

- ⑨ Listen to the voices of slave women (not in the Bible reading). What women in our contexts and communities are like them? How are they like them? How are we like the slave women?
- ⑨ Listen to the voice of Hagar. What women our contexts and communities are like her? How are they like her? How are we like Hagar?
- ⑨ Listen to the voice of Sarah. What women in our contexts and communities are like her? How are they like her? How are we like Sarah?
- ⑨ Listen to the voice of Abraham. What men our contexts and communities are like him? How are they like him? How are we like Abraham?
- ⑨ Consider the words of Langston Hughes, in the poem below. In what way is Sarai's action a response to a dream deferred? Is this typical of persons who 'wait' upon God?

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore - and then run? Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over - like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?¹

Questions to ponder:

- ⑨ What does it mean that God appeared to the slave woman in her time of need?

1 Dream deferred by Langston Hughes

- ⑨ What message did God have for Hagar, Sarah and Abraham in their situation?
- ⑨ What message does God have for us in times of oppression and conflict?

REV. DR. ADLYN SESSING-WHITE

Rev. Dr. Marjorie Lewis

“You have heard that it has been said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go a mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you...” (Mt 5.38-42)

Dr. Adlyn Sessing-White was the first woman commissioned as a Deaconess in the Presbyterian Church in Jamaica (1959) and the first woman ordained to Ministry of Word and Sacraments in the United Church of Jamaica and Grand Cayman (UCJ) in 1973 and the first woman to be moderator of the UCJ in 1992. She has had an outstanding ministry in pastoral work, education, educational administration and quality assurance, covering academic preparation and appointments in Jamaica and the U.S.A.

In reflecting on over fifty years of ministry, Adlyn reveals that her spirituality is focused on reading and reflecting on Jesus as “Son of Man.” For her, the essence of Jesus’ ministry is linked to Jesus’ humanity. She has been learning more and more about Jesus as a human being and seeking a deeper understanding of why Jesus came and why he was unacceptable to the people of his day.

“It was because of love; the sacrificial demands of love...” Adlyn concludes. For her, Jesus came to usher in a new order of love. A new order of love that

“You have heard that it has been said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go a mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you...”
(Mt 5.38-42)

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Jesus spoke about in terms such as, you have heard that it has been said, an eye for an eye, but I say to you... Other significant passages are those exhorting his followers to turn the other cheek, to give a coat also, where someone wants your cloak. For Adlyn, the more she ponders and understands Jesus' ministry, the deeper her understanding of this type of love. All things considered, the sacrifice Jesus made is love. He bore it all sacrificially for us.

This love is very costly.

This love is very costly.

Adlyn feels that we need to preach this love more often, that nothing else really matters. She concludes, "I don't own anything. I am owned."

Who is this woman, Rev. Dr. Adlyn Sessing-White whose theology revolves around Jesus' humanity and his expression of sacrificial love?

Who is this woman, Rev. Dr. Adlyn Sessing-White whose theology revolves around Jesus' humanity and his expression of sacrificial love?

Adlyn hails from Medina in Manchester, Jamaica, one of twelve siblings (five boys and seven girls) born to Wilfred and Loney Sessing. She went to primary school at age seven culminating her early education by passing the Third Jamaica Local Examination. Adlyn then went to Kingston and attended a private college, Bodmin College at 12 Blake Road in Kingston (near where Kingston College is currently located). This college no longer exists. She then taught for approximately four years at the Morris Knibb Preparatory School

before going to Union Theological Seminary (UTS) at Canewood in Kingston, Jamaica, to begin her formal theological education.

On completing her course of studies at UTS, in 1959, Adlyn became the first woman to be commissioned to the Order of Deaconesses by the Presbyterian Church in Jamaica. She then worked in Montego Bay at the St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, exercising all pastoral duties except the administration of the sacraments. Commissioned deaconesses, in those days, were not allowed to administer the sacraments – that role was reserved for ministers. She then went on to serve at the Lucea Presbyterian Church, before going to the United States to do further studies.

Adlyn was convinced that ministry required careful academic preparation beyond the bare minimum that many leaders in the church at the time thought adequate for ministerial formation. In 1962 she went to St. John's University in New York and did a Bachelors degree in Education, while simultaneously

serving as Christian Education director for a Presbyterian Church in Jamaica, Long Island, United States.

Her first intention had been to do a Masters degree in Christian Education at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. The Faculty at Union, on examination of the transcript from her theological education in Jamaica, accepted her for the Masters programme in Christian Education.

Acceptance into the programme, however, required the endorsement of the Presbyterian Church in Jamaica and this endorsement was not forthcoming. For the leadership of the Presbyterian Church at the time, there was no need for further training, and Adlyn's business was to return to Jamaica as the Presbyterian Church needed her. With the door to a Masters in Christian Education effectively closed to her, Adlyn enrolled for the programme in Education at St. John's University.

Adlyn maintained her resolve to seek the best possible academic preparation for effective ministry, and opted to pursue studies in education, while serving as Director of Christian Education for a Presbyterian Church in Long Island, United States.

While serving at the Presbyterian Church in Long Island, the Minister there, Rev. Lincoln, wrote to the Presbyterian Church in Jamaica asking them to endorse Adlyn's application to become a member of the church in Long Island. In a letter, the church in Jamaica declined to endorse Adlyn's application for membership in the Long Island Church.

Adlyn's Bachelors degree in Education was then followed by a Masters degree in Library Science, and she worked in a library to fund her way through graduate school. While she was studying in the United States, the Presbyterian Church and the Congregational Church joined to become the United Church in Jamaica and Grand Cayman, in 1965.

In 1969 Adlyn returned to Jamaica and joined the Andrews United Church in Manchester, while working at the Church Teachers' College in the same parish. She eventually was appointed vice principal of the College. At the urging of her then minister, Rev. Sam Smellie, Adlyn agreed to take over the directorship of the work with the Women's Fellowship. This she did on a voluntary basis and in the course of the appointment, she visited every congregation of the United Church conducting training programmes and encouraging the women in their work.

Modelling her commitment to lifelong learning, Adlyn, while working at

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

the Church Teachers' College, pursued a Masters degree in Educational Administration followed by a PhD in Educational Administration at the University of the West Indies.

On June 21, 1973 Adlyn was ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. She recalls that the Jamaica Gleaner newspaper at the time reported that she was the first woman of any mainline church to be ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments.

In 1995 Adlyn retired from the Church Teachers' College and also gave up being Director of the United Church's Women's Fellowship.

Another 'first' which Adlyn achieved, was to become the first woman to be the Moderator of the United Church in Jamaica and Grand Cayman in 1992.

In this capacity she was an integral part of the negotiations during the 'courtship' between the Disciples of Christ in Jamaica and the United Church in Jamaica and Grand Cayman. This courtship resulted in 'marriage' and with the joining of the Disciples of Christ in Jamaica, the new United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands came into being.

On Union Sunday, December 1992, Adlyn handed over the moderator's reigns to Rev. Dr. Derik Davidson of the former Disciples of Christ in Jamaica. Dr. Davidson served for one year as moderator after which Adlyn assumed the post, completing her term and passing the mantle on to Rev. Dr. Richmond Nelson, also of the former Disciples of Christ in Jamaica.

The United Church in the 1989 established the Institute for Theological and Leadership Development (ITLD) to provide theological education and training for lay persons in the church. In 1993 Adlyn was appointed president of ITLD and the work grew and flourished under her leadership. Adlyn demitted office in 2005 as ITLD was being developed into the International University of the Caribbean (IUC).

Since then she has established her own consultancy working as an educational

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Rev. Dr. Adlyn Sessing-White

consultant specializing in Quality Assurance and Accreditation applications by tertiary institutions seeking registration with the University Council of Jamaica. The UCJ also calls on Adlyn on a regular basis to use her expertise on special projects.

Adlyn enjoys her hobbies of gardening and restoring antique furniture. She currently lives in Manchester, Jamaica, with her husband.

RECONFIGURING THE CARIBBEAN FAMILY

Rev. Olive Sampath Mahabir

Olive Sampath Mahabir is originally from Trinidad & Tobago where she served as a deaconess in the Presbyterian Church in Trinidad & Tobago. She is currently living in the United States. and was ordained as a minister of Word and Sacrament by the Presbyterian Church (USA). She is an associate for student affairs, alum and church relations at Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia and previously served as minister at Cadmus Presbyterian Church in Michigan.

Read Matthew Chapter 12

Prayer: God our Mother and our Father, we thank you for this time to reflect and study your Word. We pray that you will open our minds and hearts to hear you speak to us and that we will be both inspired and challenged by your Word. We ask that your Holy Spirit will enlighten us as we seek to find ways in which your Word will transform and liberate us, grant us your divine guidance and direction. In the name of Christ our Saviour we pray. Amen.

Introduction

If we were to read Matthew's Gospel from a woman's perspective, we would see that the Gospel writer reveals aspects of Matthew's community as a gender inclusive Gospel, in which women are included. When read in the backdrop of the Roman Empire, Matthew's community appears to be living on the margins of society and is opposed to the Roman Empire. Consequently, living on the margins produced new ways of thinking and living, since the people needed to find ways to survive while living under the oppressive rule of their government. One entity in Matthew's community

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which undergoes such a transformation is the family and the role of father or patriarch. For instance, there are several texts which seem to displace the earthly paternal figure, and these texts are Mt 4.21-22, 8.21-22, 12.46-50, and 23.9. Hence, a new pattern of family is proposed by Jesus, one which includes women, and the passage which best supports this move reads as follows:

While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, "Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Mt 12.46-50)

Explanation of text

A close look at Mt 12.46-50 reveals several layers. Here Jesus speaks to the crowds and his mother and brothers are standing outside wanting to speak to him (v. 46), but he seems to pay no attention to them. In Mt 12.46-50 there could have been several reasons why Jesus' mother and brothers were in the same location as Jesus. They may have wanted to warn him of his opponents, or even protect him from the intense crowds he was encountering.¹ Whatever the reason for the presence of Jesus' mother and brothers did not interest Matthew, since the Gospel writer makes no attempt to provide an explanation. The focus of Mt 12.46-50 therefore, is not the location where Jesus' mother and brothers stood, but rather Jesus' words which lead to a new definition of family. Verses 49-50 read "and pointing to his disciples, he said, here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." By excluding the role of the father, and including mother, brother and sister, patriarchy² or male domination and its power dynamics are overturned. Here we see that Jesus sets up an alternative family among Matthew's community,³ and this new family includes women as mothers and sisters, as opposed to the traditional family grounded and centred on patriarchy (fathers).

- 1 HARE, Douglas R.A., "Matthew," in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), p.145.
- 2 My own definition of patriarchy is derived from reading many different feminist scholars, and spending much time in dialogue and reflection on this particular subject. Patriarchy is a structure in which the father is ultimately and unquestionably the leader of a society, clan or nation, consequently relegating mothers or mother figures to a lower place in the society. In a patriarchal setting, mothers are worth less than fathers and have very little or no rights and privileges.
- 3 CARTER, Warren, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (NY: Orbis Books, 2005), p.279.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

In Mt 12.46-50, Jesus seems to replace the biological relations which constitute the family with non-biological relations, those who do the will of the father. The “new” family Jesus creates, which includes mothers, brothers and sisters, affirms the place of women in the family.⁴ It is important to note that this new household is not based on birth, ethnicity or gender.⁵ During first century Rome (around the time the Gospel was written) in Jewish and Christian families the father (paterfamilias) was the main figure of the home, and the father [patriarch] made the decisions, owned property and dictated the family’s life.⁶ This guaranteed that the centrality of patriarchy or the father in the Mediterranean gender system stayed intact, with distinct male and female roles. These traditions and cultural codes excluded women from their basic rights at that time and women had no identity outside their relationship with a man/male.

Matthew places women and mothers in a more visible and significant role in the family by including them in the genealogy, certainly this was a very radical move for a Gospel writer at that time. There is no doubt that women were already responsible for many tasks involving home and community life, however, they were still seen as insignificant and still kept in the margins.

It can be asserted that Matthew is intentional about the inclusion of women since his move from the patriarchal (male) family structure, to a matriarchal (female) family structure is apparent in his genealogy of Jesus (Mt 1.16). In Jesus’ genealogy, Joseph is not directly called Jesus’ father, rather it reads “Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called the Messiah.” In positioning Mary as the mother of Jesus and as the primary parent, Matthew’s Gospel departs from the way in which families were configured in first century Judaism, since only men/males were included in the family tree or genealogy.

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4 TOLBERT, Mary Ann, “Mark,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, (Eds.) Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1992), p.257.

5 Carter, *Op.cit.* p.279.

6 JEFFERS, James S., “Jewish and Christian Families in First Century Rome,” in *Judaism and Christianity in First Century Rome* by Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2003), pp.138-145.

Reconfiguring the Caribbean family

Matthew's failure to name Joseph as Jesus' earthly father and his inclusion of four women in the genealogy of Jesus (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Mary) further shows the ascending place of women and the descent of fathers in family history in the Gospel. It is fascinating that the Gospel writer included these particular women since each character was associated with notoriety or as some of us say 'a bad name.' Tamar was a victim of rape, Rahab was a prostitute, Ruth was a foreigner, a non-Israelite, and Mary was basically an unwed mother. These four women of questionable character stand in the midst of a genealogy in which the males were at the head of the family. Thus, they set the stage for a new family legacy, a matriarchal one which represents the inclusion of the marginal and the excluded. Also, the women included in the genealogy demonstrate active faith, and are contrasted with the powerful and privileged elite males who according to biblical history failed to live out their responsibilities.⁷

Reflection:

If you were to trace your genealogy and construct your family tree including only the names of the women in your family what will that look like? Would you not be proud to stand on the shoulders of the women in your family?

If Mt 12.46-50 is read in this way, through a Caribbean woman's lens, it has the potential to dismantle patriarchy within the Caribbean. In other words, it allows us to rethink the way we view a woman's place in the family, and it opens the door to place women at the centre and even as the head of the family.

Our history

If Mt 12.46-50 is read in this way, through a Caribbean woman's lens, it has the potential to dismantle patriarchy within the Caribbean. In other words, it allows us to rethink the way we view a woman's place in the family, and it opens the door to place women at the centre and even as the head of the family.

This is crucial for Caribbean women, since Caribbean women are in a unique situation, both geographically and culturally. Much of the population of the Caribbean can trace their history to African slavery, Chinese and Indian Indentured labour, as well as belonging to several European colonizers. As slaves and labourers, we had to endure the loss of self-determination, freedom, and the right to govern and order our own lives.⁸ Caribbean peoples were treated less than human, and women in particular suffered many pains, we were suppressed mentally, intellectually and emotionally.

7 Carter, *Op cit.* p.60.

8 THOMAS, Oral, A.W. "A Resistant Hermeneutic Within the Caribbean," in *Black Theology* 6 no. 3 S (2008), p.333. <http://web.ebsco.com.ezprozy.drew.edu> .

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

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In this historical situation and even present day, the Bible is an integral part of everyday living, and in the Bible women must find strength and hope for their lives. In light of our unique history and culture, as Caribbean women, we must question those parts of the Bible that seem to place us in the margins, we should not be afraid to ask: "What does this mean to and for me as a woman?" Any interpretation of the Scripture which oppresses women or calls them to be silent must be seriously examined. The Scripture should be liberating and affirming, and when we read and interpret the Scripture women must underscore themes of justice and equality for themselves first, and then for all humanity and creation.

Reflection:

Are there ways in which we still retain some of our authentic African and Indian culture in our families, worship or church life?

Our families

Caribbean women also experienced the creation of new types of families, particularly from people who were brought from Africa, Asia and Europe (and not so much in Amerindian communities). In the present day many Caribbean women are caring for families on their own without the responsibility and support of their male partners. Trinidadian writer, Merle Hodge says that much of the research done to discredit one-parent families which are headed by females, has been conducted in the United States or somewhere similar. She goes on to say that while one-parent households have been unsuccessful in these polls, one parent households have great success in the Caribbean.⁹

Official statistics indicate that 22-44% of women in CARICOM (Caribbean Community) countries are sole heads of households,¹⁰ and are raising successful and well rounded children and Caribbean citizens. Children from single parent, female headed households are mentally, emotionally and physically stable and have great success in education and in life. At this point, I am inclined

9 HODGE, Merle, "We Kind of Family," in *Gendered Realities: Essays in Caribbean Feminist Thought* ed. Patricia Mohammed (Trinidad and Tobago: University of the West Indies Press, 2002), p.480.

10 <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed>

to say that I am not suggesting in any way the eradication of marriage and two-parent families. Rather, I am proposing that families established upon matriarchy (the mother as parental authority and provider) with the absence of a male figure, have been successful as well. In a matriarchal household, the matriarch performs in the role of provider, disciplinarian, protector and decision maker.

Matrifocality¹¹ in the Caribbean context implies the centrality of women in the family and their kinship groups. While this does not mean the total elimination of the male presence, it transfers power and focus from the male to the female in the society's order.

Today in our churches and society there are many women who for some reason or another single-handedly care for their children and other family members (some reasons could be divorce, death of their husband, broken marriage because of abuse, and children out of wedlock). As churches and faith groups how can we affirm and encourage these women in their role as providers and decision makers? In the Caribbean the norm requires a family to consist of mother, father and children. And we believe that the answer to single mothers and women is to find them a husband. The reality however, is that male-female relationships are much more complex in contemporary society. And if women decide to care for their homes and families without the presence of a male partner, their decision must be respected. True liberation for women means that women are not bound to oppressive systems based on history, culture or social norms.

So we may ask the question “how does one deal with Matthew’s Gospel, gender and politics while also negotiating the relationship which continues to exist between the Bible and everyday life?” Matthew radically reformulates the relationship between his community and the Greco-Roman imperial structures of his day. In reading the Gospel of Matthew, Caribbean women must read this text in ways that empower them. Matthew’s envisioning of women should motivate us to envision ourselves as moving from the sideline to the centre in our society and culture.

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11 Matrifocality can be defined as societies which focus on the centrality of mothers in families and by extension women. However, it does not necessarily mean that such families are dominated by mothers and women. Matriarchy on the other hand, is defined as power residing with the women and especially with the mothers of a community.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

A Caribbean woman's reading of Matthew's text particularly Mt 12:46-50 creates a paradigm shift, in that it expands roles and creates a more inclusive view of family and women. Such a reading of the Bible text no longer alienates persons and particularly women, but portrays a God and a Gospel which dismantles classism, sexism and powerlessness.

Conclusion

Ultimately, I have not set out to overthrow the institution of marriage (since I am in a loving and committed marriage) or male-female relationships, or two parent homes. Rather, I have set out to attempt a reading of Matthew which decentres patriarchy in the Caribbean context where women are often heads of households, the sole providers and leaders in their communities. Reading from a contextual perspective can be liberative for Caribbean women and female heads of households. The text can impact our lives as women if we allow the text to speak to us in different ways, and if we are willing to "read" the text in new ways.

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Questions to ponder:

- ⑨ How does this interpretation of Matthew's Gospel and this Bible study speak to you personally as a woman, a mother and follower of Jesus Christ?
- ⑨ What were the instances where Jesus' mother (Mary) appears in the Gospel narratives? What does this say about their relationship?
- ⑨ What can the church do to support unwed mothers, widowed mothers, teen mothers, and female heads of households?

Suggestions for follow up of the Bible Study:

- ⑨ Celebrate the women in your lives and churches by having a mothers/ woman's appreciation service.
- ⑨ Do some research and find a photograph of one of your female ancestors (your grandmother, great-grandmother, etc.) frame it and give it to your daughter or granddaughter as a gift.

- 🌀 Grant a scholarship at your primary school or high school in the name of your mother, grandmother or a woman who has impacted your life.

MARGARET: A WOMAN OF FAITH AND FORTITUDE

Rev. Olive Sampath Mahabir

I grew up in a small village in south Trinidad. It was a quiet place, and families in my neighbourhood had very modest lives, many of whom made their living in the agricultural sector. When I was about eight years old my neighbourhood was transformed into a very busy place when a lumber yard opposite my house began to expand rapidly. The owner was a gentleman who was very forth coming, stern and who consistently operated in business mode. I did not know him personally, nor did I have the opportunity to know him, he passed away when I was 16 years old. This was the same year I began the journey to understand God's call in my own life. I became very involved in the churches in the pastoral region, there were seven in all. During this time I became acquainted with many women in the region who dedicated their time and energy to building the church, they were all from different backgrounds and ages. One woman stood out in my mind, she was introverted, and also stern in the way she spoke, her name was Margaret.

I knew of Margaret since I was very young, but all I knew was that she was the wife of the businessman who drove past my house everyday (the owner of the lumber yard). For the next two years my encounters with Margaret were brief, except for her occasional critique of my sermon. It was not until I was assigned to Margaret's church as part of my ministerial training in 1998 that I was given the privilege to know Margaret at a personal level. I then saw her regularly when I became a full time church worker in her pastoral region from 2000-2004.

Margaret was an intriguing woman who did not let many people into her life; I quickly learnt that she was full of faith, clear sightedness and a woman of great fortitude.

Like many women in her generation, she married at a young age and became a mother

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Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

soon after that. Margaret faced many challenges in her marriage, but when I asked her to recall some of those challenges she simply stated ‘that is the past.’

When I asked her how she got through the difficult times in her life she simply said “the one constant in my life has been my faith in God, and God has never let me down.”

Margaret lived much of her life in the shadow of a powerful man, but she was never consumed by his presence. Margaret had her own life, her own identity and as her family and success grew, so did her faith in God and her commitment to God’s church. She nurtured her six sons and one daughter, educating them and preparing them for the world of business, always encouraging them to put God first. While she cared for her children and supported her husband’s vision for their family’s business, Margaret found her own niche. She served the church with great loyalty, and on many different levels. She was a member

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of the church’s choir for ten years; she was treasurer of the church and an elder for thirteen years. The most incredible aspect of her service was that she was a member of the women’s group of her congregation since its inception about sixty years ago, and she continues to be a member to the present day. Margaret is also a poet in her own right, producing about three hundred poems in the last thirty six years. Many of these poems were written and read in honour of people in ministry, church members and family members; she has shared her poems at weddings, funerals, anniversary celebrations, birthdays and farewell services.

At 78, Margaret has lived a full life grounded in faith, she taught her children the values of generosity and loyalty as well. These two values are entrenched deeply within her children; who are presently the leaders of the family’s business and they continue in her spirit of benevolence. To date, Margaret and her family have been generous financial contributors to churches all over Trinidad. This makes Margaret a model for church leadership, and Christian discipleship, but she is also the matriarch of her family and her family’s business.

Margaret’s life is not without pain, she had to endure the pain of losing her husband and recently her mother. She has also endured serious illnesses of the women closest to her including her daughter and sisters. She has endured the tragedies and pain of her church family, all of which impacted

Margaret: A woman of faith and fortitude

her tremendously. Margaret represents a calibre of women in the Caribbean who are strong, ambitious and independent, women who find balance in their families, lives and their service to God. She still continues her service to the church, however not at the forefront of leadership. In her unassuming and benevolent spirit Margaret and her children continue to assist with the church's needs even in the remotest parts of the country.

Margaret has assisted me in my own faith formation, and encountering her has made an indelible impression on my life and mind. She has challenged me in my ministry and in my own life as a woman. She is like so many women in our church and society, family oriented and centred on God.

She has lived and walked the gospel particularly the words from Luke 12.48 "from everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked".

Let us continue to celebrate all the Caribbean matriarchs, the matriarchs in our churches and the matriarchs in our lives. I celebrate the ones in my life, and I am filled with gratitude that I can call a woman like Margaret my friend and my mother-in-law.

HOMELAND MOUNTAINS

From the lofty heights of Pakaraima,
Kanuku, Acarai, and Kamoia
Descended from clouds, sculpted by winds,
Nourished by rains
We hold secrets of the stars
Centuries of history we bear
Among us dwell the great spirits of old
Our tears of mirth spring forth as mighty rivers
Cascade into Orinduik, Kaieteur
Majestic falls of splendour to behold
Then surge on proudly bearing ores of gold.

Within our full breasts of forests
Come, find repose
See the flaming orchids and plumaged friends
of beauty rare
Here the symphony of baboons punctuate the air
Build homes from our stalwart greenheart
Who like sentinels stand as rivals to our peaks.
Flesh of the inner earth
Sensuous mysteries to unfold
We beckon all.



Mrs. Maureen Weekes-Gumbe

Maureen Weekes-Gumbe was born and raised in Guyana. She now lives in Geneva, Switzerland and is a member of the UNHCR's Artist Circle and the United Nations Society of Writers, Geneva. Her poetry has appeared in United Nations publications.

RUTH AND NAOMI - MAKING THEIR STORY OF SOLIDARITY OUR STORY

Dr. Aruna Gnanadason

Aruna Gnanadason, a member of the Church of South India is a former staff of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva, Switzerland where she held several positions, the last of which was in the general secretariat of the organisation. She was responsible for the work on women of the WCC through the second half of the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women. She presently lives in Chennai and is a freelance writer, speaker and editor.

Prayer: We thank you dear God for so skilfully creating us in all our diversity and painting us in colours so splendid! We thank you for the potential to become a transforming community in your grace and pray for your continuing presence with us as we discover anew the hidden depths of meaning in your word to strengthen our bonds of solidarity. In Jesus name we pray. Amen

Introduction to the Bible Study on the Book of Ruth

The Book of Ruth communicates a simple story centred mainly on the lives of two women - Ruth and Naomi - intermeshed with the account of the relationship between nations, between family members and between God and Israel. The story goes that Elimelech and Naomi, along with their two sons Mahlon and Chilion, leave their own city of Bethlehem in Judah and migrate to the foreign land of Moab for the most obvious reason – they were seeking greener pastures because of the famine in Judah. Their sons got married to Ruth and Orpah, two Moabite women. Unfortunately, all

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Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

three men in the family die, leaving Naomi with her two daughters-in-law in a foreign land. Naomi decides to return to Judah as the period of famine has passed and there is evidence of plenty in Judah. As they prepare for their journey, Naomi tells her daughters-in-law to stay back and return to their own ancestral homes. Both refuse, at the outset, but then Orpah does leave her mother-in-law and returns to her family. Ruth however, continues with Naomi to Bethlehem.

The Bible narrative has potential to build community. It provides us the frame work to re-look at the way we have been taught to relate to each other as women, through surprising shifts in the story.

An important detail in this story is that the two daughters-in-law are Moabites, in other words they are considered to be traditional enemies and corrupters of Israel. So Ruth's insistence to stay with Naomi is even more difficult to fathom. She risks staying with her mother-in-law, despite the poor opinion about her people. She refuses to leave, saying words that have become familiar, "Do not press me to leave you... Where you go I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be my people and your God my God." (Ruth 1.16).

The Bible narrative has potential to build community. It provides us the frame work to re-look at the way we have been taught to relate to each other as women, through surprising shifts in the story.

Ruth eventually remarries Boaz, a wealthy relative of Naomi's husband Elimelech. The fact that Ruth's ancestry is with a people who are counted as enemies of Israel and because of her commitment and friendship with Naomi she wins God's favour and God uses her to build up the house of Israel. According to the feminist theologian, Isabel Apawo Phiri, while in Ezra 10 and Neh 13.23-27, God is presented as being opposed to Hebrew men marrying foreign women, "in the book of Ruth, God is seen as blessing a foreign woman, Ruth, and enabling her to conceive a child who became the grandfather of David, the king of Israel."¹

The aim of this Bible study:

Isabel Phiri continues that this book reveals the kindness of God towards any person who trusts God, regardless of gender, race or ethnic and religious

1 PHIRI, Isabel Apawo, Ruth, in *African Bible Commentary*, Tokunboh Adeyemo, General Editor, (Zondervan, Word Alive Publishers, Kenya, 2006), p.319.

Ruth and Naomi - making their story of solidarity our story

background.² This Bible Study will draw on that Biblical promise and explore, from a post-colonial perspective, the potential of this story, to help us forge bonds of unity among women within nations and across the continents, overcoming many historical obstacles in our way.

The methodology:

The Bible Study will situate this ancient Biblical narrative in the context of today's realities and will identify its potential to challenge oppressive customs and systems that have ensured that some women are kept in the situation of discrimination based on class, race, caste, sexual orientation and ability.

Two Indian narratives are used as the lenses to re-read the Book of Ruth from a post-colonial context in the Indian context: missionary archives and a novel set in colonial times in India. The key to this reading of the book of Ruth lies in the solidarity between the two women recognizing that Naomi's change of heart and consciousness is critical for building solidarity between her and Ruth.

Reading the book of Ruth as an Indian and in India alongside other narratives

Christian women in India were made "foreigners" in their own country when they were Christianized. They became the ones seeking "a home" as they were isolated from their own people and sometimes made to feel that they really do not belong to their own country. Christianity in India is still, by and large, seen as a Western religion and is therefore perceived to be foreign.

The image of Christ brought to India during the time of colonization was associated with domination - of a conquering hero - over against other religious motifs and images. Some exclusivist perceptions of Christians are rooted in the missionary movement in India, where the establishment of "European looking homes with gardens in front of them" for the Indian Christians, was seen as an integral part of the missionary enterprise.

In a fascinating postcolonial study of Basel missionary archives, Mrinalini Sebastian, discovers that for the missionaries "'home' stands for an altered mode of living and is suggestive of 'marked progress' - a new image of the woman, especially that of a native Christian woman emerges... The opposition between the natives 'former mode of living' and their changed circumstances, therefore is not an indication of a complete transformation of the status of the converted woman, as we would like to believe - and as the missionaries

2 *Ibid.*, p.320

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

liked to believe – but the reconstitution of a mode of living that fits more into an ideal of how a Christian woman ought to live.”³

Naomi’s impulse to find a home for Ruth is reminiscent of what Sebastian has discovered in missionary archives. It is a home, marriage and domesticity that were the marks of “the civilizing mission”, local customs and patterns of behaviour and relationships were denigrated as “heathenish practice.”⁴ Sebastian writes that for the missionaries the need to transform the mode of living relates to the fact that “the civilizing impulse was very strong amongst these missionaries, so much so that it often overshadowed their task of evangelisation.”⁵ She quotes from the Basel Report of 1884 where notions regarding appearance and purity were part of the blue print for another mode of living, a more civilized mode where ‘obedience and good behaviour’ were required qualities for evangelization.

“We are happy to state that by far the greater part of our former pupils are attached to us, and they appreciate the benefits received from us during a number of years. Such young women make mostly good wives and mothers. **Those who are the least thankful are generally untidy**, and scarcely show the labour bestowed on them whilst they were in school. There are several girls in the institution, who fill our hearts with misgiving, when we think of their future. **Sensuality, stealing, lying, quarrelling, pride, loquacity, are vices which seem to form their second nature.** The greater part, however, cheer us through their obedience and good behaviour, and a few through their fear of God.”⁶

The arrogant might of Christianity and its nexus with the colonizing project led therefore not just to the colonizing of the land but also of the minds and bodies of the natives and of their own spiritual and philosophical traditions – most of which was branded “pagan”. This is described poignantly by David Davidar, the author of the novel, *The House of Blue Mangoes*:

“The advent of muscular forms of Christianity coupled with imperfectly understood Darwinism equated colour and ‘paganism’ with inferiority. From that point onwards, matters deteriorated. The Englishman abroad, consciously or subconsciously, began to subscribe to the philosophy that the subject peoples (especially in the tropics) were a lesser breed; their civilizations were

3 SEBASTIAN, Mrinalini, *Reading Archives from a postcolonial perspective: “Native” Bible Women and the Missionary Ideal*, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol.19 No. 1 (Spring 2003), p.11.

4 *Ibid.*, p.13

5 *Ibid.*, p.12

6 *The Basel Report of 1884*, 47 emphasis added by Sebastian Mrinalini who quotes it. *Ibid.*, p.11

Ruth and Naomi - making their story of solidarity our story

trashed and British culture was exalted above all others.”⁷

And so the character, Helen, the Anglo-Indian wife of Kannan, the Indian “creeper” (assistant to the planter), in the novel *The House of Blue Mangoes*, looks forward in anticipation to “live the life of a *memsahib*.”⁸ She looks forward to the invitation to tea at the British planter’s home, where she dreams of sitting and sipping tea with them like “a proper English lady.”⁹

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Sebastian gives the example of a customary inheritance law called *Aliyasanthana*, which was the prevalent practice among different groups of people where the Basel mission was started in 1834. This law was considered “heathenish” by the missionaries, because in it succession was traced through the female line with male members being entitled to maintenance on the property handed down through female succession. The law was rejected and the British imposed a “Christian” inheritance law that was considered ‘normal’ because in it, fathers bequeath property to their sons.¹⁰ This law later covered all Christians in India and this so-called instrument of “civilization” kept Indian Christian women in bondage till very recently. This is the narrative of Indian women’s lives that inspired me to re-read the story of Ruth and Naomi in a new way.

The methodology of using other narratives to read the Biblical text:

Reading steps for group work:

- ④ Spend time in prayer asking for clarity of vision.
- ④ As this is a long book, it will not be possible to read the whole text in one session therefore, retell the story of Ruth and Naomi – this can be

7 DAVIDAR, David, *The House of Blue Mangoes*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books India Ltd., 2002), pp.298-299.

8 *Ibid.*, p.283. Memsahib is a Hindi word which here stands for the white mistress of the plantation.

9 *Ibid.*, p.283

10 Mrinalini Sebastian, *Op cit* p.13

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

done either by the leader telling the whole story or saying the first line and each person in the group continuing the story – each adding a line. Keep the Bible text open so as to remind the group of the next stage in the story. The leader needs to be well prepared to ensure that the story is fully retold with all details.

- ⑤ Give time for the group to recollect other relevant narratives, either from missionary archives, from novels they have read, or from real life which depict positive images of the solidarity among women in our societies. While the focus is on positive images, give the opportunity to the group to also share negative images where solidarity among women is not evident. Two lists can be put on the wall – one recording positive images and the other negative images of women working together.
- ⑤ Go back to the book of Ruth and allow the group to consider how it can liberate us as men and women to build solidarity for the transformation of our societies. If there is something that any person disagrees with in the actions of Naomi and Ruth, allow this to come to the open in the discussion – not to be contested, but to be noted.
- ⑤ Allow the group time to reflect on the men in the story and the role they play in salvation history. Boaz can particularly be considered. (Ruth 2 and 3).
- ⑤ Is it a story of the power of sisterhood between Naomi and Ruth is the question to be addressed?

A post-colonial reading of the text is a way to liberate the text and to empower us in our engagement with each other to find alternative communities of solidarity and power.

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A short description of post-colonial methodology:

Postcolonial theory offers a space for the once colonized to resurrect the “marginal, the indigene, the subaltern... It is an act of reclamation, redemption and reaffirmation against the past colonial and current neocolonizing tendencies which continue to exert influence even after territorial and political independence has been accomplished. It is a tactic, a practice and a process. It means finding ways of operating under a set of arduous and difficult conditions which jeopardize and dehumanize people.”¹¹

11 SUGIRTHARAJAH, R.S., *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge University Press, UK, 2001), p.250.

What has interested me most in this theory is the emphasis it places on mutual interdependence and mutual transformation of both the colonized and the colonizer; among different categories of peoples among the colonized in one nation; or between colonized peoples from different nations. It offers the possibility for the construction of a hybrid identity based on the inter-twined histories of the colonized and the colonizer. It aims to overcome essentialisms and dichotomies. A post colonial reading situates itself in that in-between-space “where one is equally committed to and disturbed by the colonized and colonizing cultures.”¹² It offers to the colonized third world peoples and churches the possibility to reclaim the Bible and our faith as our own.

Implications of such a reading for the Indian context:

It is important to do a postcolonial¹³ reading of the book of Ruth from the perspectives of poor women in India who have been described as having “privileged access to survival expertise”¹⁴. Women in India have survived in the context of extreme poverty which affects them the most but also in spite of the institutionalized systems of social and cultural discrimination - both of patriarchy and of caste.

A post-colonial reading of the text will affirm women’s roles in political and cultural struggles but as with other former colonies, in India too, the liberation paradigm has emphasized that women must put themselves in a secondary role for the sake of the liberation of their peoples, either from the colonial power or from other forms of political, economic or social structures of domination.

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In spite of the fact that Indian women continue to be the poorest of the poor, and are bogged down by cultural practices such as dowry, and by marriage which is seen as the norm and therefore sometimes imposed on women, as well as by the stigma attached to widowhood and many other forms of social and economic discrimination, women have by and large been socialized to

12 *Ibid.*, p.249

13 Also see SUGIRTHARAJAH R.S., *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the Interpretations* (Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 1999).

14 SHIVA, Vandana, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (London: Zed Books, 1989), p.224.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

put their families and communities above their own personal interests. And yet, it was only recently that liberation theologians such as Dalit theologians in India have recognised that their theologies are incomplete if they do not take into account the doubly and even thrice oppressed women in their communities.¹⁵

The theologian Kwok Pui Lan, in her text **Finding a Home for Ruth: Biblical Studies from the Margins** writes: “many women’s stories in the Bible had been read as serving some grand purpose, such as the salvation that comes through God or the political liberation of the people. Post colonial feminist critics are quick to point out that women’s issues have been subsumed.”¹⁶

The story of Indian women is a meta-story of oppression and struggle, in itself. Therefore finding a home for Ruth is no easy exercise in the Indian context, because we live in a very patriarchal social context where the continuation of the male line is given precedence, and where the upper castes continue to hold sway.

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It is important to also take note of the positive role the missionary movement has played in the lives of Indian women. Several examples can be given of their contribution to the “liberation” of Indian women: from education of women, to the building of the “zenana” health mission for women, to training women to be evangelists and catechists to organising women for social reform.¹⁷ Many women headed mission boards emerged in the last two centuries and much of the property that mission agencies owned in India were funded by

15 CLARKE, Sathianathan, MANCHALA, Deenabandhu & PEACOCK, Philip Vinod, (Eds.), *Dalit Theology in the Twenty First Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways* (Delhi/Geneva: Oxford University Press and WCC Publications, 2010).

16 LAN, Kwok Pui, *Finding a Home for Ruth: Biblical Studies from the Margins*, mss Paper presented at a Bossey (World Council of Churches) Seminar on Post-Colonial Hermeneutics, July 2001.

17 One such example is referred to the “Breast Cloth or Upper cloth movement”, when in the mid 19th Century, the missionary movement in the former Travancore State – now part of Tamil Nadu - supported the Chanar women in their struggle to cover their breasts. Till then this had been a privilege of the upper caste Nair women only. For more information on this and on other ways in which the London Missionary Society, worked for the liberation of women, see Joy GNANADASON, *A Forgotten History: The Story of the Missionary Movement and the Liberation of the People in South Travancore* (Chennai: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1994).

contributions from women in their home countries.

The missiologist, Dana L. Roberts writes: “Evangelical women saw themselves as helping to save the world through self-sacrifice and service. Their interest in spreading evangelical ideals throughout the world increased as the century progressed, so by the end of the century, 57 percent of the subscribers to the London City Mission were women, 56 percent of legacies left to the Baptist Missionary Society were from women and 70 percent of all receipts to foreign missions were given by women and children.”¹⁸

But as the missionary archives quoted above indicates, the question as to whether women could be “liberated” within the frame of colonization, remains a point of contention. “Women of colonizing centres, while oppressed by various forms of patriarchy in their own contexts (and here it is caste), also perpetuate the oppression of the “other” when they operate within colonial frameworks of thinking.”¹⁹

The missionary movement, in its attempt to “liberate” the women from the men in their communities, “used” the women as its contact point. “Under the pretext of saving brown women (from brown men) colonial desire and imperialistic advances have masked and collectively reconstituted in a blatant reversal as ‘social mission’.”²⁰ In other words colonialism has contributed to the continuing divisions among us as women in India.

Finding a home for “the Other” among Indian women

Therefore, there is danger in speaking of all women of India as one category. They are not. Essentialism tends to make some women’s historical subordination to men (and to other women) seem like a natural fact rather than as a cultural and even political product. For instance in India there are deeply marked divisions of caste and class and ignoring this would not do justice to the women here – in such a context “finding a home for Dalit and Adivasi²¹ women” in India remains as urgent a task today as ever.

18 Dana L. Roberts, quoting F.K.Proshaka (Women and Philanthropy in 19th Century England, Oxford: Clarendon Press) in *The ‘Christian Home’ as a Cornerstone of Anglo-American Missionary Thought and Practice, Converting Colonialism: Visions and Realities in Mission History, 1706-1914* ed. Dana L. Roberts, (Michigan/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), p.138.

19 DUBE, Musa, “Postcolonial Feminist Spaces and Religion”, *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse*, ed. Donaldson Laura E. and Kwok Pui-Lan (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p.106.

20 KWOK, Pui Lan, “Unbinding our Feet: Saving Brown Women and Feminist Religious Discourse”, *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse, Ibid.* p.64.

21 Adivasi which literally means “the first inhabitants” is the way Indigenous Peoples in India describe themselves. Tribals is another word they use to describe their identity.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

The missionary movement in India targeted the Dalits as the major group to be evangelized. In other words Dalit Indian women were 'the contact point'²² between the occupied lands and the colonizers. Many of the newly converted Indian Christians were from the subaltern class, which was largely rural, semi-literate and minimally westernized and Dalit, and came to Christianity mainly through mass conversions. "For these converts, who were mainly outcastes and Tribals, their principal encounter with the colonial power was through the mission agencies and their welfare work. They were the recipients of the beneficent effects of missionary work... They saw their dignity being restored by the intervention of missionaries and colonial administration in cases like the Upper Cloth Movement in Travancore."²³

B.R. Ambedkar, who has been considered the Father of the Dalit Movement, strongly advocated conversion as a weapon against the upper castes, "whenever they have been subjected to limits of their endurance in the area of social discrimination as well as economic exploitation."²⁴ Therefore, a newly independent pan-Indian identity did not matter to the Christian Dalits. Their plight in post independent India and the continuing hesitation of the church in India to respond to their legitimate claims, and fight for their rights as Dalit Christians, justifies their fears.

Solidarity between Naomi and Ruth has to inform us as we build bonds of solidarity among us as women in India.

Solidarity between Naomi and Ruth has to inform us as we build bonds of solidarity among us as women in India.

The solidarity between Naomi and Ruth needs to cross the oceans. Colonial relationships ensured that at the outset as Indian women we were still dependant, almost entirely, on Western feminist theory to define liberation and Western feminist theologians to discover how we can read the Bible anew.

22 MUSA, Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press 2000), p.119.

23 SUGIRTHARAJAH, R. S., *Complicencies and Cul-de-Sacs, Christian Theologies and Colonialism*, in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner and Mayra Rivera, eds., (Chalice Press: St. Louis Missouri. 2004), p.27.

24 LOBO, Lancy, 2001, "Visions, Illusions and Dilemmas of Dalit Christians in India", *Dalit Identity and Politics: Cultural Subordination and the Dalit Challenge*, New Delhi, Sage, p. 293. Quoted by Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar in "The Diversity and Dialectics of Dalit Dissent and Implications for Dalit Theology and Liberation", *Dalit Theology in the Twenty First Century, Op Cit*, p.58

Finding a home for our solidarity with women across the globe:

The solidarity between Naomi and Ruth needs to cross the oceans. Colonial relationships ensured that at the outset as Indian women we were still dependant, almost entirely, on Western feminist theory to define liberation and Western feminist theologians to discover how we can read the Bible anew.

While we have to be eternally grateful to feminist theologians from the West, for their wisdom that liberated our reading of the Bible, I believe it also steered us into a particular methodology and scholarship that kept many Indian women out of the discussion and strengthened the divide between theologically trained women and women in the pew. It also did not open the space for us to reflect on the deep divisions among us as women – such as that between Helen, the wife of Kannan, the Indian assistant to the planter and the planter's British wife, in the novel referred to earlier.

Colonial relationships affected our contact as Indian women with women from other colonized nations in general and particularly with women theologians from other third world contexts. For example our links with women in the Caribbean has been limited. Because of our shared history, building solidarity with feminist theologians from the Caribbean would have enriched us in our struggles and would have certainly helped us to make our theological work in India more contextual, grounded, as well as more relevant and effective in the task of transformation of our societies and of the world.

The word of God in this text: Ruth and Naomi as a perfect example for solidarity!

The Book of Ruth is a powerful text that affirms the solidarity between these two women, even with a level of manipulation, which was the only political tool they had available to them to survive. It reminds us of the potential of joint strategies and joint actions for the sake of the liberation of all women and men. In a context of economic globalization and empire when economic, political and social forces are engendering discrimination and injustice within each of our nations and between us as women the story of Naomi and Ruth is a story that affirms the power that we celebrate as we seek new ways to forge unity among women

Actions for change:

As a follow-up some of the actions we can engage in:

- 🌀 Learn more about women theologians in other countries, particularly

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

in the Third World, read what they have written and allow the insights gained to analyse and understand your own context.

- 🌀 Study the role of colonialism, globalization and empire in keeping us divided as women.

Join feminist networks online which are linked to women in other countries – show solidarity with them by signing online petitions and any other actions of support that they solicit.

THEIR STORY IS OUR STORY – IN OUR UNITY IS OUR POWER!

Dr. Aruna Gnanadason

Abha is a Dalit woman living in the Dalit village of Chikathana in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra in Central India. She along with the others in her village has been set apart as manual scavengers because of their Dalit caste background.

She is gutsy and strong, and boldly asserts, “My vision for our future is that our children will not be engaged in manual scavenging!”

The caste system is the bane of Indian society. In no other country is inequality so graded that it gives little opportunity for those at the lowest rungs of the structure, who strive for liberation, to break out of the rigidly structured caste hierarchy. A system sanctioned by religion prevents the freedom of mind and therefore this clear voice of Abha was like a spurt of fresh air. The Dalits of Chikathana live either doing the degrading tasks of manual cleaning or they work as landless labourers in the fields of upper caste landlords exposing them to many forms of exploitation and violence. Women of this community largely engage in the sweeping of the streets and making brooms from leaves they collect from the forests or they do menial jobs in the agricultural sector.

Resistance to oppression is taking major risks because Dalit women all over India face violent forms of suppression of their voices. In a searing article entitled, “Cruelty, Criminality and Community: Dalit Women in the Cultural Web of Indian Caste-Patriarchy”, Sathianathan Clarke and Paul Divakar write

Their story is our story - in our unity is our power!

that, “Cruelty is inflicted upon Dalit women to remind them of the fact that they are the lowest among the low when viewed from the important lenses of both caste and gender. While Dalit men are often violently punished and sometimes killed, Dalit women are also publicly violated. It is this explicit and public pattern of ritualized cruelty that communicates to the Dalit women that she has to bear the marks of violence on her body in front of the entire social body.”¹

She is gutsy and strong, and boldly asserts, “My vision for our future is that our children will not be engaged in manual scavenging!”

Can Indian women make the story of Naomi and Ruth their story?

The writers list the horrendous forms of physical and verbal abuse experienced by Dalit women. They add the tragic fact that in addition to the public forms of societal violence that Dalit experience: “Dalit women suffer verbal and other forms of abuse not only from upper caste men (and women) but also from their own partners and the (extended) family.”²

The law courts and the police connive with the culprits by sometimes remaining mute spectators to public humiliation of Dalit women or not registering the cases or by dismissing them without doing them justice. The violence is also aggravated by the open economic and political discrimination Dalit women face. It is estimated that 85% of Dalit women work as labourers in the agricultural field, almost entirely as landless and the lowest paid. They face discrimination in the delivery of health services and education. Their political participation is seriously hampered by politically motivated violence against them.

Can Indian women make the story of Naomi and Ruth their story?

There has been a rich history of women’s activism in India; feminism has seen itself as a movement not just for a transformed world for women but for all men and women in this society and for the earth itself.

As it has been described: “The contemporary Indian women’s movement is a complex, variously placed movement which encompasses and links such issues as work, wages, environment, ecology, civil rights, sex, violence,

1 CLARKE, Sathianathan & NAMALA, Paul Divakar, in “Cruelty, Criminality and Community: Dalit Women in the Cultural Web of Indian Caste-Patriarchy”, *Cruelty and Christian Witness: Confronting Violence in its Ugliest*, Deenabandhu Manchala, Drea Frochtling and Michael Trice, eds. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2011), p.25.

2 *Ibid.*, p.31

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

representation, caste, class, allocation of basic resources and common goods, consumer rights, health, religion, community, and individual and social relationships...

Structurally, the women's movement has a vertical as well as horizontal reach: from the horizontal network of autonomous feminist groups, issue - and occupation-based women's organisations, development groups, radical professional associations, and party affiliated organisations, it reaches upward to administrative institutions, state functionaries, members of parliament and political leaders."³

There has been a rich history of women's activism in India; feminism has seen itself as a movement not just for a transformed world for women but for all men and women in this society and for the earth itself.

This is its strength but also its weakness as its efforts sometimes have become dissipated and competing agendas have led to a lack of a clear voice. Additionally, Gabriele Dietrich reminds us of the fact that, "It has taken sometime for the women's movement to shed some upper-caste secularist blinkers"⁴. This is a fact that the feminist movement has been largely led by middle class, urban, educated and upper caste women. And this has without a doubt influenced the agenda of the movement at times.

But we have little choice as women in this country. We need to forge strong links with each other so as to provide a hope for the millions of Abha's in India and all over the world. The challenge of building bridges between all women in India and globally, is to emphasize the revolutionary potential of such unity among us – in the context of the economic injustice and the political vacuum created by globalization and the unipolar world we live in.

Feminism's power (however we name it in our own contexts) as a political, social and cultural alternative paradigm cannot be underestimated. It is in our consciousness about "shared victimization"⁵ that real solidarity among us can be based. There can be no space for the hierarchalizing of suffering or of competing traumas – as women of the world we are in this together and we have to look into each other's eyes, unafraid and discover the political potential of such solidarity among us.

3 KUMAR, Radha, "From Chipko to Sati: The Contemporary Women's Movement in India", *Gender and Politics in India*, ed. Nivedita Menon (New Delhi: Oxford University Press,1999), p.368.

4 DIETRICH, Gabriele, *Beyond Patriarchy, Caste and Capitalism, Seeds of Hope* (Arasradi, Tamilnadu: Tamilnadu Theological Seminary, 2009), p.13.

5 bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Centre* (Boston: Southend Press, 1984), p.49.

Their story is our story - in our unity is our power!

We need a new political and theological imagination to reclaim the power of our sisterhood – the sisterhood between Naomi and Ruth - to get more actively engaged in transformation of all injustice in our societies and the world.

Monica Melanchthon, a Dalit feminist theologian describes it well when she writes: “Female individualism is futile when the need today is for a collective feminism. Some men would prefer that women fight lone battles and would celebrate this as strength and courage, and therefore empowering to women.”⁶

Using stories from the Bible, giving a name for unnamed women such as the servant in the Book of Judith, and by reclaiming the stories of women from historical narratives, which have often been silent on the role of women, Monica Melanchthon stresses the difficulty of individual actions and the need for collective action. She proposes that there can be dialogue and reconciliation when we stress on “the camaraderie between (these) women”⁷ coming from differing communities, groups and regions. Dalit women have come together across the country able supported by Dalit men and women and men from other communities who stand in solidarity with them to challenge all forms of injustice.

We need a new political and theological imagination to reclaim the power of our sisterhood – the sisterhood between Naomi and Ruth - to get more actively engaged in transformation of all injustice in our societies and the world.

Abha and the other women in her community do not seek our help they seek our solidarity – their story is our story and together we can challenge the injustice that denies fullness to life to all women and all of society and the Earth itself!

6 MELANCHTHON, Monica, “The Servant in the Book of Judith: Interpreting the Silence, Telling the Story”, *Dalit Theology in the Twenty First Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*, Sathianathan Clarke, Deenabandhu Manchala and Philip Vinod Peacock eds. (Delhi/Geneva: Oxford University Press and WCC Publications, 2010.), p.246.

7 *Ibid.*, p.246

THE ANGUISH AND TERROR OF RAPE AND INCEST

THE STORY OF TAMAR

Rev. Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth

Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth is the executive secretary for Justice and Partnership with the World Communion of Reformed Churches. She is responsible for Gender Justice and Justice in the Economy on the Earth and for all God's Creation. Patricia is the first woman to be ordained as a minister of Word and Sacrament of the Guyana Presbyterian Church in 1984.

Text: 2 Samuel 13.1-22

Introduction

The story of Tamar has not been a popular one for churches. One rarely hears a sermon preached on Tamar, Dinah (Gen 34.1-12) or the Levite's concubine (Judg 19.10, 20.48). These are three of the stories of rape and violence against women told in the Bible. These stories are disturbing because they deal with the sin of sexual violence which has been difficult for the church. The story of rape and incest in 2 Sam 13 occurs in the family of David, one of the most famous persons in the Bible. David's son Amnon rapes his half-sister, Tamar. David's other son, Tamar's full brother, is outraged and kills Amnon.

Rape is a horrific form of violence which is a manifestation of an abuse of power, especially male power. It is one of the most used weapons usually of male abuse of women. Rape takes place in public as well as in private. It is perpetrated by strangers or family members or persons known to the victims, including rape in marriage. Rape is also used as a weapon of war, conflict and to settle disputes. Often the victim or survivor has little access to justice and healing. It often eats away at its victim, emotionally, psychologically and socially and leaves deep scars.

Rape is ubiquitous and affects persons regardless of age, ethnicity, gender or social standing. It has been known to happen to the youngest infant up to the oldest adult. There have also been reports of rape in churches, perpetrated by pastors, priests, usually by men with power in the church. Recently, in the Caribbean there has been a spate of cases of rape of young school girls in mini-buses and in schools.

The anguish and terror of rape and incest

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The rate of violence in the Caribbean region has been spiralling to a significantly high level. Gender based violence is especially highly prevalent in all Caribbean countries. According to a 2007 World Bank report, all Caribbean countries have higher rates of sexual violence than the world average. Rape and sexual molestation of women and children are rampant in Haiti and this combines with other economic, natural and social disasters as well as a high rate of societal violence. In Guyana one in four women suffered from male physical abuse in a relationship, and approximately 30% of women surveyed in Trinidad & Tobago have experienced domestic violence. In Suriname 67% of women have experienced violence in a partner relationship and 30% of adult women in Antigua & Barbuda and Barbados have experienced some form of domestic abuse.¹ In 2008 charges of sexual assault were laid against Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. The media reported on 2 cases of rape by Gonsalves and similar allegations by three other women against him. Both cases were dropped when investigations discontinued. One of the survivors dropped her case and it was reported that she was pressured to do so.²

Reading the text

Organise for participants to do a biblio-dramatic or group reading of 2 Sam 13. 1-22 and after the reading invite participants to share the following in table groups:

- 🌀 What were you feeling as the story of Tamar was being told?
- 🌀 Identify and describe the main characters in this story. What is the role of each of the male characters in the rape of Tamar?
- 🌀 Imagine Tamar in her everyday life. What was life like for her?

1 A Joint Report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the Latin America and the Caribbean Region of the World Bank on Crime, Violence, and Development: Trends, Costs, and Policy Options in the Caribbean, March 2007 http://www.unodc.org/pdf/research/Cr_and_Vio_Car_E.pdf

2 Caribbean Media Corporation [Bridgetown]. 20 September 2008. "Woman Said Pressured to Drop Rape Case Against St Vincent Premier." (BBC Monitoring Americas 21 Sept. 2008)

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

- ⑨ How is she treated by her family and the community, after the rape? What would you do if Tamar was your sister or daughter?
- ⑨ What is the power construction in the story? Identify places where power and powerlessness are evident and share the situation in your context.
- ⑨ Where is God in the story of Tamar?

What does the text tell us?

The rape involved three of David's children: Absalom, Amnon and Tamar. It was a horrific tragedy which cannot be disconnected from what was happening in the family, especially the sexual irresponsibility of David, and the power struggle between Amnon and Absalom. Amnon's political ambitions as the heir to King David were challenged by Absalom. David was by far the most powerful of Israel's kings, militaristically and charismatically. He was to become the prototype of the Messiah. Jesus, on the other hand, would play down that aspect of his status that described himself as the scion of the House of David, and emphasizes his role as the "powerless" Suffering Servant.

David, the irresponsible father

What could he have done? Did he pretend not to know what was happening right in his house? What about the parent who is in denial about an 'open secret' in the family?

King David is the most pathetic person in this story. Great and powerful as he was the most that could be said of him in his relationship to women and to his children, is that he is irresponsible. He hears of the incest/rape; he is very angry; he does nothing! Verse 21 tells us why: "But he had no wish to harm his son Amnon, since he loved him; he was his first-born (son)". How typically patriarchal! For all his power, he would not take disciplinary action against his son. But the daughter is forced to live a sad, disconsolate, lonely existence for the time being in Absalom's house, and then..... His inaction would lead to the loss of both Amnon and Absalom; Tamar had already been lost. Did he care?

What could he have done?
Did he pretend not to know what was happening right in his house? What about the parent who is in denial about an 'open secret' in the family?

Absalom, seizing power at any cost

When sexual violence, including rape and assaults occur, usually the victim

The anguish and terror of rape and incest

is silenced by the family, church, society and the legal system. Why should she be quiet in a situation in which she is terrorized? How can her family, who claim to love her not feel her pain, vulnerability and need for justice and healing?

When sexual violence, including rape and assaults occur, usually the victim is silenced by the family, church, society and the legal system. Why should she be quiet in a situation in which she is terrorized? How can her family, who claim to love her not feel her pain, vulnerability and need for justice and healing?

Interestingly, the incident of the rape falls under Section C of 2 Samuel that deals with David's family and the intrigues for the Succession. Even more interesting is the fact that sub-section 3 is headed "Absalom". This makes the story of the rape an episode within the larger story of Absalom's quest for political power. Absalom was Tamar's "full-blooded" brother. He would use the violation of his sister as the pretext and justification for the use of force (primary power) in the murder of Amnon (2 Sam 13.22-33), but his objective was the seizure of David's throne.

Patriarchy alone does not explain his advice to Tamar: "Has Amnon your brother been with you? Be quiet now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this so much to heart" (v.20). And yet, he begins a vendetta thereafter that would cost him his life. Obviously, her pain and shame was no big thing! Except that it could be put to good use.

Amnon, obsessed with power and lust

Dominant masculinity and manhood are closely linked with sex, power and violence. Men seek to prove their masculinity through sexual conquests.

Dominant masculinity and manhood are closely linked with sex, power and violence. Men seek to prove their masculinity through sexual conquests. How does your church address the issue of dominant masculinity? What are your responses to rape and incest? How do you deal with victims and perpetrators?

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It is abhorrent to think that Amnon's rape of Tamar was an act of contempt – contempt for Absalom whose sister she was, and whose ambition for political power at his (Amnon's) expense was an open secret. He was certainly

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

contemptuous of her once the physical violation was over. His order to his servant was explicit: "Get rid of this woman for me, throw her out and bolt the door after her" (v.17). Get rid of the whore! According to 2 Sam 13.2 ff, it was Amnon's desire for Tamar that made him ill. Or was it the frustration of his power to obtain her? A definition of power is that "power is meant every opportunity/possibility existing within a social relationship, which permits one to carry out one's own will, even against resistance, and regardless of the basis on which this opportunity rests." It was his cousin, the shrewd Jonadab, that would suggest how Amnon, whom he pointedly called "Son of the King" with all the power potential that title entailed, might create the opportunity however dishonest the basis on which that opportunity would rest.

Who are the Jonadabs in your community/church? How do we respond to their amoral behaviour/abuse of power?



Tamar, confronting power

Like Tamar, many women cry out from pain and anguish of rape, incest and domestic violence. Who are the Tamars of your family, church and community? How are they heard in your church and community? Is your church one that brings healing, support and demands justice?

Against the power of naked, violent force, Tamar would use another kind of power: that of moral persuasion and rational commonsense with an appeal to personal self-interest. "No, my brother! Do not violate me. This is not a thing men do in Israel. Do not commit such an outrage. Wherever would I go, bearing my shame? While you would become an outcast in Israel. Go now and speak to the king; he will not refuse to give me to you". (vv.12-13)

But he brushed aside that appeal, overpowered her and raped her. Had he loved Tamar he would have listened to her and achieved the desired outcome of a sound, permanent relationship with her. In 2 Sam 13.1, it is written that Amnon "fell in love" with Tamar. But was it really love, or was it rather lust, insecurity, wantonness and vileness? His "falling out" came quicker than most. He showed no concern for Tamar, even when she pleaded with him. Love is not only a feeling or sexual urges; it is the desire to engage with another in the interest of the mutual growth and development, sharing deep and caring concern for each other. Even after the rape, Tamar would appeal for common sense and humanity in Amnon's interest, but to no avail.

Tamar's pain and anguish ripped her life apart. She ripped her clothes, threw ashes on her head, and wailed as she mourned publicly. She declared that she was violated and was clearly calling for justice and mercy from her father,

The anguish and terror of rape and incest

King David. Tamar lived in a context which judged harshly the victim of such a crime. She had been shamed and “finished” in her community.

Breaking the silence of rape, incest and all forms of gender based violence

Men are placed at the top on the pyramid of human relationships and are systematically encouraged to view power as dominating and controlling. Rape and sexual violence are rooted in a patriarchal construction of power, where power is seen as dominant and controlling; it wields its ugly hands against those who are vulnerable and powerless. It has its basis in patriarchy - a system that positions men over women (and also some men over other men) and instils a sense of entitlement and privilege in many men. Patriarchy also institutionalizes the social, cultural and legal contexts that permit gender violence.

Rape is about violence and power. Amnon used his power as he was not only bigger and stronger than his sister but also had other male privileged power based on his status, firstly as a man and more so, a man with power in the family and society. He was driven by lofty ambitions about power to rule and control. He felt that he can do what he feels like doing without facing consequences. David had the power to make Amnon bear the consequences of the crime committed against Tamar and thus bring justice to his daughter, but he did not. He did not punish Amnon for the crime he committed.

The many “Davids” in our churches and community remain silent and suppress victims of rape, incest and domestic violence when they should be outraged and compelled to seek justice for the victims. The church community needs to take a public stance – in giving voice, presence and action on overcoming all forms of gender based violence. This can no longer be treated as a marginal issue. It is a frightening epidemic affecting the Caribbean.

Churches need to seriously consider this issue as a priority and address it at every opportunity - in sermons, prayers, litanies, liturgical dances, songs and mission priorities. Church leaders must challenge theology which legitimizes male dominance over women. They need to organise Christian education material and widespread re-reading of the Bible, especially texts found in Paul’s letters to the Ephesians, Corinthians and Colossians which churches often misuse to teach about marriage and family life. These are just a few examples of texts which have often been misinterpreted to prescribe male control over the family and submission of women, even to the point of submitting to abuse.

An important strategy is to address the issue of dominant masculinity. There

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

needs to be a process of redefining masculinity and to create a social climate, in male peer culture, in which the abuse of women is seen as completely unacceptable. “A comprehensive strategy involving wide-scale discussions of the underlying social causes of men’s violence is required. Strategies need to take into account that violence is learned behaviour, and boys and men need to be re-educated on how to be men in ways that do not involve abusing girls and women - physically, sexually, or emotionally. It is time for the church to say “NO TO VIOLENCE” and for men to be at the forefront of this campaign.”³

Ask participants to read the story below on Rape, A Lifetime of Hurt. After the story is read, invite them to form small group or use table groups and discuss the following:

- ⑨ Where does sexual abuse occur? Share a case that you know of in your family, community or church.
- ⑨ What are ways and means used by sexual abusers to manipulate their victims?
- ⑨ What happens to the victims of incest and rape? How are they silenced? What possibilities are there to break the code of silence and for the truth to be heard?
- ⑨ What roles do other family play in such situations?
- ⑨ Often victims of sexual abuse and incest are shamed, blamed and demeaned. How can the church help in bringing justice, healing and safety?

Conclusion

After the group discussion, ask participants to share briefly key points and feedback. Allow time also for brief discussion and feedback from the plenary. Put up a list of available centres/places for counselling and other support structures that are available in your city/context for both survivors and victims of domestic and sexual violence. Share information on resources available. (Refer to resource on page 260)

Close the Bible study session by organising participants in a circle. Light a large candle in the middle of the circle and have available small candles, enough for each person to have one. Two persons will need to stand at two convenient spots to assist persons with lighting their candles.

3 SHEERATTAN-BISNAUTH, Patricia and PEACOCK, Philip Vinod, (Eds.) *Created in God’s Image: From Hegemony to Partnership* (Geneva: WCRC and WCC, 2010).

The anguish and terror of rape and incest

Lead in singing a song, after which, participants will be invited to come forth and name persons who have suffered and those who are suffering from domestic or sexual violence. They may choose to name the persons silently or aloud. As they step forward, they will light a candle and say a prayer for the person.

End in a collective prayer and singing songs of hope.

RAPE, A LIFETIME OF HURT

Jamaica Gleaner, published Monday, January 16, 2006¹

Nashauna Drummond, Staff Reporter

“The rapist might try to gain some advantage by ripping at your clothes. If your hands are free, get those beautifully manicured nails into his eyes.”

Rape figures

For 2005 there were 735 reported cases of rape in Jamaica. Though these are preliminary figures from the Constabulary Communication Network (CCN), women continue to be victims of numerous sexual abuses. Rape, carnal abuse and incest are the ultimate abuse of women’s human rights.

When a woman is raped, she never fully heals. The scars she carries for the rest of her life are mostly hidden from public eye. For the next two weeks Flair will highlight the stories of women who were victims of various forms of sexual abuse. We will attempt to learn about their healing processes perhaps in the process their stories will help other victims.

All the names of the victims have been changed to protect their privacy.

Incest - Jenny’s story

Jenny was sexually molested by her stepfather. Now in her 40s and married with two children, she still wears the scars of her ordeal.

Still unable to speak about it, she wrote the details of her ordeal for Flair.

“The rapist might try to gain some advantage by ripping at your clothes. If your hands are free, get those beautifully manicured nails into his eyes.”

1 <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20060116/flair/flair1.html>

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

“My ordeal started when I was about five years old. I was sexually molested by him from age five to age 12. I cannot remember any time when I was not afraid or when I felt safe. I could not tell my mother because she would beat me (well that’s what he told me), so I just suffered in silence.

My liberation came on my first day in secondary school. I was getting my things ready when he called me to tell me my mother wanted me to feed the rabbits. She had gone to the market, so I went and that’s when he grabbed me and wanted me to have sex with him. I managed to free myself from his grip and ran. I told him I was going to tell mama what he had been doing to me and he just laughed and said, “Who you think she is going to believe, me or you?”

I couldn’t wait to get home to tell mama. I got home to find him, mama and one of my uncles sitting in the living room waiting for me. She told me to come in and take off my clothes and I froze. Without so much as a word she pulled out an electric wire - three pieces plaited into one. For the first hit I stripped down to my birthday suit. I was naked in front of the man who had been molesting me. He was just sitting there with this look of, “I told you so,” on his face.

“My mother beat me bloody that day. He had told her some story about me and some boy and she didn’t think - she just believed him - end of story. My stepfather stole my soul and my mother killed my spirit at the age of 12.”

Healing

How am I dealing with it? Well I tried to take my life at the age of 16 and Jesus saved me. For the better part after that, I blocked it out and just didn’t deal with it. But I was killing myself. Many people now say I am doing well. I’m married with two beautiful children, I own my own business, drive a nice car. But I have no feelings, I am numb and my emotions are messed up. When I hear some women speak about how they feel when their partner touches them, I sometimes look at them with envy. I don’t know how to make love to my husband. I just have sexual intercourse.

I am getting counselling now and I pray to God that I can get some help because now that my memories are back it is getting harder and harder to deal with it.

Statutory rape - Jane’s story

Jane is now 33 years old, she was raped when she was 13. Her parents had divorced and she was living in the United States with her mother but she

visited Jamaica every summer and Christmas. One summer she and her friends went over to the house of a guy they knew. "He was older, about 18. We were hanging out and he asked me to accompany him into a room. I never thought anything of it as I had known him for a while, so I went. He kissed me and still I did not think anything of it as I thought he was cute. Then the issue of sex came up and I told him I didn't want to have sex.

"That was when I realised how large the house was and that we were pretty far away from everyone. I was isolated. I started to protest verbally and then it escalated. We were tussling and he called three of his friends into the room. One of them had a gun. When I saw it all my fight just went out the window. He probably saw that and he told them to leave. There was a bathroom adjoining the room and he told me to get inside. I was so petrified that anything he said I would have done.

"He locked the bathroom door and that's when the act occurred. It's like I had an out-of-body experience, it happened but didn't happen.

"One of my girlfriends came upstairs and saw me shaking and got really mad, she was so angry I wished I was that strong. He ran out laughing and she and I went home.

"I didn't tell anyone for six months then I told my parents. My mother was angry at my father because she blamed him and he wanted to press charges. I told him no. I asked dad not to do anything about it; that's one thing I insisted on. I didn't want anyone to know because even at that age I knew they would say it was my fault even though I thought no one would believe me. But in future if I was somewhere and the rapist was there, I would leave. I was petrified of him for years. I blamed myself and I thought I was foolish and so naive."

NOT A MUMBLING WORD

Rev. Robina Marie Winbush

Robina Winbush is an associate stated clerk for the Presbyterian Church (USA). She serves as the director of the Department of Ecumenical and Agency Relations in the Office of the General Assembly. Robina has served on several national and international denominational and ecumenical committees and organizations including the National Council of Churches of Christ, USA, the World Council of Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. An ordained minister, she has served congregations in Harlem, Long Island, the Bronx, Queens, New York and Louisville, KY.

Read Judges 19.1-30

Introduction

This Bible study was presented at the World Council of Churches, Global Ecumenical Conference on Justice for Dalits in Thailand, 2009. It shows ways in which the struggles of African Americans are connected with the liberation struggles of Dalits. On the surface, it is no secret that the liberation struggle of African Americans, particularly in the relatively recent years of what is referred to as the civil rights movement has given inspiration and power to liberation struggles of marginalized and oppressed groups both within the United States and throughout the world. However, before one can look at the heart of the struggle, one must stop and examine the oppression that demands eradication.

I am an African American woman who is privileged by virtue of education and occupation but at the same time I come from a community, which is still defined by race and skin colour in the United States, which despite having elected one who both is and identifies as an African American to the highest office in the country, African American communities continue to have a disproportionate number of our men incarcerated, a disproportionate number of our children uneducated and a disproportionate number of our community bearing the burden of this “current economic crisis.” I hear the words of my sister, Dr. Jean Sindab¹ screaming at me to remind folks of the struggles of those who are not privileged by virtue of education and occupation and whose reality is so often overlooked.

1 Dr. Jean Sindab was an African American Baptist laywoman who served on the staff of the World Council of Churches in the Programme to Combat Racism in the 1980's.

I am always mindful of a woman with whom I had worked prior to entering the staff of the PC (USA) over 20 years ago. She was a woman whose life was marked by racism, poverty, abuse and marginalization. She had lived her life in and out of mental institutions. She literally came to me in a vision during my first national meeting and asked the question "How is what you're doing going to make my life any better?" It is to her, that I dedicate this Bible study.

Prayer: Speak to our hearts Holy Spirit. Give us the words that will bring new life - words on the wings of a morning to drive all the nights of doubt away. Speak to our hearts Holy Spirit. As you speak, when we grow uncomfortable, remind us that you are pruning the parts of us that need to be removed.

When we feel some joy, remind us that you are refreshing and empowering us for the work of ministry. Holy One, receive the glory and grant us your blessing. In the name of the One who is the Living Word, Jesus the Christ, we dare to pray. Amen

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Invite participants to do a biblio-dramatic reading of Judges 19.1- 30.

Silent Reflection: Write your image reaction - words, pictures, etc.

The murderous brutality and rape of a woman and her children from the village of Kherlanji near Nagpur:

On the evening of 29 September 2006, as they were preparing for dinner, 44 year old Surekha Bhotmange, her 18 year old daughter Priyanka, her 23 year old son Roshan and 21 year old son Sudhir, were dragged from their house. Surekha and Priyanka were stripped naked, dragged by their hair to the village centre about 500 meters away, humiliated, bitten, beaten black and blue, gang-raped in full public view for an hour before they were hacked to death. Their attackers pushed sticks into their private parts. Roshan and Sudhir were kicked and stabbed repeatedly before they were dead, their faces disfigured and private parts mutilated. It is said that the punching did not stop even after Surekha and her three children were dead and also that Surekha and Priyanka

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

were raped even after they were dead. Surekha and her children's bodies lay strewn in the village square for hours.²

Silent Reflection - Write your image reaction... words, pictures, etc.

It is important that we not run past the horror of these stories. That we allow ourselves to listen, to react, to own what it does to us to hear these stories of women, of men, of children, created in the image of God, claimed by God as God's own and so brutally attacked and their lives destroyed. No wonder, Phyllis Tribble identified the story of the unnamed woman from Bethlehem as a Text of Terror.³ It is important that we allow ourselves to be horrified, frightened, angry beyond acceptable words, and grieved in the depths of our spirits. Too often we are quick to turn the page, to look for a new story not quite so horrific, something that will make us forget. But the stories do not go away. They remain from generation to generation, demanding our attention; until we stop, listen, feel the horror, and seek a more faithful response.

We will explore together ways, in which we who claim the name of the Anointed One, Jesus the Christ, might faithfully respond in our own time and context. What are the tools of resistance that might effectively be employed?

We will invite the story of this unnamed woman from Bethlehem to be the lens through which we struggle with multiple issues of social ordering, power relationships, sexuality, hospitality, and insider/outsider dynamics. However, I will only be able to touch on these issues briefly and will focus my major attention on: **silencing as a weapon of mass destruction**.

We will explore together ways, in which we who claim the name of the Anointed One, Jesus the Christ, might faithfully respond in our own time and context. What are the tools of resistance that might effectively be employed?

Many biblical scholars have addressed this text through the analysis of North African biblical hospitality codes and the violation of these codes in the act of the Benjaminites.⁴ They compare the hospitality by the concubine's father extended to his daughter's master to the lack of hospitality shown by the men of Gibeah, both in refusing to open their homes and the desire to rape the

2 NAMALA, Annie, "Affirming the Image of God in Dalit Women: A Task for the in the Indian Church" in In God's Image: Journal of Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, Vol. 26, No. 3, (September 2007).

3 TRIBBLE, Phyllis, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (OBT Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1984).

4 OLSEN, David T., "Judges" in *New Interpreter's Bible Vol II*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).

Levite. Others have examined this text as an example of the faithlessness of the Israelites in a time when they had no king and “each man did what was right in his own eyes.”⁵ Others would dare to address the vulnerability and violation of the women in this story and subsequent story found in chapter 20.⁶

For the purposes of this conference, I would like to examine the work of womanist scholar, Koala Jones-Warsaw who suggests that patriarchy defined a social context in which layers of social ordering created multiple victims for which multiple parties bear responsibility.⁷ It would be too easy to isolate this story as the depraved act of violence against one woman in one community. However, the systems that existed to allow such violence to occur must be examined.

We must acknowledge that a social order had been created that privileged some by virtue of their gender, their age, their birth order, their marital status, their wealth, their tribal affiliation.

We must acknowledge that a social order had been created that privileged some by virtue of their gender, their age, their birth order, their marital status, their wealth, their tribal affiliation.

This social stratification is played out in the relationships between the individual men in this story. The father of this unnamed woman has a greater standing because of age. However, the master/husband was identified as a Levite which indicated that he was from the tribe responsible for the teaching and keeping of the holy laws that were to govern the Israelites - a religious man who held a position of honour, placing him above many other men in his society. The old man who opened his home to the Levite had been working in the fields, which suggest that he had neither sons nor servants to work for him and therefore possibly limited resources. The servant to the Levite is clearly the least influential of all the men in the story.

The two women in this story are both in vulnerable situations. The unnamed woman from Bethlehem is identified as a concubine, which means she has none of the privileges of a wife and is therefore in an inferior position both within her family and community. The virgin daughter of the old man is the only other female specifically identified in this story. It would not be an

5 *Ibid.*

6 Phyllis Trible, *Op.cit.*

7 WARSAW, Koala Jones, “Towards a Womanist Hermeneutic: A Reading of Judges 19-21” in a *Feminist Companion to Judges* ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

unreasonable conclusion that because of her age, marital status and possibly economic status, she was not in a particularly protected group.

Now let us take a moment and look at the story again:

The story begins with the woman having left the Levite, returning to her father's house and the Levite coming to bring her back. Biblical scholars debate the reasoning of her leaving. Some would translate the Hebrew verb *zānâ* as to commit adultery. Others would argue that the word could be translated "to become angry with." Because women in ancient Israel could not initiate divorce, the generic term of adultery is the only term that could be applied to a woman who leaves her "husband/master."⁸

What we do know is that the woman leaves the Levite's household, returns to her father's house and stays there four months. The Levite has come to "speak tenderly to her... to speak to her heart... and to bring her back."

What we do know is that the woman leaves the Levite's household, returns to her father's house and stays there four months. The Levite has come to "speak tenderly to her... to speak to her heart... and to bring her back."

I suspect it doesn't take great hermeneutical imagination to envision the gifts, the soft words, the wooing that the Levite did trying to get his woman back. However, the text reports no such gifts are given. No soft words are spoken. No wooing is experienced. Rather an exchange between two men is all we hear.

We watch an exchange between the Levite and his father-in-law for four days. It remains unclear whether the two were engaged in an ancient rite of "male bonding" - drinking, eating and making merry or whether the father was trying to detain the Levite in his house long enough to ascertain whether it was safe for his daughter to leave with him or whether they were engaged in a power play over who had claim to the daughter/concubine.⁹

The woman had become an object passed from father to her master/husband. Female sexuality is a valuable asset that is transferred from father to master/husband. What is clear is that the decision to stay or leave was no longer the decision of the woman, but now a brokered decision between two men, each of whom were responsible on some level for her well being. Each of whom,

8 David J.Olsen, *Op cit.*

9 McCANN, Clinton J., "Judges" in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002).

the story will reveal, failed her.

From the woman, her mother or any other female that may have influenced what was to come; we hear not a mumbling word. The narrator of this story effectively silences their voices and their witness.

From the woman, her mother or any other female that may have influenced what was to come; we hear not a mumbling word.
The narrator of this story effectively silences their voices and their witness.

Finally the Levite prevails over his father-in-law and decides to leave late on the fifth day. The decision to leave late in the day means they will not reach their destination before nightfall. The servant advises the Levite to stop and find refuge in the city of Jebus. But the Levite, not wanting to enter a city of “foreigners”, ignores the advice of his lower

positioned servant and decides to continue on to Gibeah, where he expected to receive an appropriate welcome and hospitality from his Benjaminite relatives. (Your enemy ain’t always the stranger!) Arriving in Gibeah, he waits in the public square to be invited into someone’s home. He waited for the ancient North African hospitality to be offered to him. However, there is not an outpouring of hospitality. And he waits. Finally, one old man of questionable economic status and position offers him hospitality. (It is often those who have the least who offer the most!)

No sooner had the Levite and his entourage entered the old man’s home and are enjoying themselves, the threat of attack on the Levite by a group of men outside the home is made known. They bang on the door demanding that the Levite be given to them so that they may rape him. The old man in an attempt to “protect” the Levite, offers to give the gang his virgin daughter instead.

Does this sound familiar? Remember Abraham and Lot? One must wonder what type of perverted social/familial system sacrifices children to protect adults? The Levite intervenes and throws his concubine to the destructive crowd. **From the virgin daughter, the wife of the old man or any other female in the house we hear not a mumbling word of opposition or protest.** Again, **the narrator has effectively silenced their voices and their witness.**

The brutal gang rape and torture of this daughter of God in the public square is appalling. It is not a brief horrible encounter; it is a prolonged and tortuous event that happened over hours - all night long. **Throughout this horrible ordeal, we are told that the Levite slept comfortably in the old man’s home and there wasn’t a mumbling word from that house... not a word of concern, not a word of prayerful supplication, not a mumbling word.**

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Throughout this atrocious attack in the public square there is not a mumbling word from any of the townspeople. Surely, somebody knew what was going on? Where were the family members of these crazy men? Where were the community busy-bodies? Where were those charged with the responsibility of keeping order? **There is a collusion of powers that allow such an attack to occur and we don't hear a mumbling word.**

The servant, the old man, the virgin daughter, other residents of the household, all the townspeople... nobody says a mumbling word! There is silence.

After being raped and tortured all night long, this unnamed daughter of God drags herself back to the house that should have been a source of protection and collapses on the doorstep. We can only imagine her lying there, beaten, raped and brutalized, but **consistent with the rest of this story, we do not hear even a whimper or a cry.**

The Levite wakes up from his sleep and prepares to go home. He doesn't prepare to go look for her, to comfort her, to confront her attackers, to confess his complicity and guilt for her demise. He prepares to continue on his journey. The only words we hear him speak to his beloved concubine, the woman he went to speak tenderly to and whose heart he wanted to touch with tender words - the only words we hear him speak when he sees her lying there is "GET UP! We are going." Again there is silence.

The servant, the old man, the virgin daughter, other residents of the household, all the townspeople... nobody says a mumbling word! There is silence.

The story does not end there. The Levite throws her on his donkey, goes home, and cuts her up in twelve pieces. Let me stop here for just one minute. We are never told when the woman dies. It is not clear that her unresponsiveness to the command to get up after being tortured and raped was because she was dead. We know that if she wasn't already dead, she is sufficiently dead after being dismembered!

Mieke Bal suggests that her death begins at her exposure to the ravaging crowds and ends with her dismemberment. She dies several times or rather she never stops dying!¹⁰

The Levite then sends her dismembered body throughout Israel as a call to war against the Benjaminites, declaring there has never been such a vile thing

10 BAL, Mieke, "A Body of Writing: Judges 19" in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, Athalya Brenner ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), p. 222.

done since the days of Egyptian bondage. To what vile thing is he referring? The rape to which he sacrificed his beloved? The torture for which he offered no words of sorrow or dismay? Or maybe the vile thing is that his male, patriarchal ego was bruised! He uses this horrific event as an excuse to wage war, murder the Benjaminites and rape 400 other women in Shiloh.

From the beginning to the end in this awful saga, there is this deafening silence that troubles my soul. There is silence even from God! From the beginning to the end, God says not a mumbling word!

Let us pause for a moment. I would like for you to discuss the question of “what fuels silence?”

I would argue with others that a social order that gives a hierarchal value to life, that defines some persons solely by their benefit to others and makes them easily expendable, is a social order that violates God’s intention for humanity. It is a social order in which people will negotiate their own positions and continuously look for others to throw to ravaging crowds in attempts to literally save their own asses. It is a social order in which fathers place daughters in vulnerable and violating situations. It is a social order in which husbands sacrifice their beloved for the sake of their own honour. It is a social order in which the most marginalized cannot find their own voice. It is a social order that creates a theology with a mute god in the face of unspeakable horror.

From the beginning to the end in this awful saga, there is this deafening silence that troubles my soul. There is silence even from God! From the beginning to the end, God says not a mumbling word!

Alice Walker in her book “Possessing the Secret of Joy” writes of a woman whose life has been defined by female genital mutilation. The woman Tashi asks for me a most relevant question.

“I grew agitated each time he (her pastor/husband) touched on the suffering of Jesus. For a long time my agitation confused me. I am a great lover of Jesus, and always have been. Still I began to see how the constant focus on the suffering of Jesus alone excludes the suffering of others from one’s view... I knew I wanted my own suffering, the suffering of women and little girls, still cringing before the overwhelming might and weapons of torture, to be the subject of a sermon. Was woman herself not the tree of life? And was she not crucified? Not in some age no one even remembers, but right now, daily, in many lands on earth?

“One sermon, I begged him, one discussion with your followers about what

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

was done to me. He said the congregation would be embarrassed to discuss something so private and that, in any case, he would be ashamed to do so.

“They circumcised women, little girls in Jesus’ time. Did he know? Did the subject anger or embarrass him? Did the early church erase the record? Jesus himself was circumcised; perhaps he thought only the cutting done to him was done to women, and therefore, since he survived, it was all right.”¹¹

When we who are marked by the waters of baptism and fed with the very life force of our Saviour at the Table of our Lord engage in the conspiracy of silence when violence and oppression is done to the most marginalized in our midst, are we by virtue of our silence, implying that for Jesus it is alright?

My dear friend and colleague, the Rev. Dr. Randall Bailey, in reflecting on the book of Judges notes that the violence perpetuated against women and children’s bodies - from the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter to the rape and murder of this unnamed woman from Bethlehem to and the mass rape of the daughters of Shiloh and the continual silence of God in the face of such violence is problematic to say the least. The narrator of Judges presents a god whose primary concern is a self-possessed jealousy and anger over the worship of some other deity that doesn’t exist.

The narrator in Judges does not present a God who is concerned about the treatment of women, the poor and the oppression of the stranger. **In the face of unbelievable horror, the narrator fails to record a mumbling word from God.**

Dr. Bailey argues that such a portrayal of God is a betrayal of God!¹²

What then becomes a more faithful response?

I hear the words of my slave ancestors who took Jeremiah’s question, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?”¹³ And flipped it with the answer as they began to sing: “There is a Balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul. There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. You may not preach like Peter, you may not pray like Paul, but you can show the power of Jesus who came to free us all... There is a balm in Gilead...”

11 WALKER, Alice, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (New York: Pocket Star Books 1992), pp. 275-276.

12 Dr. Bailey is the Andrew W. Mellan Professor of Hebrew Bible at the Interdenominational Theological Seminary in Atlanta, GA. This reflection comes from a March 11, 2009 interview with Dr. Bailey in preparation for this Bible study.

13 Jeremiah 8: 18-23

I had forgotten many of the details of Tashi's life. However, I never forgot the final message in her story: "**Resistance is the Secret of Joy!**"

Resistance is the balm in Gilead! Resistance! Resistance! Resistance!

Throughout the biblical text, the unnamed woman is made silent by the narrator. However, she was the only one in the story who exercised resistance to a social order that was oppressive. In verse 2, we are told, "But his concubine became angry with him and she went away from him to her father's house..." She took the initiative to escape a situation that was unacceptable.

What would have happened if she had a family and community of support that protected her rather than betrayed her? Not only would her life have been saved, but a brutal war, mass rapes of innocent women and the enslavement of a whole village could have been averted!

Harriet Brent Jacobs, a 21 year old enslaved mulatto escaped the sexual exploitation of her master by hiding in an attic crawl space in her grandmother's house for seven years. While only five feet four inches tall, there was barely room to lie down, no room to stand up and stretch. There was no ventilation, no protection from the bitter cold in the winter or the scorching heat in the summer. Her flesh was eaten by tiny insects. She was forced into silence and stillness unless her presence was made known. For seven years she hid in this place until she could escape to a place where chattel slavery would not define her. But her resistance was supported by her family and community who loved her. Her grandmother fed her, her uncle obtained needed medicine, her friends were on the lookout, her young children managed to keep an unspeakable secret. Silence has its place... never in the collusion of oppression, always in the service of liberation!¹⁴

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Joanne Little was a young uneducated Black woman in North Carolina who while being jailed for some minor offense was subject to rape by her jailer. She resisted and killed him! Knowing that she would not receive a fair trial, she managed to escape prison. However, a national movement of African

¹⁴ BRENT, Linda, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: An Authentic Historical Narrative Describing the Horrors of Slavery as Experienced by Black Women*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973).

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Americans and feminists committed to justice rose up to her defence and dared to resist a system that would declare a woman had no right to defend herself against sexual assault.

When the collusion of powers wanted to justify the massacre of Surekha and her children, the community resisted this distortion, came out en masse, protesting and demanding that truth would come forth until her story was told and justice given!

Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar suggests that, resistance begins, “When we begin to understand the Dalit body as a subversive tool for theologizing in context. It is a theology that understands “there is no place for silence, passivity and uncritical accommodations or absorption of violence against Dalits when one opts to engage in (and not just study) Dalit theologizing.”¹⁵

I believe that for the church one of our first acts of resistance must be to break the silence, to remember the victims of violence, to call forth their names, to tell their stories, to lament for their families, and the whole community’s loss of their potential.

We must resist the temptation to protect our positions of privilege (as little as it might be) and participate in the collusion of silence. We must resist the silencing of God and then demanding allegiance to such a god in the face of unspeakable horror.

I believe that for the church one of our first acts of resistance must be to break the silence, to remember the victims of violence, to call forth their names, to tell their stories, to lament for their families, and the whole community’s loss of their potential.

Acts of Remembrance, Confession, and Lament: The community is invited to remember, name and lament the victims of violence.

Resistance is found in Elizabeth Joy’s article, “*Dalit Woman’s Body in Relation to Land, Labour and Liberation*” when she quotes Samuel Ryan that we must employ a theology that will not attempt to explain away suffering, but will engage a praxis to overcome all the minions of death. The perspective or horizon in our context will be God as freedom... Theology will connect hope and freedom in history; connect eschatology and struggle for justice now;

15 ANDERSON RAJKUMAR, Evangeline, “*Dalit Body: A Subversive Tool for Theologizing in Context*” in *In God’s Image: Journal of Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture and Theology*, Vol. 26, No. 3, (September 2007).

connect the reign of God and social change.¹⁶

Resistance is picking up the challenge that Annie Namala presents when she suggest that the church must develop a theological angle that accompanies legal and human rights struggles, building a “sound base with which Dalit women and the community can rebuild their social image. The task would be to go beyond presenting the Bible and Christian theology as given today, but to help Dalit women and community to create one from their experience and break away from the mould of the outcaste-untouchable and affirm the image of God in them.”¹⁷

Resistance is engaging in work that moves Dalit women and other excluded, marginalized people from lives of degradation, death and destruction, to hope and possibilities.

Resistance involves committing ourselves to confronting and dismantling hierarchical systems that allow for the destruction of sons and daughters of the Most High God. Resistance means committing ourselves to work for and building communities and systems that values and honours each human being as one in whom divine potential exists. Resistance means committing ourselves to work for a world in which every living being is respected as part of God’s created order. Resistance is seeking out those who have been defiled, dismembered, and discarded on the dung heaps of this world and daring to speak words of life, restoring to them all that has been destroyed! Resistance is believing in the power of the resurrection today, right now in the face of death and destruction!

Resistance is hard work. Many of you here have been engaged in resistance struggles for a long time. You finish one struggle only to find another struggle and another struggle. You wonder if your work makes any difference and if you can engage in yet another struggle.

I remind you again of the words of my slave ancestors: “Sometimes I feel discouraged and think my work’s in vain. But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul. There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.”

I remind you again of the words of my slave ancestors: “Sometimes I feel discouraged and think my work’s in vain. But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul. There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.”

16 JOY, Elizabeth, “Dalit Woman’s Body in Relation to Land, Labour and Liberation” in In God’s Image, *Ibid*.

17 NAMALA, Annie, *Affirming the Image of God in Dalit Women: As Task for the Indian Church*, in In God’s Image, *Ibid*.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

I am most encouraged by Koala Jones-Warsaw's suggestion that our hope lies in the resurrection of black women (of Dalit women; of all women) who must gather together the pieces of herself from every field and dumping ground and stand before God and humanity as a whole human being and declare in the words of Maya Angelou:

You may write me down in history
With your bitter twisted lies
You may trod in the very dirt,
But still like dust I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.
Just like moons and like suns
With the certainty of tides
Just like hopes springing high
Still I'll rise

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops
Wakened by my soulful cries.

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own back yard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes
You may kill me with your hatefulness
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise

Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling
I bear in the tide
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave
I am the dream and the hope of the slave
I rise
I rise
I rise¹⁸

In the name of this unnamed women from Bethlehem, may it be so!

18 ANGELOU Maya, *Maya Angelou Poems* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), pp. 154-155.

TAKING BACK MY YESTERDAYS



I am no longer innocent,
but I am not guilty of the wrong
you have done to me.
The sacred shadows of yesterday
rise like spectres of injustice.

Like Banshee, they sound an alarm
meant to cower me,
but I will not.

Cower as others may,
I am not captive to your forever-sins,
neither victim of your momentary
whims.

I am colorizing my memories,
sanctifying them for my future.
Stubbornness has taken hold of me,
and I am staring down the sorrow,
factoring in the pain,
and becoming Today and Tomorrow
Strong.

The non-memories I have blocked
I am filling with faith in a God
who moves forward and leads.

I want to take my medicine bag,
those healing stones
that helped me survive your cruelty.
I will need them
in the not-too-far-successes
I will encounter.

Valerie Bridgeman Davis is founding president of Woman Preach Inc., the premiere ministry that brings women to full prophetic voice, and is associate professor of Hebrew Bible/Homiletics & Worship at Lancaster Theological Seminary. She is a published and award-winning poet.

You may not keep them.
And my tears are reserved
in a heavenly bottle numbered by
Wisdom.

They belong to me again,
and are on account,
testifying against you.

No, you may no longer name yourself
My judge or my destiny.

All you stole, I now reclaim with force.
The violence you used against me –
that whirlwind that wrecked my life –
well, I have learned to harness wind
and thunder.

The violence, I have turned to my own
power.

And yes, I am here to take everything
you kept:

pieces of my soul,
pieces of my heart,
And my destiny.

The future is ahead, and I need them.
I am taking back my yesterdays.

**Rev. Dr. Valerie J.
Bridgeman Davis**

WOMANHOOD

A BIBLE STUDY ON PROVERBS 31

Rev. Dr. Gillian Wilson

Gillian Wilson is a Guyanese who currently lives in Jamaica and is the librarian of the United Theological College of the West Indies (UTCWI). She has served as co-ordinator of the Institute of Continuing Studies (ICS, UTCWI). Gillian is an ordained deacon in the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas (MCCA), and Director of the Wesley Diaconal Community. She also served as deacon in the Tobago Circuit of the South Caribbean District, MCCA.

Introduction

Women are said to be nurturers and to have the ability (even though not used) to dictate how the world turns. The proverb “the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world” bears testimony to this and to the fact that early childhood caregivers at some point dictate the morals of society. The book of Proverbs makes reference to three women: Woman ‘Wisdom’, Queen Mother and the Virtuous Wife.

The women we glimpse in Proverbs 31 differ significantly from the women referred to throughout the book. On the whole the women outside of Proverbs 31 are seen as inconsequential, disreputable, untrustworthy and fatal to the well-being of men.

The women we glimpse in Proverbs 31 differ significantly from the women referred to throughout the book. On the whole the women outside of Proverbs 31 are seen as inconsequential, disreputable, untrustworthy and fatal to the well-being of men.

The two women, described as the Queen Mother and the Virtuous Wife are presented as strong and influential in their own right. Their position as mother and wife has not restricted them. On the contrary, it has given them an arena within which they can exert power. The power they employ is not oppressive, exploitative or manipulative, it is relational. It is used for the benefit of others.

Understanding the text

In Proverbs 31, in some respects, womanhood is depicted in ways that seem positive. At the same time however, the depiction of womanhood bears some

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

of the values of the society of the day. In fact some of the teachings in the text reflect and reinforce the values and customs of a society that is patriarchal in structure and androcentric in perspective. For example, the male perspective of the instruction is evidenced in the repeated warning about the temptress, which we see in the earlier sections of Proverbs. She is depicted as worldly, wise, taking advantage of the naiveté of the young and innocent man. The underlying understanding is that the woman is captivating, provocative and can be irresistible.

The truth is that men too are captivating and provocative. They can be just as attractive and irresistible. The fact that only a woman is portrayed in this light says less about the seductive character of women and more about the gender bias of the writer.

In the Book of Proverbs the women of Israel are depicted in the positions assigned to them by the religious, social and ethical norms of the day. However in this closing chapter some attempt is made to show them in another light - that of good mothers and industrious women. One of the problems in this text is that while the text teaches the 'fear of Yahweh', the woman who is exalted is not the one who fears Yahweh but the one who brings honour to her husband in public life. We also see that while the mother advises her son, one significant advice is against spending his strength on women who are described as those who ruin kings (v.3).

Interpreting the Scriptural text

Proverbs 31.1-9

This passage is distinctive in that the advice comes from the queen mother rather than from the reigning king. She calls the king "son of my vows" indicating that she made promises to God in exchange for the birth of this son. Mothers at all times and places warn their sons against dangerous women and drunkenness. Earlier in Proverbs we see a similar warning (23.27-35). The general understanding is that the damaging effects are greater when the son is a king. Here the mention of a vow suggests that the son's misbehaviour might cast a shadow over his mother's integrity in the eyes of God.

Proverbs 31.10-31

This poem is titled "the virtuous wife". It speaks of a woman whose husband is well respected at the gates because of her conduct. (31.23) It was probably created not to honour one particularly praiseworthy woman but rather to underscore the central significance of the work of skilled women in a household-based economy.

A commentator suggests that it might be likely that the poem was composed in the period after the Babylonian exile, when, with the collapse of the great national centres of government and religion the home became the central social and religious institution, the place where the Israelite identity was established.

This industrious wife is presented as a model wife, mother, and provider. However this portrait is the prevailing model fostered by patriarchal society. While her husband is seated with the elders at the gates of the city, presumably conducting the public business of the society, she is busy providing for the private needs of the household.

Even though the wife works outside the home all her business is transacted on behalf of her family. Hence even though she is out of the home her business remains within the sphere of the family while her husband continues in the public sphere. The fact that the poem ends on an imperative note suggests that women did not often receive public recognition for their role in maintaining the well-being of family and community.

The main virtues identified in chapter 31 - prudence and temperance, are both important for the well being of the individual and the community in which she lives. The person who recognises her worth and value as a woman, partner, mother, sister and friend can deal better with reality and challenges. She need not be weighed down with the stress of insecurities and anxiety about the future (v.25). She is able to act generously towards others (v.20) and to contribute to wholeness and well-being. Her own happiness is a sphere of blessing to others.

Exploring the meaning of the text

In verses 1-9 Dianne Bergant suggests that what is important is not so much the queen mother role as instructor but rather the content of her instruction. For her advice to her son reflects the dominant values of the patriarchal society in which she lives. In this way her advice can be understood as contributing to and supporting the gender bias of the society. This bias is brought out in the mode of training advice and caution against Lemuel's dealing with women.¹

A role model for Christian women today

When we read the text at face value we find the qualities that the Israelite society might have expected from a woman which would qualify as a good or wise woman.

¹ BERGANT, Dianne, *Israel's Wisdom Literature* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

When we read this text from a Caribbean woman's perspective of a single woman who heads a household and who enters the fray every day competing in an androcentric society as well as competing with members of her own sex, we find aspects of liberation and oppression.

Proverb 31, especially the second section, is used in the Jewish household as a model for the soon to be wife and/or mother who serves the needs of her family diligently.

When we examine this ancient biblical ideal of womanhood the question as to whether the chapter deals with the queen as the mother and the advisor of the king, or of the king giving kudos to his mother, depends on how we read the text. Whether the wife is an industrious woman serving in her own private sphere, or whether it is the public status of the man that is being exalted depends also on how the text is read. In the text we do not find the stereotyped housewife occupied with household chores. Her daily life is not dictated by the demands of her husband and her children. We do not find a hardened, overly ambitious career woman who leaves her family to fend for itself either. What we find is a strong, dignified, multitalented, caring woman who is an individual in her own right.

When we read this text from a Caribbean woman's perspective of a single woman who heads a household and who enters the fray every day competing in an androcentric society as well as competing with members of her own sex, we find aspects of liberation and oppression.

But what of the Caribbean women who since the 1970s and 80s dragged, hauled, pushed, pulled, fetched, lifted, and carried merchandise in what was known as "trading" to provide not only for their households, but also to strengthen the ailing economy of their nations. Their merchandise stocked supermarkets and paved the way for varying types of commerce. These activities benefited many families as homes were built, food was placed on the table and children educated.

The current state of the world's financial and social crises has forced more and more women to, as the Caribbean proverb goes, "tun yuh hand an' mek fashion". Probably, this is similar to what was happening in Israel at the time of the writing of the text.

Throughout the world more and more women from affluent families have been entering the world of paid labour and the world of work. The struggle for survival has awakened them to struggle in other areas where human destiny

is also at stake. Entering the labour force has changed the expression of women's faith. From their previous horizon of home and family, women have opened out to a broader reality.

God is no longer one who addresses a world limited to the activities of home and family; God becomes the one who addresses socioeconomic and political challenges.

The image of God is no longer that of father to whom one owes submission; rather God is basically the image of what is most human in woman and man, seeking expression and liberation.

How do we study texts such as Proverbs 31 in this changed and changing context?

The current state of the world's financial and social crises has forced more and more women to, as the Caribbean proverb goes, "tun yuh hand an' mek fashion". Probably, this is similar to what was happening in Israel at the time of the writing of the text.

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Conclusion

The model woman described in Proverbs as a portrait of ideal womanhood is not to be looked upon as being outside the reach of the specific Caribbean women that I chose to focus on. The focus of this portrait should be a woman's relationship with God, not her specific abilities or marital status. Who is a virtuous woman today? While Proverbs 31 tells us that it is the woman who serves her family best, the ideal woman is the woman who puts her trust in God, and this should encourage all women everywhere.

As a group share your reactions to this passage.

- ⑨ What do you think about the way in which the woman is portrayed in both sections of Proverb 31?
- ⑨ What does this passage tell you about women and work and security?
- ⑨ Identify any parallels in your region that can be drawn with women's position today?
- ⑨ Compare the roles of women in the text and the roles of women in the Caribbean today.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Group activity

This passage was written as a poem in the form known as an acrostic. Each line began with a letter following the order of the Hebrew alphabet.

- ⑨ Ask each group member to write a brief poem or skit about women and work in the 21st century.
- ⑨ OR ask group members to write a verse beginning with the letters of the alphabet about women and work in their communities.
- ⑨ Share the poems and skits and encourage the writers to speak about events or experiences that prompted them to write what they have.

REV. WINIFRED RHODEN- RUTHERFORD

Rev. Dr. Marjorie Lewis

Thy life was given for me;
thy blood, O Lord, was shed,
that I might ransomed be,
and quickened from the dead.
Thy life was given for me;
what have I given for thee?¹

Winifred Rhoden-Rutherford was born in St. Catherine, Jamaica. She was the first woman ordained by the Disciples of Christ in Jamaica (now United Church of Jamaica and Cayman Islands). In the early days as a child in the Sunday School of a Methodist Church, Winifred, when asked by the Sunday School teacher what she wanted to be when she grew up, said, "A Missionary."

Her call to ministry was not a dramatic experience, but a desire from childhood days to serve God, which was nurtured by her mother and Sunday School teachers, given focus while attending Oberlin High School as a boarder where she gave her life to Christ, then going on to service in a

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1 Hymn by Frances Ridley Havergal, 1858

number of capacities in Jamaica and the United States.

For most of her ministry, Winifred worked as a “Tent Maker,” earning a living in other jobs while serving the church in ministry. What was the spiritual journey through which she travelled?

For most of her ministry, Winifred worked as a “Tent Maker,” earning a living in other jobs while serving the church in ministry. What was the spiritual journey through which she travelled?

Winifred describes it in this way:

“I grew up in a Christian home where my mother was a great influence in my life. Her loyalty and dedication to God and the church made a remarkable difference in the way her five children were brought up. (I was the second of five.) At the age of 15 and a student at Oberlin High School, I committed my life to the Lord and was baptized at the Oberlin Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The words of the hymn, “Thy life was given for me, what have I given for Thee?” spurred me on to commitment. What had I done for God? The thought of full time ministry was not in my mind, although at about the age of nine or ten, I told my Sunday School teacher that I wanted to be a missionary. I attribute my decision to go into full time ministry to Mrs. Dorothy Robertson, teacher and wife of the Principal of Oberlin High School.²

The Disciples of Christ Church was at that time recruiting students to study at the Seminary and the school being under the auspices of the church was asked to recommend committed candidates. I was singled out and encouraged by Mrs. Rob to apply for training in Christian Education at the Theological Seminary at Canewood.

At first I was reluctant, saying why me, but a voice spoke to me, saying why not you?

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With the encouragement of my mother and Mrs. Robertson, I started the three year study and the journey. Along the way I was tempted to give up, but I was encouraged by Richmond Nelson a student at the Seminary and also by Mr. and Mrs. Montgomery³, tutors at the Seminary. They reminded me that Christ did not promise an easy road, and that there would be bumps along the way, but He also promised never to leave us nor forsake us. I was encouraged and continued the course of study.

2 Rev. Cyril Robertson was the Principal of Oberlin High School at that time.

3 Ruth and J.D. Montgomery were sent by the Disciples of Christ in the US to work with the Disciples of Christ in Jamaica as tutors at Union Theological Seminary, Canewood, Jamaica

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

My journey continued as I served the churches in Portland, preparing for and conducting vacation Bible School, workshops for Sunday School teachers and working with Christian Youth Fellowship groups. My job also included directing Youth Conferences. I began to pastor churches when there was a shortage of pastors especially for some of the rural churches. Some of the churches were the Lucky Hill, Providence circuit and the Mannings Hill, Oberlin and Salisbury Plains circuit.

As a pastor and Guidance Counsellor, my life has been dedicated to helping children, teenagers and their parents to make wise decisions. Since the treasures and wisdom and knowledge are hid in Christ my goal has been to provide Biblical principles and concepts of life to guide people in their choices. Putting God first in all things, not only in matters of religion but in all matters of life whether religious or secular, and expressing deep appreciation to God and to people, are my basic principles.

Among my favourite scripture texts, are; Is 40.31 “But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint”; and Jer 29.11: “For I know the thoughts that I think towards you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.”

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Winifred describes her ministerial career in this way:

“I began my ministerial career 54 years ago when I entered the Canewood Theological Seminary now the United Theological College of the West Indies (UTCWI). My field of study was Christian Education. In 1959, I was ordained to the Christian Ministry and was assigned the position of Director of Christian Education to the Disciples of Christ Churches in Jamaica. I worked with children and young people, organising and directing Youth Conferences, Vacation Bible Schools, Workshops, etc. My love for children and young people took me to the field of public education where I taught Religious Education and other subjects at Oberlin High School, my alma mater.

In 1965, I migrated to the United States where I continued my education earning a Bachelor’s Degree in Sociology and later a Master’s Degree in

Guidance and Counselling. My career in the church and in public education spanned 55 years between Jamaica and the United States. I served as pastor, teacher and guidance counsellor in Jamaica and in the United States. I also served on several Boards of the Northeastern Region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in New York. On the National level I served on the Board of the Division of Overseas Ministries of the church. For 19 years I was a Guidance Counsellor with the New York City Board of Education.

In this position I was able to touch the lives of many children and their parents. This was a fulfilling ministry for me.

In this position I was able to touch the lives of many children and their parents. This was a fulfilling ministry for me.

In 1992 myself and a group of six started the United Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Brooklyn, New York. I was able to help our small congregation acquire a building for permanent worship. After serving as the pastor of the United Christian Church for 10 years, I retired. I am now residing in Orlando, Florida.

On a personal note I have one daughter, Alyssa. In 1995, I married my elementary school friend and neighbour, Cleveland Rutherford (after over 40 years of not seeing or corresponding with each other).

WOMEN, BEAUTY AND PERSONAL EMPOWERMENT - BODY, MIND AND SPIRIT

A BIBLE STUDY ON PROVERBS 8

Ms Jennifer Ayana Mccalman & Ms Simone Singh

Ayana McCalman is a 28 year old Guyanese attorney-at-law. She currently serves the Council for World Mission (CWM) as a deputy moderator and Caribbean region representative. She has a passion for justice especially regarding issues affecting women and youth.

Simone Singh is a 24 year old youth leader from Trinidad & Tobago. She is the national youth coordinator of the Presbyterian Church in T&T. Simone is engaged in policy design and implementation of youth programmes involving peace in society, including gender based violence.

Introduction

Ever heard the slang statements, “If you aint red, yuh dead?” or “The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice?” They both refer to the skin tones of women found in the Caribbean – black, brown, red, yellow.

Too often, even in our Caribbean society, who we are, is surmised based upon the colour of our skin and the texture of our hair. Conclusions are drawn based upon the curves of our hips and the clothes that we wear. It is commonly said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but is beauty found only through the physical eye or the eye of the mind?

Together, our body, mind and spirit constitute our total image. Thus, it is unfortunate that the image of women has often been distorted in media and culture. Our society has demeaned the woman through its limited focus on the body and outward appearances. This has had a massive degenerative impact on the society’s view of beauty and how it is defined. For many women, the only symbol of beauty that they could recognize is their bodies. For

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many more women their bodies represent a struggle with self esteem and identity as they strive to fit the fashion model size presented in the latest advertising trend or music video. These issues restrain the capacities of women, restricting them from being confident about their bodies and their worth as human beings. We have to empower women to become self-assured so that they can make healthy choices about their lifestyles and their bodies, so transforming their lives and enabling them to fully contribute to the advancement of their societies.

This Bible study examines one image of “woman” as presented in Proverbs 8. It is presented with the hope that it will start a conversation on the meaning of real beauty and will encourage women to take actions to empower themselves and each other to restore their whole image in body, mind and spirit.

Questions to ponder:

What defines us as persons? What motivates us to be self-assured, confident and productive as women?

This Bible study examines one image of “woman” as presented in Proverbs 8. It is presented with the hope that it will start a conversation on the meaning of real beauty and will encourage women to take actions to empower themselves and each other to restore their whole image in body, mind and spirit.

In Proverbs 8 the virtue of wisdom is personified. Wisdom is given human qualities and abilities, and made to appear as a woman. Proverbs 8 stands out as unique and remarkable because the recorders of the text present this matchless imagery of woman, even though the Bible itself is written almost exclusively in male language, by men. Even the book of Proverbs was written by King Solomon, the wisest person to have walked the earth, and he is the one to personify wisdom as a woman. Throughout this study we will refer to the imagery in Proverbs 8 as the “Woman Wisdom” in alignment with the personification of wisdom as a woman in the biblical text.

Understanding the text

The Woman Wisdom is introduced at the beginning of the book of Proverbs (see Prov 1.22-33) and at length in Proverbs 8 and 9. The Woman Wisdom is a remarkable, positive image of femininity, as it is a virtue that men and women alike seek after. It is a virtue that seems almost unattainable, one that is linked directly to the attributes of the Creator. People always research words of wisdom and attempt to incorporate wisdom into their daily lives. There are many calendars, books, desktop items, diaries and so on that incorporate

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

words of wisdom for users. People send text messages, set their Facebook statuses and spread e-mails that contain wise sayings and quotations. It is indeed an advantage to have wisdom and use it in one's life. Especially in the Caribbean islands, we seek wisdom from the experiences of our mothers, grandmothers and the elder women in our communities. When we need advice on life issues, medicinal remedies, family life, prayer and spiritual guidance, we often seek out the women who have endured much through their lives, and who can give timely and practical advice to soothe our souls. This is why the imagery of woman as Wisdom is so very noteworthy for us to contemplate and identify with.

Proverbs 8 offers a direct challenge from Scripture to the distorted and negative beliefs held by society and even within the church regarding the image and role of women. We understand even more why the Woman Wisdom is remarkable when we first consider the book of Proverbs itself.

There are several key principles in the book of Proverbs that enable us to interpret and unlock the meaning of Proverbs 8. These principles include:

- ⑨ The source of wisdom is devotion to God. Prov 1.7 declares "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge."
- ⑨ The book of Proverbs is intended to provide practical instruction to both women and men for daily living. The book includes instructions on various matters such as decision making about the way and order of life; responsible family life; just relationships; discipline, wealth and success.
- ⑨ The book of Proverbs encourages embracing wisdom, that is, life ordered by divine principles of truth, righteousness and justice in contrast to foolishness. Foolishness is not merely being silly or senseless but lacking good judgment and refusing to be corrected.

Within the verses of Proverbs chapter 8 we encounter wisdom personified as the "Woman Wisdom" who is presented as:

- ⑨ Speaking in the first person with her words. She cries out and shouts: Prov 8.1-4.
- ⑨ A symbol of truth, righteousness and justice. The virtue of wisdom is praised as the true source of life and success: see Prov 8.7-8; 15; Prov 8.34-35.

It is the Woman Wisdom whose image is given as positively representing the call to common sense, good judgment, truth and righteousness in daily life.

- ⑨ The divine companion of God. She is described as present and participating in the creation of the world: Prov 8.22-31.

It is the Woman Wisdom whose image is given as positively representing the call to common sense, good judgment, truth and righteousness in daily life.

This depiction of the Woman Wisdom invites us to consider for further study why the writers presented wisdom as female. It has been suggested that the writers of the text may have been influenced both by the cross-cultural depictions of women in religious writing as goddesses as well as the roles of actual women who lived at that time. Some of these real women are recorded in the Old Testament including the unnamed Daughters of Zelophehad whose petition changed the law of Israel regarding land (Num 27.1-11) and Deborah who served the kingdom of Israel as a Prophetess and as a wife and mother (Judg 4,5).

No matter what the source of influence was for presenting wisdom as female, the text stands as another positive image for women. The text provides significant lessons to both women and men regarding the image of women as created by God. We explore these lessons below.

The role and image of women

“She could have been no more than twelve. She was brought from Guyana, she said, to work as a domestic. It had turned out that she had other duties, including serving her employer’s sexual needs as well. We asked if she was in school. She shook her head in the negative. We asked if she would like to go to school. She nodded. Her eyes lit up at the thought but it was soon replaced by a cowering fear that her keeper would discover that she had shared with us this dream of a door to freedom. She hurriedly declared that she must go, fear filling her face...” (Excerpt from *Trinidad Express Newspaper “Women & Girls”* by Dr. Kris Rampersad, *September 24, 2010*)

The Woman Wisdom directly challenges the underlying assumption of women as weak, passive or powerless and the use of scriptures to support these images. It is a direct challenge to the stereotypical images regarding the sexuality of women either as virgins, whores or mere objects for sexual fantasy. It also calls for an end to silence on the experiences and portrayal of women as objects of violence and abuse.

Questions to ponder: What are the roles of women in the home, workplace, church, society? How have they changed over the years? What sorts of messages are given to our younger generation about the role and function of women in the society?

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

The Woman Wisdom declares that those who find her find life and favour from the Lord and warns that those who hate her love death: Prov 8.35-36.

The Woman Wisdom declares that those who find her find life and favour from the Lord and warns that those who hate her love death: Prov 8.35-36.

Therefore as we begin to consider matters of beauty - in mind, body and spirit - we must encourage women to recognise that real beauty is found when they embrace wisdom and take responsibility for their daily life to walk practically in the principles of truth, justice and righteousness. This is true beauty, beauty that is found in our thoughts, words, actions – beauty of the heart and soul. Such beauty should be more influential and acknowledged than beauty of the skin and body.

The Woman Wisdom also calls us to recognise the inherent worth of both women and men as divinely created beings. The text in Proverbs 8 cries out against the misinterpretation of the creation story in Genesis, of women as somewhat inferior, since she was created out of the rib of the man, and is therefore part of the man and not a whole person. The Woman Wisdom acknowledges that she too like all living things of the earth is created by God (Prov 8.25).

It is noteworthy also that the Woman Wisdom is shown in the text as speaking in the first person. In fact she shouts and cries aloud (Prov 8.1-2). We must then encourage women to speak out and share their stories in their own words and with their own voices. We must further encourage women to acknowledge and demand that their whole person - body, mind and spirit be regarded as sacred and beautiful with conscious recognition of their roles as equal partners in fulfilling God's mission. We were created with purpose and importance by God, and are irreplaceable upon this earth.

Questions to ponder: What actions can we take individually or as a group to share and spread the image of woman as “Woman Wisdom”? How can we inculcate the virtue of wisdom into our daily lives – by word, thought and action? What routes will we take to shape the image of women for the next generation?

Conclusion

A re-reading of the text of Proverbs 8 provides the opportunity to continue the discourse between women and men as created in the image of God, before considering cultural assumptions about acceptable and appropriate gender

roles and relationships. The latter point is often where the conversation between women and men begins. However, the alternative method of starting the conversation about the image of women and men as created by God may help to overcome resistance to the discourse from both women and men. It provides an opportunity to diffuse arguments centred solely about who is victor or victim, powerful or powerless and can inspire creative, productive and mutually beneficial dialogue.

Even more, the Woman Wisdom presents a model for women to take action, acknowledge their spiritual strength, and work towards their own positive self awareness and personal growth. We are challenged to steer our warped societal views of women away from beauty of the body toward beauty of the spirit.

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that frightens us most. We ask ourselves, ‘Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and famous?’ Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that people won’t feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It’s not just in some of us; it’s in all of us. And when we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”¹

CARIBBEAN WOMAN!

(Proverbs 31)

Rev. Doreen Wynter and Hon. Joan M. Purcell

Virtuous Woman!

Strong Woman, Weak Woman
Radical Activist, Professional catalyst

Virtuous Woman!

Inclusive and attractive
Competent and caring

In private and in public

1 WILLIAMSON, Marianne “Our Deepest Fear” from *A Return To Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles* http://skdesigns.com/internet/articles/quotes/williamson/our_deepest_fear. Quoted by Nelson Mandela in his inaugural speech in 1994.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

She is all that and more

Virtuous Woman!

Seeking and questioning

Reflecting and analysing

Strong in faith, Steadfast in hope

Open to love, Devoted to God

Virtuous Woman!

Acknowledges her fears and bears well her cares

Faces her struggles and never gives up

So don't write us off, we're more than enough

We're everywhere in the Caribbean Seas

From Dominican Republic in the North to Guyana in the South

We are Virtuous Women!



WOMEN, LEADERSHIP AND POWER IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY

Rev. Joy Evelyn Abdul-Mohan

Joy Abdul-Mohan is a minister with the Presbyterian Church in Trinidad & Tobago in a three point pastoral region and serves as Chaplain of three Presbyterian Primary Schools. Joy is the first woman trained and ordained locally in the Presbyterian Church of Trinidad & Tobago (PCTT). She is the first woman to serve as principal of the St. Andrew's Theological College (SATC), Trinidad 2002-2010. Joy works extensively with ecumenical and community organisations that serve and care for prisoners, abused women and children.

Read Judg 4.1-10; reference text: Mark 10.35-45

Introduction

Women and men together are created in God's image and both together represent the fullness of God and humanity. Both were created with a specific purpose in mind and an inner power.

I am using power to mean the ability to do, act or produce, which means that power, can be destructive or constructive. Power, as used in this Bible study, also refers to energy and control. From these perspectives we can say that power is present in the very fabric of our lives, that is, in political, social, economic and religious structures. In other words, power is endemic to life itself and it has both positive and negative connotations. However, power is a gift from God and should be used to bring fullness of life to humanity.

As women in leadership, we need to ensure that we unleash the power within that will enable us to improve the quality of life of ourselves and others, to build and not destroy; a power that will help us realize our fullest potential and fulfil the purpose for which we were created.

Suffice it to say that women have played a

Women and men together are created in God's image and both together represent the fullness of God and humanity. Both were created with a specific purpose in mind and an inner power.

Women, leadership and power in church and society

central and vital role in people's struggles across the globe against oppression and exploitation. In the Caribbean we hear names like Eugenia Charles (Dominican Republic), Portia Simpson (Jamaica), Janet Jagan (Guyana), Enid Kirton (Trinidad), Anna Mahase (Trinidad), Zalayhar Hassanali (Trinidad), Beryl McBernie (Trinidad) and Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the first female Prime Minister of Trinidad & Tobago. Internationally, we can recall the efforts, sacrifice and service of women, to name a few like Aung San Suu Kyi, Indira Gandhi, Mother Theresa and Rosa Parks among others.

As women in leadership, we need to ensure that we unleash the power within that will enable us to improve the quality of life of ourselves and others, to build and not destroy; a power that will help us realize our fullest potential and fulfil the purpose for which we were created.

Albeit women in the Caribbean and in other countries have made strides in their struggle for liberation, society has continued to perpetuate many forms of exploitation and oppression of women. Hence, a crisis of leadership engulfs the world today. Political leaders, economic experts, leaders in the field of education, law and religion; women and men who know the way and can lead others on the progressive path are very few.

Deborah is one of the most remarkable characters and leaders in the Old Testament. She was considered among the wisest of Old Testament women. She was indeed a famous and fearless patriot, chosen and called by God to liberate her troubled and crushed people.

In the Bible we find examples of women who held critical positions of leadership and made significant contributions. One such person is Deborah of whom we read in the book of Judges.

Reading and interpreting the text

Deborah is one of the most remarkable characters and leaders in the Old Testament. She was considered among the wisest of Old Testament women.

She was indeed a famous and fearless patriot, chosen and called by God to liberate her troubled and crushed people.

Many and varied were the accomplishments of her brilliant career. She was one of the many women in scriptures distinguished as a prophet. She was a competent judge and leader. But apparently this public activity did not prevent her, or make her in any way neglectful of her domestic responsibilities.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

As a prophetess Deborah discerned the mind of God for her times and declared the purpose of God to her people. Dignified in person “she used to sit under the palm (tree)... between Ramah and Bethel in Mount Ephraim: and the Israelites came up to her for judgment.” (Judg 4.5)

Deborah’s leadership was not merely that of mediator settling some dispute. It also reflected God’s values of righteousness, justice and mercy which she dispensed after her victory over Israel’s enemies. She ruled with justice in a land that had been at war for forty years. (Judg 5.31) Deborah was a servant-leader in the sense that she served selflessly and sacrificially - for the good of her country.

Early in her leadership role as a judge, Deborah was greatly concerned about Israel’s oppression as understood by the community and its leaders. For them God had told Barak to take the necessary steps to deliver Israel, but he lacked the courage or the know-how to initiate the conquest. When this was made known to Deborah, she sent for Barak and said to him, “The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, “Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun” (Judg 4.6-7). Barak was fearful, however, and said to her, “If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go” (Judg 4.8). Barak’s obvious dependence upon Deborah indicates the great degree of leadership, which she wielded in Israel at the time. The whole initiative of the battle was in the hands of this female leader, judge and companion in battle.

Interestingly, Barak saw Deborah’s leadership skills and celebrated it. He was not an insecure male with a blown up ego that prevented him from seeing the benefits of her leadership at that time in Israel. Barak actually broke the status quo and looked beyond the taboos of the day.

Interestingly, Barak saw Deborah’s leadership skills and celebrated it. He was not an insecure male with a blown up ego that prevented him from seeing the benefits of her leadership at that time in Israel. Barak actually broke the status quo and looked beyond the taboos of the day.

On the other hand, Deborah’s reply to Barak was simply, “I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman” (Judg 4.9). Barak values the satisfaction of his mind, and the good success of his country, more than his honour; and therefore by no means would he drop his request. He would not go into battle without Deborah, to direct him and pray for him. Also, Barak must have understood that it was not going to be easy for him as a man to permit a woman to take the front line.

Women, leadership and power in church and society

He knew that there was going to be 'talk' so he prepared himself for it. So Deborah went with Barak, she would not send him where she would not go herself as a servant-leader.

The scriptures show that as judge, Deborah exercised authority in matters of legal disputes. As a prophetess she proclaimed God's word to the people; and with divine inspiration she composed one of the greatest pieces of poetry in the Bible as found in Judges 5.

At the time of the judges it seemed that 'men' of faith and heroism had largely disappeared from Israel. The Joshuas and Calebs were no more and the people were crushed in spirit. But Israel's victory will come through Deborah's skillful leadership.

Deborah lived and worked in a very patriarchal society where women were treated as inferior to men. In fact they were seen as mere objects. In Rabbinic literature you would hear the saying, "it is better to be born a dog than a woman". Yet God in God's wisdom chose Deborah for leadership - because no 'man' was capable of that task at that time. Deborah was not chosen for mere tokenism, but God saw that she had the potential and competence to lead.

Application of the text

Indeed, wasn't Deborah a woman whom God in God's sovereignty chose to be the spiritual leader and judge when there was apparently no 'man' found suitable for the occasion? (On a personal note, those who know me well know that I stipulate the use of inclusive language.) However, I would like to maintain the word 'man' in this context. Get this ladies and gentlemen: "apparently there was no man found suitable to do the job!"

In these changing and challenging times, women are called to become judge and prophetess, by taking a stand on constitutional matters in their church and country, sitting with women, men and children to teach them the ways that God wants them to go and praying and weeping with them in their struggles. Women must speak out against the injustices meted out to others, especially the defenseless and marginalized. Women are urged to share their views on issues of violence and crime, domestic violence, incest, racism and sexism. More importantly, women must make the word of God relevant in the 21st century.

Like Deborah, woman leaders need to sit under their 'palm tree', as judge - guiding persons to understand the way the church operates and what is expected of each person; working with them to build the church and society;

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

as a prophetess – proclaiming God’s word to God’s people, teaching them the statutes and instructions of the Lord, showing them the best possible way to go.

Women leaders may consider the model of servant-leadership our Lord Jesus has provided for all leaders, which can be effective and transformative. “The greatest must become the servant.” The leader must also be a servant. The Apostle Paul picks up Jesus’ point when he said, “For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as slaves (servants) for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor 4.5).

Like Deborah, woman leaders need to sit under their ‘palm tree’, as judge - guiding persons to understand the way the church operates and what is expected of each person; working with them to build the church and society; as a prophetess – proclaiming God’s word to God’s people, teaching them the statutes and instructions of the Lord, showing them the best possible way to go.

In many forums the term ‘servant’ may have a negative connotation and may seem politically incorrect. Furthermore, the words servant and leader are usually thought of as being opposites. But when Jesus came on the scene he reversed the direction of service without giving up his leadership. He was assertive and firm in his leadership. He was a no nonsense person but he was also a servant.

If we look deeper into the Gospel lesson, Mark 10.35-45 we see that Jesus uses a situation to teach his disciples what it means for them to be servant-leaders. After telling them that the positions of importance are to be given only by God, he uses the craving of James and John, who were ‘jockeying’ for positions as an opportunity to explain the true meaning of the concept of exaltation. They wanted to be leaders in the new Israel that Jesus would establish after his resurrection, but they were still thinking like everyone else at that time. They sought to obtain power and authority, but Jesus promoted another style of leadership; that of servant-leadership.

Jesus’ life was an example of service to all of humanity, and that was supposed to be the model for all his disciples. In the kingdom Jesus wants to establish, importance is determined through service. Unlike society in general, where leaders bask in their importance and power and where their resumés shine more than they do, the leaders in the Christian community are to be humble servants of God’s people.

Jesus’ message continues to be a challenge to us in the 21st century. Our world considers power and importance to be the ultimate goal in life. It would seem that the rich and powerful are looked up to and envied, and they determine

Women, leadership and power in church and society

the course of society, usually to their own benefit. Sometimes that attitude even affects our churches. But Jesus calls us to servant-leadership.

Women in leadership and the church as a whole are called to be a model of servant leadership, both in the church and in the society. When we serve others in the church and serve the larger community outside the church, we demonstrate that there is another way to live; one that is not motivated by what benefits and satisfies us but rather by what is beneficial to all of humankind.

Eloquence, a polished speech, an impressive appearance or intellectual attainments are admirable and even helpful in ministry, but only one who has truly become a servant-leader and serves for Christ's sake and not from selfish motives will be able to affect the creative and transforming power of God in their leadership. It is through servant leadership that the ministry, which Christ entrusted to us, will be sustained.

Women are called to offer a vital and compelling leadership not only in a society of materialistic values, but also in a pluralistic environment of a multiethnic, multicultural and multireligious reality. Therefore, women need to be more conscious of their power and purpose as they continue to lead others in God's way and to offer God's vision of a society of peace, unity, equality and justice, in a place dominated by other visions of unity - by economic, political and ideological visions.

Reflections/thoughts to ponder:

As women leaders unleash that divine power within, the following may be considered:

- ⑨ Women need to recognise their unique gifts and abilities. For too long women have undervalued themselves, avoided public office, and thus society has been denied the special contribution of women's perspectives.
- ⑨ Women are called to develop and exercise an empowering rather than a controlling style of leadership to which most women have grown accustomed.
- ⑨ Women are called to be innovative and creative; to attempt new styles of leadership, cutting through outmoded practices and introducing new models.
- ⑨ Women are called to critique the prevailing patriarchal models and engage critically in the national and international scene.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

- 🌀 In the face of strong opposition, women are challenged to keep their efforts fresh and strong; to be firm and feminine in their decision-making; to maintain the fight at a level commensurate with today's values; to feel that they are in control of their own lives, rather than being controlled by others.
- 🌀 As women of power and purpose, we are constrained to be both vigilant and visionary.

“STRUGGLING TO BE BORN AGAIN”

(Based on Romans 7 and 8)

Her soul writhed and wrestled with painful thought
The peace, hope and faith once claimed she now desperately sought.
For actions and words floundering out of control
Showed angels of darkness and imprisoned her soul.
She struggled to be born again!

Is flesh so doomed and always destined to win?
Must it abort every good and conceive every sin?
Can faith not fan the flicker of one word?
And raise it to a flame, pleasing God?
She struggled to be born again!

Her soul settled serenely at Salvation's door
Anguish and torment were raging no more.
God's Spirit had won; her heart was God's home
The blessings she missed became forever her own.
She struggled and was born again!

Rev. Joy Evelyn Abdul-Mohan (*Reflections from a woman in ordained ministry for 22 years*)

Prayer to celebrate womanhood:

Creator of our lives and caretaker of our souls, our hearts are filled with gratitude for your numerous blessings. Out of the turbulence and restlessness of this world we set aside this time to celebrate womanhood.

“Struggling to be born again”

We praise you that you have called us as women to serve you and humanity in unique ways.

Bless the efforts, hard work and sacrificial labour of all women around the world as we create a partnership and network that go beyond ethnic, religious, political, social and geographical barriers. We thank you for the rich global experience you have initiated through countless Caribbean women.

Let your power be present in our weakness, in our fears and in our anticipation. Stir our imagination and sharpen our wills. Grant to all women the power to let go of the past and step into the future, trusting and unafraid, as we strive to respond to you, in new and exciting ways.

O God in these changing and challenging times, help us to continue to play a vital role in providing opportunities for women and the entire human race to deepen their faith and commitment.

We commend all that we have and are into your care and keeping, that our lives would be enriched and souls would be refreshed, for the sake of Christ, our eternal Friend, we pray. Amen.

THE YOUNG, DYNAMIC JOY EVELYN ABDUL MOHAN

Mrs. Vera Hajarysingh

Vera Hajarysingh is a retired primary school teacher and poet. She has published two books of poems. “Selections from the Heart” and “Women of the Bible; Bold, Beautiful, Sinful, Blessed”.

What a “joy” it is for us to know the young, dynamic, effervescent trail blazer Rev. Joy Evelyn Abdul Mohan. In many ways she reminds us of Ruth who goes willingly into unfamiliar territory armed with the precious knowledge that God will always be with her. As she says to Naomi “Your God will be my God.”

Rev. Joy surfaced at a time when women, especially young single women were still being subtly subdued in a male dominated society which comprises mainly of Indo-Trinidadians and Afro-Trinidadians. This young Indo-Trinidadian girl grew up in a society, which was traditionally male-dominated, where it was

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

taboo to speak up or express an opinion or apply for jobs which were traditionally male. It was at this time our trail blazer emerged.

Raised and nurtured by parents who treated their children equally, she and her two brothers were blessed to have parents who did not display or promote gender bias. Like her brothers, she had the same freedom and independence to make her own choices and decisions.

Joy was especially encouraged by her father who was an educator, to pursue her dreams with dignity, vigilance, competency, hard-work, sacrifice and determination. Some of his words would forever be etched in her memory, "Sad but true, in our culture a woman must work twice as hard to achieve her goals..."

Joy was the first locally trained woman to graduate from the ministerial programme at St. Andrew's Theological College in Trinidad (SATC). Thus she became the first locally trained woman to be ordained in the Presbyterian Church in Trinidad and Tobago (PCTT) in 1989.

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Although there was one second career woman in the early 1960s who pursued theological studies overseas and became the first ordained woman in the PCTT, it was not the custom for younger women (19 years and under) to apply to become ordained ministers. On a whole, women were expected to apply to become Deaconesses or the traditional Bible Women.

These achievements were not without challenges.

As the first female applicant and graduate in the Licentiate in Theology, the pathway here was fraught with pitfalls of traditionally male biases against female progressiveness in the area of theology. From the start, it was difficult because the entire organizational structure of the church and the St. Andrew's Theological College was oriented towards men. Policies were structured by men for the benefit of men.

Joy was in her fourth year as an ordained minister when she applied to Princeton Theological Seminary and was accepted as an International Scholar. Following a lull, Joy was the first person to be granted study leave from the PCTT at that time. Was this to be a grand celebration for the whole church? For the general laity and women population this was wonderful, but not for all

The young, dynamic Joy Evelyn Abdul Mohan

of Joy's male colleagues. Some unkind remarks were made as to how she attained the scholarship and got recommended for study leave in the first place. These remarks however, did not deter her from fulfilling her dream to pursue post-graduate studies.

In 1993 Joy obtained a Master of Arts from Princeton Theological Seminary. Upon returning to Trinidad & Tobago she was appointed assistant principal of SATC in 2001. On the 1 August, 2002 she was appointed the first woman to serve as principal of SATC.

During the period she served as principal, Joy also faced several challenges as the first woman. SATC's structure was very much founded on an approach to "men's way of knowing and doing". It was strange and sometimes unacceptable to have things done according to a "woman's way of knowing and doing". There was the tendency by some to belittle her and prove that the man's way of knowing and doing is the right and only way. Yet, Joy maintained her femininity and assertiveness in executing her duties and brought a new dimension of leadership.

As was written about her in an appreciation speech, following her tenure of eight years as principal:

"SATC has been the beneficiary of Rev. Joy's success. During her stint as principal, Rev. Joy has achieved too many things to be chronicled in this short story. Her accomplishments ranged from infrastructural and institutional improvements to pastoral care and fund raising. Faced with the ominous challenge of having to get SATC registered with the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago (ACTT) or face its shutdown, Rev. Joy demonstrated her faith-filled commitment and dedication to SATC. Working assiduously with the staff of SATC, volunteers and a sub-committee appointed to ensure the registration, Rev. Joy worked long and hard to raise the required fees needed for the process and to make sure that everything was done to make it successful - as it eventually was.

Rev. Joy served as principal during a most challenging transition period in life of SATC. Faced with new models of governance, confusing if not conflicting lines of authority, a plethora of demands and directives, all mixed in with some headstrong personalities, Rev. Joy responded with as willing and as open an attitude as she could. Always she was conscientious and committed to SATC. Little more could have been asked in the circumstances. Indeed, on the very eve of her departure, August 2010 Rev. Joy attended the interview with the ACTT and led the SATC team in successfully convincing the Council that SATC is fit for candidacy for accreditation."

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Rev. Joy also found time to be involved in active community service which included counselling at the Halfway House for Abused Women, The Hope Centre for Abandoned and Abused Children and The J.C. McDonald Home for the Aged. She also served as second vice president of Naparima Scouts Association and as an honorary member of the South Aids Support. She has also served as chaplain of St. Augustine Girls High School, Naparima College, Corinth Teachers College and the Prisons Service.

Today we loudly applaud this virtuous woman who has looked well into the needs of her community and who like Ruth, with God as her guide, was not afraid to venture into unchartered territory and blaze a trail for many of our young women to follow. As John Keats once said, "A thing of beauty is a joy forever: Its loveliness increases."

Rev. Joy Evelyn Abdul Mohan is certainly a "joy" to all whose lives she has touched. May God continue to bless her as she works in God's Vineyard.

RESILIENT WOMEN

A BIBLE STUDY ON MIRIAM - PROPHET AND LEADER

Rev. Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth

Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth is the Executive Secretary for Justice and Partnership with the World Communion of Reformed Churches. She is responsible for Gender Justice and Justice in the Economy on the Earth and for all God's Creation. Patricia is the first woman to be ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament of the Guyana Presbyterian Church in 1984.

Read Ex 2.3-10; 15.20-21, Num 12, 20.1, Mic 6.4

Introduction

The paradigm of power and leadership in the Caribbean perpetuates male domination, divisiveness, and maintains systems of economic injustice, resulting in poverty and social fragmentation. Caribbean women have survived hard times, and continue to seek ways to resist injustices and to transform their churches and societies.

This Bible study looks at the Prophet Miriam as a woman who has not only survived slavery and oppression but showed great resilience, resistance and prophetic leadership. Miriam was a visionary, charismatic and powerful leader who mobilised her community to stay together, keeping hope alive as they escaped slavery, embarking on a long and rough journey home. She offers a good womanist model for resistance and transformation. The Apostle Paul refers to Miriam (Ex 15.19 -21), Moses and Aaron (Num 33) when he spoke about leadership as a gift of the church (Rom 12.8). This vision of leadership is not individualistic; it is closely related to the gifts of the Spirit for the good of the whole community.

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Women's resistance

On March 8, 2002 more than 140 women and a few men across Guyana's ethnic diversity marched through the streets of

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Linden, Wismar and neighbouring communities, banging empty pots and pans, demanding that their unpaid work be recognized and counted. They chanted:

“Invest in caring, not killing!” “Abolish the Third World debt and free up the money to pay for what people need!”

They demanded better health care, potable water, affordable electricity, pension and national insurance benefits for domestic workers and housewives. The march was organised by Red Thread Women as part of a worldwide Global Women’s Strike campaign. The demonstrators also spoke out against the attacks of the early 1960s during the worse racial and political riot in Guyana. They drew public attention to the power of women in Guyana, “to demand what they are entitled to, and to reclaim their first right – not to be at war with their neighbour of another race.”

“Invest in caring, not killing!”
“Abolish the Third World debt
and free up the money to pay
for what people need!”

She struggled for her people
by resisting injustice and
standing firm in her belief
of human rights and dignity.
She paid the price with her
life. Sadly, Kowsilla’s story is
not well documented and her
story is largely untold.

On March 6, 1964 Kowsilla, a young woman labourer and mother of four, was killed during the Great Sugar Strike in the former British Guiana. Her body was crushed by a sugar estate scab, who drove a tractor through her, while she was demonstrating at the Leonora Sugar Estate. The perpetrator was later acquitted. Kowsilla, a member of the Women’s Progressive Organisation was a sugar worker and leader in the struggle for humane working conditions and trade union recognition.

She struggled for her people by resisting injustice and standing firm in her belief of human rights and dignity. She paid the price with her life. Sadly, Kowsilla’s story is not well documented and her story is largely untold.

Women’s resistance against slavery and many forms of oppression provides a firm basis for strength, courage and prophetic witness. They can be read alongside the groundbreaking stories of women in the Bible. The Bible names more than 150 women and includes many others who were not named, those who played significant roles – such as mothers, sisters, daughters, friends, queens, prophets, judges, preachers, missionaries and revolutionaries. Women in biblical times lived on the margins of their societies and faced tremendous challenges. With great resilience, determination and in defence

of life, they were able to expose the instability of the oppressive and death dealing systems, challenging the power by which they were maintained. Women played significant roles in every aspect of life, including prophetic ministry and leadership.

Group exercise:

- ⑨ Learn about the history of your community and the struggles of those who have contributed to its development, making it one which you can call home.
- ⑨ What are current threats to your community - women, men, youths, children and the environment? How can you advocate and act to bring out change for your generation as well as for your future generation?

Background to the texts

According to scholars, Exodus, Genesis, Leviticus and Numbers are based on several sources and traditions that were in existence during this period and were probably compiled around the 6th century BCE. Exodus means departure from oppression into liberation. It is the second book in the Hebrew scriptures which gives an account of the period of Israelite slavery in Egypt - their resistance, escape, wanderings in the wilderness, return to the “promised land” and the covenant between God and God’s people. Miriam, with her brothers Moses and Aaron, led the Hebrew people throughout the forty years in the wilderness as they searched for a land to call home.

The people of Israel were forced into exile. Theirs was a hard life and many may have often yearned for the stability and settled life they had left behind in Egypt. Everything was scarce – water, food and other basic necessities. Their living conditions were poor. Though women’s roles are not clearly mentioned in the texts, it is obvious that their roles were significant in these times of hardship and they were a threat to the community.

The women maintained family, safety and sanity and were resourceful in providing physical sustenance as well as spiritual nurture. Women were essential in ensuring the survival of their tribes and cultures and the protection of life forms in their eco-system. They also preserved rituals and ceremonies in worship and community life.

Some scholars would say that stories as we have them in the Bible were edited much later by male priests, and therefore while there are hints that women had a thriving cultural tradition of their own, this has been lost because it was

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

never recorded. Women played important roles, which included subverting the system and enabling the escape (Ex 3.22). They helped to keep hope alive by organising and leading community celebrations, as they did upon safely crossing the sea (Ex 15.1-21).

Group exercise:

- ⑨ Identify roles that women played in biblical times. Discuss their strategies and their importance in addressing injustices and bringing about change.
- ⑨ Identify roles that women play in your church and community. Name women who have made significant contribution and what you can learn from them.
- ⑨ What characteristics and styles of leadership do you draw from these women?

The prophet Miriam: a charismatic and respected leader

Miriam lived in challenging times and emerged as a leader of her people bringing steadfastness, resilience, courage and hope to her community. She is named in the list of ancestors together with her brothers, Moses and Aaron (Num 26.59, 1 Chron 6.3). Miriam is believed to be the unnamed sister in the birth story of Moses (Ex 2.4-7). As a child she showed significant initiative, courage, wisdom and confidence.

Miriam took risks and was strategic and skilful when she cleverly worked with her mother, Jochebed to save her brother, Moses. Miriam watched over him and organised for him to be taken into the pharaoh's house-hold. She was resourceful and strategic, for example, when she got her mother to be Moses' wet-nurse and care-giver. This is a well-known story, which shows that the survival of Moses depended on the courage and ingenuity of his mother and sister (Ex 2.1-10).

Miriam is the first person in the Bible to be called a prophet (Ex 15.20) and is named as one of four women prophets in the Hebrew scriptures. The others were Deborah (Judg 4), Huldah (2 Kgs 22.14-15), and the unnamed woman in Isa 8.3. Prophets were God's spokespersons who played leadership roles in religious and sacred matters and were known for addressing injustices in their societies. They were priests, poets, musicians, warriors and dancers. Prophets in the Bible spoke loudly and clearly about the real situations of people's painful suffering, brokenness and other injustices which they faced. They addressed issues of religious conflicts, empire/imperialism and all forms

of power abuse, economic exploitation, poverty and social injustices.

Miriam was a leader who was grounded in the struggle, resilience and culture of life of her ancestors. She was also a poet, singer and dancer, which was a worthy attribute in her participatory leadership style. Miriam had charisma and great ability to mobilise people. She was an essential prophet for her people during their escape from slavery and wanderings in the wilderness. Miriam led by example and identified with the people. She was not an authoritative leader who was alienated from the grassroots. She led with service, showing love, care and solidarity in her people's struggles.

Miriam's word was regarded as relevant for people in their context. When she emerged as a leader, she did not alienate herself from the people who walked with her, including all the people she was elected to lead. She was able to garner good community support. The people accepted her leadership and showed their loyalty and solidarity with her even when she was kept outside the camp for seven days (Num 12.14-15).

Miriam is also known for leading the victory song, the "Song of Miriam" (Ex 15.1-21). This is said to be one of the oldest poetic couplets in the Old Testament. Miriam led the community in singing and dancing to celebrate Yahweh who had delivered them and brought them from bondage to freedom. In this act she was continuing the tradition of her ancestors. Her song is preserved as an important part of this ritual of celebration.

Questions to ponder:

- ④ How do you celebrate significant events in your community?
- ④ Share some of the songs sung by your ancestors and others in your community to celebrate their power of resistance in overcoming injustice and reclaiming dignity?
- ④ How do the popular culture and arts today inspire and mobilise people to move for change transformation and change?

Miriam's recognition as a respected leader in her community was not an overnight event. It was a growing process that began in the early years of her life. Her skills were recognised and used as gifts for her family and community. If Miriam had held back she might have lost the opportunity to make a difference as a leader. Her role as a leader for the whole community shows her acceptance by both men and women. It is possible that there were men, including her two brothers, who encouraged and supported her as prophet and leader.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Her ability to receive affirmation and to focus on the tasks with which she was confronted would have played a significant part in the respect and authority she had among her people. The refusal of the entire community to journey on until Miriam was healed of her illness is another testimony to her standing. The reference to her in Mic 6.4 reconfirms the status and role given to her by the whole community. It also identifies Yahweh's choice of Miriam to play an important role in saving the people of Israel.

Engaging critically with the Caribbean contextual reality - "Nothing about us, without us, is for us" The Caribbean is still a long way from emancipation from imperialism. People are still colonized in mind and spirit with the impact of the past as well as new forms of colonialism. The culture of our powerful neighbours in North America is highly influential in the Caribbean. People model American lifestyles, speaking like New Yorkers and trying to look like them. More and more we are lured into this foreign culture which promotes individualism, competitiveness and greed and which has a negative impact on family and community. This has taken a toll on community and nation building, social cohesiveness and development.

There is also an impoverishment in visionary leadership in the Caribbean, especially in politics and religion. Ecumenism is threatened and churches lack the prophetic spirit. In the political sphere, oppositional politics (on both parts with ruling and opposition parties) are destructive and retarding. The significant gap between people in positions of power and those at the grassroots shows the lack of vision, wisdom and strategies of leaders. Political leaders often run way ahead of the people, with little consciousness of what is required for people's development.

Miriam did not run ahead with a following of people struggling behind. She was in the midst of her community, recognising their gifts, strengths, vulnerabilities, hopes and fears.

A significant strength of Miriam was her recognition of the relational character of life and interdependence of people and also of humanity and the rest of creation, and their ultimate dependence on God the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

The Southern African philosophy of *Ubuntu* offers a good grounding for people/community centred leadership. Ubuntu translated means "I am what I am because of who we all are." It is based on the critical factor of interdependency of people on each other and people with the earth. This is necessary for wholesome, cohesive and progressive communities, nations and also for the Caribbean region as a whole.

Leaders need to be well grounded in the history of the people, including stories of the marginalized. Their approach should be inclusive leadership, based on partnership. As Audre Lorde, an African American womanist, with Caribbean roots said:

A significant strength of Miriam was her recognition of the relational character of life and interdependence of people and also of humanity and the rest of creation, and their ultimate dependence on God the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

“Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between and individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretence that these differences do not exist.”

Questions to ponder:

- ④ How has your community changed in the last twenty years? Identify some negative and positive features.
- ④ What role can the church play in enable life-giving communities, which are undergirded with shared responsibilities, showing concern and care for all citizens and for the environment?

Miriam in the Caribbean context

Miriam demonstrated many aspects of leadership in the texts that carry her story. She epitomizes the different roles that one woman can play as a respected leader. Like Miriam, Caribbean women have played critical roles in leading their people from slavery to emancipation. These were prophetic women who led resistance movements against Slavery and colonial rule – struggling for freedom against slavery and colonialism, for life and for justice. From Nanny of the Maroons, to Mary Prince, Anastasia, Kowsilla and others named and unnamed, women have left behind a great heritage of resistance, leadership and survival of their communities.

There is a dire need for the prophetic spirit, imagination and strategies of Miriam and many Caribbean women to carve out new paths today. One practical way forward is to tell the stories of these amazing women and to invite our communities to drink from their wells of nourishment and hope. This could be an important aspect of enabling our churches and communities to come forth with a prophetic vision for an alternative paradigm of power and leadership based on principles of care, compassion, shared resources and power, interdependency and community.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Like Miriam, women with visionary leadership need to be nurtured, promoted and supported. They bring the dreams and wisdom of the grassroots, to develop alternatives, which are sensitive to the local situation, and with consideration of what is necessary for people to live together in dignity. The stories (below) of Karen De Souza and Christina Ramjattan speak about today's women leaders whose lives, witness and mission are rooted in their love, care, astuteness and ability to mobilise and bring wisdom and experience to their communities in times of hardship.

Christina was and Karen is – resilient, persistent and not ahead of people but always with them. Their examples are visionary demonstrating participatory leadership with service and commitment to life for all, especially for the poor and marginalised. Their stories are living testimonies to ways that grassroots women leaders can offer prophetic witness with fresh perspectives in leadership for these times. They have demonstrated in their leadership approaches and styles that it is important to work in solidarity with people as partners. Caribbean women and men are challenged to envision transformative communities which participate in the realisation of God's kingdom of wholeness and life in fullness for all people. The womanist paradigm can inspire the carving out of new paths towards transformation and life-giving models of leadership for the betterment of all people.

Questions to ponder:

- ⑤ What are the signs of the times in which we are now living? Share both negative and positive.
- ⑤ What are key challenges to the prophetic ministry? How can the church community be a prophetic witness? Name three practical steps that your church can take.
- ⑤ What are the significant qualities of Miriam as a prophet and leader? Discuss her characteristics and style and what makes for effective leadership.
- ⑤ Do a dramatic reading of the stories of Miriam, Christina Ramjattan and Karen de Souza. Draw out significant elements and their contribution throw leadership as service.
- ⑤ Name a prophetic woman in your church and/or community. What are three outstanding features of this woman? How can she be supported as a prophetic voice to contribute to an alternative people-centred model of leadership?

LENA CHRISTINA RAMJATTAN: WOMEN'S ACTIVIST, POLITICAL AND PRESBYTERIAN WOMEN'S GROUP LEADER

Rev. Dr. Dale A. Bisnauth

Dale Bisnauth is the moderator of the Guyana Presbyterian Church and director of the Formation for Ministry and Mission, Guyana

Lena Christina Ramjattan was born on December 20, 1920 at Graham's Hall on the East Coast of Demerara, the second of three children, born to Isaac and Naomi Bridgewater. At the age of five, her mother died and the family migrated to the bauxite town of Mackenzie on the Demerara River. Christina began school at the Christianburg "Scots" Presbyterian School. In March 1939, the nineteen year old would marry John Ramjattan in another "Scots" church – the St. Andrew's Presbyterian Kirk in Georgetown.

Christina tended to be ecumenical in her church life. At Christianburg, she was deeply involved in the Bible Class and the Women's group of the Presbyterian Church, but found time to become involved in women's "work" in the Pilgrim Holiness and Christian Brethren Churches. In addition, she was an active member of the Dorcas Society at Mackenzie. When she moved to Georgetown, Christina became a member of the Burns' Memorial Presbyterian Church and an active member of the women's group there.

Christina was a woman of integrity, unselfish and caring; she burned with a passion for the rights of women. The care of the needy was uppermost in her personal agenda and she spared no effort on their behalf. Her motto was: "I am my sister's and brother's keeper"; those who knew her well described Christina as a Good Samaritan.

Given her interest in people, her concern for their welfare and her identification with the poor and downtrodden, it was no surprise when at 34 Christina became drawn into the political life of Guyana. At that time, the political struggle was for political independence from Britain and for Universal Adult Suffrage. The leader in that struggle was the People's Progressive Party led by Dr. Cheddi Jagan. Christina joined the struggle; her house in Mackenzie

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

became a centre of political activity. She herself became an activist.

Christina paid for her activism. In disturbances in 1964 her father was murdered. She herself was battered and beaten causing serious impairment to her sight and hearing. But this did not deter her. Towards the end of her life Christina became both deaf and blind. But the struggles of the likes of Christina Ramjattan were not in vain. Guyana became independent from Britain and won Universal Adult Suffrage. She herself was awarded with the Medal of Service in 1993 – a national award. In that same year, she received from the Women's Affairs Bureau, a certificate for outstanding contribution to women's development, peace and equality. What was her chief motivation in life? She said that it was her love for Jesus Christ, and remarked of Christina women:

"We share our mutual woes
Our mutual burdens bear;
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear."

WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVIST KAREN DE SOUZA IS A 'SPECIAL PERSON'

Kaieteur News, Sunday, December 19, 2010 (Story by Sharmain Cornette)

"...It is all well and good for a party to say we are taking on the grand, national agenda, but the fact remains that there is no national agenda if you do not address the agenda of the individual."

Driven by the passion to see women rise above societal challenges, primary among them domestic violence, Karen de Souza, has over the years remained a force to be reckoned with.

As one of the founders and dedicated members of Red Thread, a local non-governmental organisation, de Souza has for more than a decade dedicated her time and energies

"...It is all well and good for a party to say we are taking on the grand, national agenda, but the fact remains that there is no national agenda if you do not address the agenda of the individual."

Women's rights activist Karen De Souza is a 'special person'

towards helping to give grass-root women a voice, as well as economic stability. Simultaneously, efforts were being made by the organisation – which had its genesis in 1985 – to dispel racial myths that were permeating the society, and consequently, causing a discomfoting ethnic divide.

With no little effort on de Souza's part, Red Thread is today closer than ever to achieving its goal, one which is so designed to have the survivors of domestic violence verbally fight back in an effort to emphasize that the unacceptable practice need not persist, at least not aided by the silence of women. Although it is headquartered at the junction of Princes and Adelaide Streets in Georgetown, Red Thread has

a presence in several communities across the country, which according to de Souza, serves as a means of enlightening women about their rights provided under the law.

The indefatigable de Souza recently helped spearhead the formation of a Domestic Violence Survivors' Group which holds forums for abused women who are allowed to share their experiences. "One of the missing elements in the domestic violence public fight is that of survivors being able to speak out and so that is the direction in which we want to go. So in addition to just supporting women by going to the police and the hospital with them, we are also discussing with them about the law; helping them to understand what their rights are and what the various agencies are supposed to do."

This new introduction to the Red Thread agenda, according to de Souza, has now taken women to a point where some of them are confident enough to support other abused women. And it is her expectation that this development will evolve further in the coming years whereby survivors will be seen and heard even as programmes are modified to further decentralise services and information sharing.

"We continue to work as much as possible in communities where we already have a presence to try to develop a unit of people, usually women, who have information and who are prepared to go and negotiate with the police and the various authorities so that something can be done on the spot in the case of an abuse, just so they don't have to wait on a call from Georgetown."

"One of the missing elements in the domestic violence public fight is that of survivors being able to speak out and so that is the direction in which we want to go. So in addition to just supporting women by going to the police and the hospital with them, we are also discussing with them about the law; helping them to understand what their rights are and what the various agencies are supposed to do."

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

And the measures that are in place have served to help a number of abused women despite the fact that Red Thread has been working with meagre resources, de Souza related. “We know that we do not have the resources to deal with the actual percentage of abuse that arises on a daily basis. It is unbelievable... the level and the amount of abuse that surface in our local societies, so any assistance to Red Thread is always welcomed.” But was this dedicated activist abused into embracing this modus operandi of fighting for women’s rights?

De Souza reveals she most definitely was. And perhaps she is listed among the worst of the abused having been deprived of employment, unjustly arrested in 1979 and tried in a court of law, simply because of her affiliation with a political party. Although she was arrested on suspicions of burning down a public building, de Souza was charged and held for a few days for possession of a Guyana National Service kit. Though a very young woman then, she was eventually able to adequately represent herself and even saw the case against her being dismissed.

But it was not until 1986 that the case would be dismissed, and by then her name had become tarnished, causing every possible door of employment opportunity to be slam shut in her face without even a crease for her slender frame to slip through unnoticed. No one would employ me. It was like they were afraid of me. I had to depend on my sister and friends, too, for support.”

Prior to her arrest and subsequent court battle, she was employed as a librarian at the then Prime Minister’s Office. She was just 16 years old at the time, but was even then very ambitious and had plans of elevating herself to a higher office.

This saw her taking leave to join the Guyana National Service and then the University of Guyana to boost her academic eminence. At the institute of higher learning she studied English and Geography, and it was during this time that she became acquainted with Political Activist, Rupert Roopnaraine, of the Working People’s Alliance (WPA). It was not expected that young Karen, who was born to parents of middle class standing, Mary and Denis de Souza, would have become politically stimulated in her early days.

The second of three offspring, she was born on January 19, 1958, in the city, but grew up as a simple lass on the small island of Leguan, on the Essequibo Coast. Her family would eventually move back to the city where she was able to secure her first and only employment which ended two years later. “It was dealing with that court trial which saw me defending myself and becoming

Women's rights activist Karen De Souza is a 'special person'

acquainted with the law that led me to become involved in demonstrations... After that first arrest I was arrested frequently, maybe even for just being alive.

The trial ended and the charges were dismissed, but out of just stubbornness I continued with demonstrations for any just cause, once the need arose. It was clear that I was expected to beg pardon and not be involved with the WPA."

De Souza would remain a committed member of the WPA, up until about six years ago, although she still maintains camaraderie with its existing members. She recalled that although Red Thread was spawned by some of the women folk from the party, it was from the inception intended to be an independent and separate body. According to her it was in 1985 that a number of women from within the party held an earnest discussion about women in the society, a move which was prompted by the problem of food shortage which was prevailing at the time.

A number of demonstrations were organised by the WPA, as a result, to emphasise the need for essential items. However, following the demonstrations some of the women, including de Souza, were arrested and incarcerated – a development which created much fear and confusion, according to de Souza.

"The women had become frightened of the politics business, they didn't want to associate with party politics, they simply wanted food and to be able to take care of their family," de Souza noted.

It was in recognition of this dilemma that the committed activist – with the support of a number of other party women – commenced discussion to organise a meeting with women outside of the party. This would lead to the formation of Red Thread which had as its initial agenda to serve as an avenue to foster income-earning activities for women.

It was at first referred to as the Women's Development Project and was even able to attract the support of financial donors. But yet to some it remained the women's arm of the WPA. "When we started we were very clear that our women's group was separate from the WPA; this was a woman thing and it had nothing to do with the party. We met as party women, but when we decided to start Red Thread at that point there was no women's organisation that was not an arm of some organisation. All women's organisations were the arms of something, so we decided and dared to start Red Thread as an independent body." It certainly did not receive the blessings of all the men of the party at first, recounted de Souza, who revealed that "a lot of men in the party were not very happy."

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

And why would they be? De Souza and some of the other women who formed Red Thread were in fact among the centrally active women in the party and according to her “this was pulling a whole lot of energy out of the party into this other thing.”

It was even expected that the grants that were awarded to Red Thread would have been turned over to the party to help boost its capacity. In defiance, de Souza and her fellow members, all middle class women, would use the acquired funds to initiate embroidery projects in target communities on the West and East Coasts of Demerara, and even in Linden.

Yet in an infantile state, the group continued to subscribe to WPA principles, which saw it working with women across race and against poverty, incorporating various money-making ventures for the women along the way. Although she was determined to see the organisation progress, de Souza revealed that she had harboured some thoughts of uncertainty about delving completely into the new arena.

“I was quite reluctant to engage with Red Thread to the exclusion of the overt party work, but I think that after working with the women in the communities for a while it became clear to me that that was the thing to do... It is all well and good for a party to say we are taking on the grand, national agenda, but the fact remains that there is no national agenda if you do not address the agenda of the individual.” It was with this in mind that she was able to shed all doubts and accepted her mission to champion the rights of women in the society, even though through a small organisation. Even if there was no way that the organisation was going to receive much needed support to expand, de Souza was eager to see it become efficient enough to bring about some measure of change in the lives of but a few women.

But according to de Souza, Red Thread’s sustenance over the years has hinged on the enormous commitment of the women who formed the core of the entity and have sought to not only embrace the policy of anti-racism and to work against poverty, but also to denounce abuse against women and children.

“I realised we were not going to claim any of the power relations in the society, except it was through the way individuals deal with their relations, and that is not something we can legislate. So I guess it made sense for me to be a part of Red Thread.”

Red Thread would gradually evolve over the years catering to other needs in the

Women's rights activist Karen De Souza is a 'special person'

society as directed by its membership which was drawn from all communities. In creating its distinct identity, Red Thread received much needed support from Sistren, a vibrant women's group in Jamaica. There was support forthcoming from other organisations as the local women's organisation tread the path to maturity.

But according to de Souza, Red Thread's sustenance over the years has hinged on the enormous commitment of the women who formed the core of the entity and have sought to not only embrace the policy of anti-racism and to work against poverty, but also to denounce abuse against women and children.

Perhaps the most important policy that de Souza has come to appreciate over the years is that of respect for those at grass root level. She revealed that "a lot of what Red Thread has done was through the efforts of grass root women, not women with high education. If we have proven anything it is that the certificates and so forth are not a measure of ability to make a difference."

It is for this very reason she believes that there are probably hundreds of women throughout Guyana that identify themselves with Red Thread and by extension, a woman who dared to use her daunting life experience to help transform the lives of many.

DORCAS, AN AGENT OF CHANGE AND TRANSFORMATION

Rev. Doreen Wynter

Doreen Wynter is an ordained minister of the Jamaica Baptist Union (JBU). She serves as the pastor of the Jones Town Circuit of Baptist Churches in Kingston, Jamaica. She is also a trained teacher and holds a B.A (General), B.A (Theology), MPhil (Theology) from the United Theological College of the West Indies. Doreen also teaches Biblical Interpretation and Preaching at the JBU lay training programme.

The narrative in Acts 9.36-42 involving Dorcas or Tabitha is one of the few Biblical stories highlighting the influence and impact of women within the believing community. The infrequency of such stories causes us to pay special attention to them, and to rediscover the role of women, especially in the early church from these brief and occasional accounts.

Context of the story

What we discover as we analyse this account is that the story of Dorcas found in Acts 9.36-42 is not really Dorcas' story but that of the apostle Peter. Dorcas is one of the characters in this story in which the main character and the plot revolved around the apostle Peter. It was Peter's story and the ministry of Peter within the context of the spreading of the Gospel.

The raising of Dorcas from the dead recorded in Acts 9.36-42 is part of a wider section from Acts 9.32-10.48 which deals with the spread of the Gospel and its impact on the life of the community on Jews and Gentiles. Within this framework, Acts 9.32-43 deals with Life-giving and Life-healing miracles, herein Aeneas was physically

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Dorcas, an agent of change and transformation

healed and Dorcas was raised from the dead. As a result of both miracles, the inhabitants of Lydda, Sharon and Joppa believed in the Lord. As we look at the account of Dorcas; her life and her work, we find that this Life Transforming theme evident in the life giving and life healing of the miracle stories are reflected in her story and impacts those around her.

Text: analysis and interpretation

When we look at the text, Acts 9.36-42 does not lend many details about Dorcas' family history, financial status or her status in society. Oftentimes, Scripture does not tell the whole story, thus, information is gathered from what is implied and inferred in the text. So we gather information from the silence or absence of data as well as what is written. It is a miracle story with the main character (Peter) performing a miracle in the tradition of Jesus, and the Old Testament prophets who raised persons from the dead. It is within this setting that we have some narrative about the woman Dorcas, along with other supporting unnamed characters: the widows, and the wider community. What then can we deduce about this woman Dorcas from the text when only verses 36, 37 and 39b actually focused on her?

Dorcas, the name:

The passage uses interchangeably the name Dorcas or Tabitha. Dorcas is the Greek equivalent of the Jewish name Tabitha. As both names are used it would imply that Luke, the writer, is recording for both a Jewish and Gentile community. We would infer from this that the community in which Dorcas ministered was not homogenous but rather it was racially mixed and her work was not racially exclusive but extended to all.

Dorcas was called a disciple:

This was significant for it was not common for the writer, Luke, to use this term in association with women. Therefore, the author (Luke) was emphasizing the work of this woman. The term 'disciple' applied to Dorcas meant that she was in the same category as the other disciples. Therefore, Luke's usage of her as a disciple hinted at the re-imagining of women as able and capable of being involved in the ministry of the early church. It was also significant as the role of women in the New Testament era, a period still governed by the system of patriarchy was still being defined. Therefore, Luke, calling her disciple was a shift from the current paradigm/practice and what we glimpse here is a sign of the re-imagining of women in the believing community of faith.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Dorcas was devoted to good works and acts of charity:

She was a kind woman who was always doing good. Her acts of kindness were not occasional, temperamental, or seasonal. She was devoted, it was a way of life and she did not demonstrate a kindness of convenience. It is easy to do good works and give generously when it is convenient so to do, for public relations and for one's image profile. This is a fact in the corporate sphere where we find businesses competing for the purchasing power of consumers do 'good works' as a 'photo op' and promotional strategy. We can do good without being committed to doing good, because of what is in it for us. Devoted to doing good, calls into being a new way of life, an attitude, and a deliberate choosing of this path.

Dorcas made clothing and distributed them to the widows:

The widows showed the tunics that Dorcas had made for them. She had the ability to sew and make clothes. This was a gift, a resource she drew on to minister to others. There are no details as to the source of her sewing materials, but there are some things that are necessary for this task: material, needle and thread. Dorcas sourced these items with which she then made the clothing, and she used her financial and creative resources to serve others. It is easy to forget that the call to living in community means that we share our gifts with each other, and not become selfish and self-centered.

Dorcas' impact on the lives of others:

The widows wept at her death because of the impact she had on their lives. She was an ordinary woman who saw a need and ministered to that need. This is the stuff which heroines are made of, her awareness, her sensitivity and her compassion. In present day, we see in our different contexts individuals who are aware of the sufferings and difficulty others are experiencing (the hungry child begging and the next door neighbour with no money to send their children to school) but instead of assisting we turn a blind eye, we hope that by pretending we don't see them that these situations will go away.

Text in context: transforming the life of the economically needy

From the analysis of this miracle story with its 'Life Transforming' theme, we find that Dorcas was actively involved in transforming the life of the economically challenged. The main plot was Peter restoring life to Dorcas, in the sub-plot we see Dorcas continuing this theme of Life by offering to those around her a better quality of life. She was a disciple following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, improving the quality of person's life. The women in

Dorcas, an agent of change and transformation

the story were in need, and in economic want. In the Caribbean region many of our women are living below the poverty line. We can become present day Dorcas by providing what is needed for others to experience a better quality of life, starting with the women in our communities. The specifics of this would vary depending on our respective contexts; however, whether it is food, clothing, or a liveable wage for domestic workers, we need to be actively engaged in improving the standard of living of others.

She Purchased,
Prepared, and
Provided.

The women in the text were living financially challenged lives and Dorcas made clothes and gave to them in their need. Dorcas was an example of the sharing of one's resources so that others may experience a better quality of life. Earlier in Acts, we read of the disciples sharing what they have with each other. This countered the actions of the man who built bigger barns to store his resources rather than evenly distributing them to benefit others. The welfare of the needy was important and Dorcas' action demonstrated an ethic of care and neighbourly love. Because the widows were marginalized and overlooked because they had no male to provide for them, the sharing was not confined to those who already have, but to those who are economically in need.

She Purchased, Prepared, and Provided.

If Dorcas' action is modeled by Caribbean women it can be revolutionary, and subversive. It can be counter culture to the view that women are non-supportive of each other, and are always competing with each other. Such a paradigm shift would require sisters from across the racial, economic and social divide to embrace one another, to share their resources for the development of the other and to demonstrate an ethic of care and love for the other.

Imitating the Dorcas' mindset

- ⑨ How conscious are we of those around us, their needs and quality of life? Are there traits of narcissism, love of self to the exclusion of others? Consider who a disciple is - follower of the way. How are our lives modelling the Jesus' way?
- ⑨ Are there ways in which we can influence the programmes in our community, country so the quality of life of the economically challenged may improve?
- ⑨ How do you see yourself - insignificant, small, nobody, not of any use in your church? Is there a need to change that image?

MAMA JOY

Rev. Doreen Wynter

She has lived a life dedicated to the hundreds of children she has mothered over the past three decades, and like most unsung heroes, did so without much fanfare. But last Friday, 61-year-old Joy Marilyn Baker or 'Mama Joy', was acknowledged for her sterling contribution to her Central Kingston community by the First Caribbean International Bank under their Unsung Heroes Programme.

Mama Joy, who was featured in *All Woman* in June of this year, was one of three persons nominated by the bank for their selfless service to the country. This was after reviewing the contributions of scores of other nominees across the island who had used their oftentimes limited resources to help the less fortunate.

"She takes care of a lot of children single-handedly. She is one of those community persons," chairman of the Unsung Heroes Local Committee, Glen Lee, said of Mama Joy.

In explaining the concept of the programme which began seven years ago, the chairman said: "We look for persons who are doing extraordinary things or ordinary things in an extraordinary way and are giving back to the community. These people are volunteers who use their personal resources to do things or they try to seek out funding to push the cause further."

In addition to the hundreds of children she has mothered, Mama Joy also has six biological children. The Central Kingston resident used her meagre earnings as a street sweeper and bar cleaner to pay school fees, purchase books and attend to their physical and mental well being.

"I started caring for children when I was 29 and I moved into this community. I used to walk around and peep through windows at nights and when I saw the children sleeping alone, I would take them out and carry them to the police. You don't know when a piece of

She has lived a life dedicated to the hundreds of children she has mothered over the past three decades, and like most unsung heroes, did so without much fanfare. But last Friday, 61-year-old Joy Marilyn Baker or 'Mama Joy', was acknowledged for her sterling contribution to her Central Kingston community by the First Caribbean International Bank under their Unsung Heroes Programme.

candle can fall and the place catch fire with them,” she told *All Woman* in her interview.

Mama Joy said she was grateful for the award, but lavished praises on the various individuals, church groups and organisations that had also made caring for the children much easier. She also had a great deal to say about her children, some of whom did extremely well in their examinations.

Apart from the award, the philanthropist also received personal gifts from the bank and cash awards for her project. She now moves on to represent Jamaica in the regional unsung heroes programme which will see her going up against other unsung heroes in the 17 territories the bank operates in.

Mama Joy has also received awards from the Holy Family Primary and Infant school for outstanding and dedicated service; the Central Kingston People’s National Party Women’s Movement and the Kingston Central Police, among others, for the important role she has played in promoting law and order and for her service to community.

Mama Joy Awarded, Nadine Wilson, *All Woman* writer, October 2010

For nearly 40 years, she has given tirelessly, relentlessly of her time, talent and treasure – to children who are of no relation to her. Mama Joy, as she has been affectionately called by her ‘children’ and other members of the community prides herself on taking care of the ‘least of these’ by offering much-needed food, clothing and shelter to street children in the inner-cities of Jamaica.

Mama Joy epitomizes the Jamaican adage ‘tun yuh han mek fashion’ as she is one of the many women in this country who is able to send myriads of children to school without the aid of a ‘baby father’ and on limited meagre resources. Working as a menial ‘unskilled labourer has not fazed this indomitable woman who simply gets to the task at hand, that of protecting her children from a life of crime and violence – by providing them with a place to call home and the necessities for physical and intellectual survival.

She uses any resource made available to her and does not waste time playing politics – when Mama Joy is out seeking help for her children, she is as aggressive as a terrier and as unrelenting as a pit bull. Mama Joy is often quoted as saying, ‘The Lord will provide’, when asked how it is that she expects to fend for her children.

This, as Mama Joy has never written a project proposal, she has not done a public broadcast or staged a grand concert to realize funds for her children. Rather, she commits them to the care of the elected representatives as well

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

as to the care of the more affluent churches in the corporate area, where she solicits funds for meeting the needs of the children.

Their ages range from pre-school to high schoolers and the numbers vary sometimes reaching in the high teens, but Mama Joy's concern is not for the numbers as she does not know how to turn back a child from her door. In telling her story Mama Joy recounts that she was very concerned for the physical well being of the children she would see sleeping on the streets at night. And somewhere between taking them to the nearest police station for overnight protection and watching out for them again and again, she became their de facto guardian and protector.

Recognizing that 'one han cyan clap' Mama Joy has sought to be the hand that unites others in making the necessary provision for her children – regardless of race and status as she willingly 'dirties' her hands to meet her children's needs. Mama Joy can be seen many Sunday mornings in the front of a Police jeep with her wards crammed in the same vehicle and oftentimes yet another making their way to church, where they sometimes are provided with refreshment and tangible contribution to the welfare of the children.

It has not always been easy for her, as her children are sometimes the recipients of various types of abuse – physical, sexual, verbal, etc. and their psyche is not the easiest to restore, especially in the inner city neighbourhoods of Central Kingston. But Mama Joy understands that someone has to take care of them and make the necessary provisions for their future. It pains her to see her children suffer, and this is independent of whether they were born of her loins (she has 6 biological children) or simply mothered by her.

Should one expend the time to find Mama Joy's children, it is highly likely that they each would extol her virtues for saving them from themselves and from sure and certain ruin. Truly she has been a strong Caribbean woman who has transformed the lives of many.

Points to ponder

- ⑨ What do you think is that 'little something' that makes Mama Joy and Dorcas suitable agents of transformation?
- ⑨ How might you and I become positive change agents in our world?
- ⑨ Would Mama Joy's philanthropy make a difference if she had had the wherewithal to help those children 'naturally'? Why/not?

What then is the difference between philanthropy and loving our neighbour?



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CASTING STONES

A BIBLE STUDY ON JOHN 8: 1 - 11

*Rev. Nicole Ashwood, Rev. Dr. Gillian Wilson, Rev. Doreen Wynter
United Theological College of the West Indies, December 2010*

The story of the woman caught in the act of adultery has often been misused as the church wrestles with matters of sexual impropriety and gender injustices. John 8.1-11 poses some difficulties, especially in the case of an unwanted pregnancy the evidence of impropriety is present for the public to see. The following Bible study was written by three pastors (Baptist, Methodist and Reformed) from Guyana and Jamaica, who, together studied the text with a consciousness of the contextual and symbolic implications of sexual impropriety and stoning, as they challenge traditional interpretation and approaches to reading the text.

Invite the Bible study group to do a biblio-dramatic reading of John 8. 1-11.

The symbolism of adultery and implications of sexual impropriety in the Caribbean

[Any] . . . man that committed adultery with another man's wife,
even he that committed adultery with his neighbour's wife,
[BOTH] the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.

Lev 20.10

22 If a man is found sleeping with another man's wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die. You must purge the evil from Israel.

23 If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, 24 (before) you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death—the girl because she was in a town and did not scream for help, and the man because he violated another man's wife. You must purge the evil from among you.

Deut 22.22-24

Being versed in the details of the Mosaic Law, and, given the nature of her actions, they brought the adulterous woman to Jesus. They claimed she was caught in the act, yet the letter of the law was only applied by the educated, right-seeking men to the woman who was caught in the act. What was the

aim of the men who sought to dispense with her in this humiliating manner? Was she not someone's child? Why use a woman as their weapon in their antagonism against Jesus?

In the Caribbean, as in many regions around the world, adultery is grounds for divorce. However, often male adulterers are largely overlooked. In fact a man (single or married) is often not only exonerated but applauded for sleeping with several women. On the other hand, for the woman it is totally unacceptable and punishable by the law (through divorce) and also by social exclusion by her family, church and community. In many Caribbean churches sexual sin or suspicion of such sin by a woman (unlike a man in the same situation) was seen as vile with the potential to desecrate the name of the church.

In recent years the back bench was a substitute for stones of first century Israel, that is, women under suspicion of sexual impropriety were relegated to the back bench. Yet, should it be one which may be covered up for the sake of the man's reputation, it just might be swept under the carpet or quietly disposed of.

Adultery is no longer as serious a crime in many of our societies today, yet the attitude to single mothers or pregnant teenagers has not changed significantly. In our schools, girls are expelled for teen pregnancy while the 'baby fadda' (father) remains in school or at work, and very little punitive action is applied to him. And, while statutory rape is still very much a criminal offense, in many instances, the girls who have been initiated into the sex acts are advised to be quiet for the sake of their family's survival. Further, there are occasions when young girls are gifted to the local community head in a modernized reinterpretation of the feudal '*droit de seigneur*'. And if she becomes pregnant . . . "Hush babymodda! Things will be better tomorrow".

One of the triumphs of the Caribbean male is of his ability to have several 'babymoddas' (baby mother) and other women all at once; hence the abundance of songs about 'wifey and matey'. A young girl is still expected to remain a virgin if she wishes to marry well, though she might be relegated the role of 'trophy wife'. It takes very little effort to recall the messages stated in Beenie Man's, 'Ole Dawg (1995)', or Shabba Ranks', 'Trailer Load' (1991), or Shaggy's, 'It Wasn't Me' (2000). Yet little effort was made to censor songs which objectified women who were simply to be available for sexual use and abuse by the men who went from partner to partner on a regular basis. But the same man would be offended should another man 'disrespect' him by having sexual relations with his property. "A no nuttin dat, call it bun fi bun".

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

The Pauline writer in the letter to Timothy insists that an elder should be husband of one wife, thus implying that there should be no other. Therein lies scope for sexual equity and a move from the concept of women as property to women being human with roles and responsibilities that may be of value even to religious society.

In reading the text, the question is asked: What value is placed upon women by the men in our lives and by the social structures which govern us? And in turn, of the leaders of our religious bodies: How does the Caribbean church promote values and attitudes which are counter to those of the popular culture, where sexuality is strong currency and, in several places promiscuity and adultery are the order of the day, and when our safe havens are homes to the most ruthless sexual predators?’

The symbolism of stoning

The Old and New Testament books are filled with instructions for right living and makes several references to stoning as the punitive measure for the infractions. On the other hand, stoning in the Caribbean context is not a penalty for breach of law but is used in attack and/or defence and in competitive games. Persons can be seen throwing stones at each other either in anger in a fight at which time innocent passersby could be injured or in a “game” by boys hurling stones at birds in a bid to see whose hand is “straighter” and who can hit the target. This target could also be animals, especially toads, dogs and cats. Mangoes and other fruits have their share of being stoned as trees are stoned with a variety of objects in a bid to reach the fruits on the highest limbs. Flat smooth stones are thrown into a small river or canal of at an angle so that the stone skims the water touching the water as many times as possible before sinking to the bottom. The one whose stone makes the most skims wins.

Biblical text

Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. This follows the instruction of the Law in the Hebrew canon, “The hand of the witness shall be the first upon him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people” Deut 17.7.

Jesus lived in times of patriarchy where the threat and exercise of force that would have accompanied the bringing of the woman alone to Jesus attests to the power of inequalities of gender. Stoning in this instance as written in the law is comparable to institutionalized violence and was a form of capital punishment. “Death by stoning” was the sentence for being caught in adultery.

Adultery that was not caught was not punished. More than likely it would have been the poorer class of persons who would have been caught in the act of adultery. Society often turns a blind eye to such wrong-doings of rich people. The case of King David and Bathsheba (2 Sam 11-12) which speaks of the legitimization of male power is one such example in the Old Testament.

Feminist theologians use critical eyes to read scripture and question religious doctrine as a finite “social construct, intimately related to communal religious practices and power structures.” They seek to identify missing voices, persons and show the influences of cultural traditions, norms and laws.

How often have you seen instances where rich and powerful persons escape the law? How is this done and what are the responses of society? How is it different in your church? Discuss.

Reading of the text of John 8:1-11 gives hope that God is on the side of the marginalised and disenfranchised, as the woman who no doubt is vulnerable for the

fact that she is a woman and most likely a poor woman, is set free from the bondage of the society. Jesus sets her free from her sin and also from the hypocrisy of the religious establishment, including its leaders.

Feminist theologians use critical eyes to read scripture and question religious doctrine as a finite “social construct, intimately related to communal religious practices and power structures.” They seek to identify missing voices, persons and show the influences of cultural traditions, norms and laws.

How do we reread the Bible with these tools and seek to reform doctrine?

Reforming doctrine involves several steps, including the following:

- ⑨ Critique of the patriarchal bias in doctrines about God, humanity, and religious practice,
- ⑨ The recovery of neglected strands of tradition that challenge these dominant doctrines, and
- ⑨ The reinterpretation of sacred texts and doctrines so as to include the perspectives and experiences of women.

Character assassination as a form of stoning

A man who is an excellent tenor and who is having an affair with a woman in the church continues to maintain his place in the choir stall, while the woman

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

with whom he has the affair is relegated to the back seat of the congregation and her infidelity is spoken of in undertones.

What are the experiences of women in the Caribbean who find themselves in compromising positions with men and who have their characters assassinated while those of the men remain unblemished or whose actions are described as a “man ting.” This is in essence violence against women. What is astonishing is that a lot of this violence is to be found in the church that uses its moral authority to legitimize situations of domination and exploitation based on class and gender. Women are also co-opted in this systemic injustice against women and they also cast stones against other women, while turning a blind eye to the man’s actions. It is embarrassing that women are in the forefront of those who propel these negative energies and cast out their sisters from the circle of fellowship and community.

Jesus sought to right the wrong against the vulnerable person and to restore her to wholeness. The text speaks about how Jesus was able to move from the law itself to the practice of the law. The story provides a good basis to guide public policies on issues of morality. Here are a few questions for us to consider:

What are some of the laws that have been changed recently that recognize the worth of women outside that of home and family, children and education? How do women influence these laws? As women and men?

- ⑨ How do we cast stones?
- ⑨ What are the stones we cast?
- ⑨ What accusations are made for stoning to take place?
- ⑨ Who must cast the first stone? The response from Jesus was, “the one who is without sin.”

What did Jesus do?

So often we hear this question being raised among Christians, if Jesus were here what would he do? In other words, one should ask what Jesus would do in a particular situation before making ethical choices and decisions. I will borrow these over used clichés and ask not so much what Jesus would do but what Jesus did in John 8.1-11 and then what should we do as followers of Jesus Christ. The Gospel according to John deals with the new community emerging as a result of the ministry of Jesus (John 20:26) and the writer speaks on two levels: there is the literal meaning and a deeper level to what

has been recorded. It is what we would call a double entendre.

What did Jesus do and say? He spoke to those in the crowd and to the woman. The core message dealt with the issue of sin. Whom did he address first?

What did Jesus do and say? He spoke to those in the crowd and to the woman. The core message dealt with the issue of sin. Whom did he address first?

It was to the religious establishment of the day. Considering that most persons in the crowd were probably non-religious persons who had gathered out of curiosity. The woman was brought to Jesus by the Scribes and Pharisees who were the legitimized religious leaders. Their actions initiated the discourse. The context of what took place was within the religious establishment, which included the church. Note that Jesus is addressing the religious establishment and its leaders. He was speaking to those who were esteemed with moral authority. When questioned by the Scribes and Pharisees, he responded by saying, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

Jesus was dealing with both personal responsibility as well as the structural sin within the congregation. Sin is a wrong-doing against God, each other and the community. In this case it was at all levels, including the religious system. This is evident in the inability to remember one's vulnerability and past weakness in the case of personal sin which leads to condemnation of others; and on the other hand structural sin which erects barriers - permitting some persons to be insiders and others to be outsiders to the church community. It was a case of 'them and us' or the 'righteous and the adulterous'. What does this mean for us? That the law, the tradition of the faith, cultural practices, social standing, rules and the statements of some congregations are potential barriers which exclude others (such as the woman caught in adultery) from the community of faith and ultimately a relationship with God.

This is a call for us to reflect on the policies and practices within our congregations which exclude others from becoming a part of the family of God. Jesus exposed the barriers and in that revelation the religious leaders 'walked away' from a marvellous opportunity for renewal.

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The second comment was addressed to the woman. Again Jesus raised the issue of sin, that

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

is, her personal sin, restored and embraced her into the new community. The symbolic “walking away” of the leaders and believers implied that the barriers by the religious establishment were recognized to have been challenged. Jesus intervened and broke the barriers, embracing the accused woman. He reached out with love and compassion, offering her forgiveness, healing, restoration and freedom from condemnation. Jesus set the woman free: “go your way, get on with your life.” The barriers have been torn down. He charged her that the personal sin should no longer be part of her life that, which contributed to her exclusion, should no longer be evident in her life. The new community which Jesus was establishing was one that embraced those who were pushed to the margins and outside the margins.

Jesus’ actions revealed the face of the new community of God. It is one in which ‘exclusion and embrace’ are under scrutiny by the word spoken and written by Jesus. It calls into question the ways in which exclusion is practiced in our respective communities of faith and to what extent we seek to embrace others.

What should we do now? How do we widen and erase the lines of demarcation which makes margins? How do we include those who are on the margins?

- 🌀 Identify the existing and potential barriers to embracing others within our faith communities
- 🌀 In what ways can we demonstrate healing, forgiveness and restoration in our communities?
- 🌀 How similar/dissimilar are our communities of faith from that which Jesus demonstrated in the story?

When we ourselves compromised - whether by choice or circumstance - How do we respond? Do we look the other way in the face of the HIV and AIDS pandemic and its reality in our society? Do we punish the woman only and once again objectify her, despite Jesus’ efforts to affirm and validate her?

And what exactly should we be writing on the sand?

Points for consideration, discussion and further action:

- 🌀 What are your views on adultery, how should adultery be treated by the church?
- 🌀 There is a school of thought that says there are two approaches to sexual impropriety – one for lay persons and the other for leaders and ordained.

What is the situation in your context, especially regarding punitive measures for young people?

- ⑨ When a teenager or young single woman is pregnant, she is sometimes asked to step down from active membership until she apologizes to the church or after the baby is born. What is your denomination's view on single parents and how does the aforementioned action help to stem the flow of promiscuity?
- ⑨ Arrange for an open and honest session with youth and adults on sexuality and its implications for life. Look at this from health, emotional and social perspectives. Try to get youth and adults presenters. Avoid judgmental approaches and try to be open to hearing the youth's issues.
- ⑨ Remember, the youth often anticipate our judgment, even when it is not present. Let us be willing to work with them, providing mentorship where needed.
- ⑨ Look at ways in which intervention strategies and peer counselling may help to improve the esteem of our youth in community. We don't only need to reach our youth in church, but we need to be available for the entire community.
- ⑨ Critically assess the extent to which your church offers recreational space for youth. Is there space within that programme for counselling, not only about sexuality, but other core matters such as finance, employment, self esteem and education. An empowered youth is less likely to be involved in unhealthy relationships.
- ⑨ Ensure that there is adequate support for single mothers and that the fathers (especially those in the church) are involved in the lives of their children in positive and wholesome ways.

(or join one) for HIV and AIDS intervention.

Explore ways in which this may provide a backdrop for men and women 'condemned' for their sexual impropriety.

“WHEN HOME IS A DANGEROUS PLACE”

Rev. Robina Marie Winbush

Robina Winbush is an associate stated clerk for the Presbyterian Church (USA). She serves as the director of the Department of Ecumenical and Agency Relations in the Office of the General Assembly. Robina has served on several national and international denominational and ecumenical committees and organizations including the National Council of Churches of Christ, USA, the World Council of Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. An ordained minister, she has served congregations in Harlem, Long Island, the Bronx, Queens, New York and Louisville, KY.

Read: Judges 11.29-40

Introductory comments

This Bible study was first presented at a Mission Consultation of the Caribbean and North America Council for Mission (CANACOM) in Trinidad and Tobago in November 2009. The theme for the consultation was “Restoring the Home Front: Mission 2020” and its anchor verse, Mark 5.19: “Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you.” Which offered a hopeful promise to our call as Christians engaged in the mission and ministry of the church. We began with rooting ourselves in our relationship to the created order and our calling as stewards of the earth on which we dwell.

This Bible study on Judges 11 focuses on the particular dynamics of male and female relationships.

Invite participants to do a biblio-dramatic reading of Judges 11.29-40.

Background to the text

The book of Judges is written in the early part of Israel’s history as they attempted to build a nation following centuries of living as an enslaved people and then decades of wandering in the wilderness trying to find their way to a place no longer defined by enslavement, but free to live as the people God had created

This Bible study on Judges 11 focuses on the particular dynamics of male and female relationships.

them to be. They have invaded Canaanite land and waged war against not only the Canaanites but anyone who got in their way. It was an era ruled by judges, who were to govern according to the commandments given to Moses and the Deuteronomic leaders. These judges were also warriors and expected to lead Israel in its various battles.

This story is filled with themes of power, gender identity formation, subjugation, marginalization, misplaced loyalties, trans-generational family dynamics and destructive patterns of male/female relations. Let us now reflect on identity formation of the male and female through the lens of this painful story.

However, it was also an era in which the writers describe the Israelites as continuing in a cycle of faithlessness; repentance, faithfulness and then faithlessness again. They were really in a struggle with their understanding of God and a series of empty promises or self-serving vows. (You know the childish vows... Mommy I promise I'll never do that again... Daddy, if you just let me... I promise...)

The Israelites were in a season of seeking God's favour and protection. The Ammonites have risen up against them and are threatening war. They are in need of someone who can lead them in battle. Finally, God responds not because God really believes their empty promises, but because according to the writer of the text, God could not bear to see their suffering.

This is where our story begins and unfortunately, it will be the last time the narrator gives us a clue as to any perspective God might have on the horrible and unbelievable act that is about to unfold. This story has been used to teach about religious integrity and radical obedience. Jephthah spares nothing to honour a vow he has made to God and a child who submits herself dutifully to her father's will.

This story is filled with themes of power, gender identity formation, subjugation, marginalization, misplaced loyalties, trans-generational family dynamics and destructive patterns of male/female relations. Let us now reflect on identity formation of the male and female through the lens of this painful story.

Jephthah's a mighty warrior... BUT

Problems with labels: Labels about his mother reduced her to identification with one aspect of her life. "She was a prostitute." (What does this tell you about her?) Nothing about her dreams or sorrows or hopes. Nothing about her love (or lack of love) for her son. Nothing about her illnesses or struggle. Simply

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

she was a prostitute and therefore worthy of our judgment - dismissal.

We can only imagine how it must have been for Jephthah, growing up with that label. (He's a strong boy BUT... He's a handsome young man BUT... He has potential BUT...) Do you know what it means to grow up with a BUT? BUT creates a conditionality that negates everything that comes before it.

Jephthah is caught in a triangulated relationship between his mother, his father(s), and his father's wife. He is held responsible for the actions of his parents. His brothers had learnt to treat him like an outcast.

Home was not a sanctuary it was a dangerous place for Jephthah.

He needed to belong to community/family. He was from the land of Tob and Outlaws and we can imagine him as one with a posse of men who may very well have been outcasts like himself. They were known for their negative reinforced behaviour.

He established himself as a mighty warrior. A bad boy if you will. A thug in some circles. He was also a leader but he still carried that identity thing. He had something to prove.

Think about how you learned what it means to be a woman or man? What were the primary lessons you learned as a girl or boy that helped you decide the type of woman or man you would like to be?

Jephthah enlists for battle and creates danger for his household

When the elders of Gilead came to Jephthah and begged him to come fight their battle against the Ammonites, it didn't take long for Jephthah to negotiate a pretty good deal for himself with the elders. This was an opportunity he had probably been waiting for his whole life, an opportunity to be accepted - to be valued - to have a respectable place in the community - to prove to his brothers and all the other folk who had talked smut about him throughout his life.

We can only imagine how it must have been for Jephthah, growing up with that label. (He's a strong boy BUT... He's a handsome young man BUT... He has potential BUT...) Do you know what it means to grow up with a BUT? BUT creates a conditionality that negates everything that comes before it.

Think about how you learned what it means to be a woman or man? What were the primary lessons you learned as a girl or boy that helped you decide the type of woman or man you would like to be?

“When home is a dangerous place”

Jephthah agrees to go into battle on behalf of the Gileadites. He implicates God in his decision by saying, “If the Lord gives the Ammonites into my hand...” He understands, as do many people, that they can do nothing outside the help of God. After his diplomatic efforts fail to reason with the Ammonite king he prepares to wage war.

We don't have to bargain with God like this! When do we learn to simply trust God for who God has already demonstrated God's to be.

The biblical writer reports that the “spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah.” As Jephthah prepares to go to battle he stops and prays: “If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever (whatever) comes out of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites shall be the Lord's to be offered up as a burnt offering.”

Do we walk in the confidence of the person that God has created and called us to be? When are the divine gifts that God has already given to us enough?

What is wrong with this prayer?

First of all it is an unsolicited and unnecessary bribe! Earlier in chapter 10 we had learned that God was willing to help the Gileadites because God was tired of seeing them suffer. Their history is replete with God's movement on their behalf.

We don't have to bargain with God like this!

When do we learn to simply trust God for who God has already demonstrated God's to be.

This vow demonstrates a lack of faith on Jephthah's part. God's spirit was already upon Jephthah.

Do we walk in the confidence of the person that God has created and called us to be? When are the divine gifts that God has already given to us enough?

Thirdly, Jephthah in that moment created a condition in which his home is now a DANGEROUS PLACE for everyone who dwells in it. Because he has determined that everyone and everything in it is expendable for the sake of his self-serving goals.

Finally, this vow implicates God in an unspeakable horror that is to come.

Jephthah returns home to face the consequences of his stupid vow

Jephthah wins the battle, he returns home and his loving daughter comes running out of the house to welcome her father home. Can you see her?

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Following in the tradition of Miriam and generations of women before her who greeted their warrior heroes with singing and dancing, excited to see her father return home alive, she comes running out the house. Can you see her? But when Jephthah arrives home it is not with good news.

In a classic case of blaming the victim, her father does not greet her with joy or love, but holds her responsible for his decision to kill whoever (whatever) greets him. It is still all about Jephthah (both in his words and the words of the narrator).

In a classic case of blaming the victim, her father does not greet her with joy or love, but holds her responsible for his decision to kill whoever (whatever) greets him. It is still all about Jephthah (both in his words and the words of the narrator).

Let me say there is something problematic in this text that the primary images of women in this text is either as a prostitute or a virgin. I suspect the lives of women are much more complicated than these two designations. However, is that not how women are often viewed in terms of their sexuality?

In this moment, the unnamed daughter does what I cannot imagine. She submits to her father's stupid vow and agrees to be killed. I wanted her to scream, argue, kick, fight, runaway. I wanted her mother to come out and ask him if he had lost his ever-loving mind. I wanted somebody to yell, scream and object! But instead, there is only submission.

Reflect for a few minutes: How did you learn what it means to be a woman particularly in relationship to men? Who taught you the lessons? What are the common lessons that are taught in our society about a woman's relationship? How are lessons of power and self-determination taught?

The unnamed sacrificial daughter is able to negotiate the terms of her demise. "Give me two months so that I can go wander on the mountains and bewail my virginity, my companions and I." She chose to spend her last days with her sister-friends.

What does it mean that she bewailed her "virginity"?

For years, I thought this was a reference to her not having been with a man, not having known the loving embrace and care of a man. However, I wonder if it is more consistent with the rest of this story to suggest that the focus on her virginity is really a focus on the fact that she had not given birth to a child. Being the only child of her father, her premature death, means that this

“When home is a dangerous place”

pathological family line will come to an end. Jephthah is not only killing his daughter, he is destroying his future.

I wonder if while she was in the mountain with her friends, if anyone tried to talk her out of going back to her father’s house. Did anyone offer her sanctuary in their homes? (But then maybe their homes were dangerous places also.)

Have you ever felt helpless in trying to save a sister-friend? Sometimes being present is the only thing you can do for someone. Sometimes, your greatest gift is accompaniment, promising that their abuse and unspeakable horror will not be forgotten. You dare to tell their story over and over, so that no one forgets!

Have you ever felt helpless in trying to save a sister-friend? Sometimes being present is the only thing you can do for someone. Sometimes, your greatest gift is accompaniment, promising that their abuse and unspeakable horror will not be forgotten. You dare to tell their story over and over, so that no one forgets!

She returns home and her father fulfils his foolish promise. Instead of negotiating with the Gileadite elders, with the Ammonites, could he not negotiate with God? Furthermore, where was the ram in the bush? You remember Abraham and Isaac?

Why didn’t God stop Jephthah and remind him this was not necessary.

Jephthah’s vow implicates God in this unspeakable horror and creates a problematic understanding of God. My dear friend and colleague, the Rev. Dr. Randall Bailey, in reflecting on the book of Judges notes that the violence perpetuated against women and children’s bodies - from the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter, to the rape and murder of the unnamed woman from Bethlehem, to and the mass rape of the daughters of Shiloh and the continual silence of God in the face of such violence is problematic to say the least. The narrator of Judges presents a god whose primary concern is a self-possessed jealousy and anger over the worship of some other deity that does not exist. The narrator in Judges does not present a God who is concerned about the treatment of women, the poor and the oppression of the stranger. In the face of unbelievable horror, the narrator fails to record a mumbling word from God. Dr. Bailey argues that such a portrayal of God is a betrayal of God!¹

1 Randal Bailey, This reflection comes from a March 11, 2009 interview with Dr. Bailey.

Conclusion

If we are to take seriously the challenge to restore the home front, we must give due effort to building homes that are not dangerous places for either our boy children or our girl children. We need new definitions of what it means to be male created in the image of God and what it means to be female created in the image of God. We need to recognise the divine potential in each child that is born and seek to honour and protect it. We need to be the voice of God that speaks out in compassionate objection when stupidity dares to destroy our families, our homes and yes our communities.

In the end, we are one. Let us listen to the words of Sweet Honey in the Rock

We Are

For each child that's born a morning rises and sings to the universe who we are
For each child that's born a morning rises and sings to the universe who we are
For each child that's born a morning rises and sings to the universe who we are

We are our grandmothers' prayers
We are our grandfathers' dreamings
We are the breath of the ancestors
We are the Spirit of God

We are mothers of courage
Fathers of time
We're daughters of dust
Sons of great visions
We're sisters of mercy
Brothers of love
We're lovers of life
And builders of nations

We're seekers of truth
And keepers of faith
Makers of peace
And wisdom of ages

We are One.

Sweet Honey in the Rock, Sacred Ground

MISS GURTI'S DAUGHTER MEETS THE SAMARITAN WOMAN

Ms Lillian Burgher

Lillian Burgher, born in Jamaica in 1936, daughter of Mildred, is the eldest and only girl of four children. She attended the Cedar Valley Presbyterian Primary School. She is mother of 10 children, (2 deceased). She has 26 grandchildren and 22 great grandchildren. In 2001, she graduated with honours from the Lay Education course, Knox College and the Ewart Centre, Toronto.

From me to you girlfriends, never give up!

In life, there are situations that confront families of all kinds, and these situations may cause families to be devastated. This story helps us to consider another way of understanding both the scripture text and the realities of many women in the Caribbean context.

There was a lady who had one daughter and three sons. She worked hard tilling the soil. She did odd jobs to send her children to school. Ms Gurti was very proud of her daughter. Ms Gurti was a Christian, happy in her church. She sent her daughter to the Presbyterian Primary School in the village. The joy ended abruptly. Daughter was pregnant at age 16.

Disgrace, disappointment, shame, pain! Ms Gurti took her position at the "back bench" of the church. Worst trouble! Secret boyfriend disowned the pregnancy! Ms Gurti took on the shame and disgrace in her body and in her soul.

Daughter could no longer go to the village pipe to fetch water at the same time as everyone else. Girlfriends, women and men picked on her, cursed her and laughed her to scorn. An older woman decided she would go with Ms Gurti's daughter to fetch the water after midnight when no one goes to fetch water. This older woman became Daughter's friend.

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Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

The shame was so great that Ms Gurti decided to send her daughter away from the village to a remote, distant village, where the story was not known, and where there was a nana who delivered babies. She stayed with the nana for two months. Thank God, she delivered the baby safely. It was a baby girl. Ms Gurti was glad that her daughter 'got-over' and would be able to do evening classes at school. She could not attend day-time school with the other children.

But Ms Gurti's happiness was short lived. Before long her daughter was pregnant again, by another guy. This baby was born and went back to heaven at the age of five months. Everything went downhill. Boyfriend number three, number four, number five, and number six. Ms Gurti was worn out. In the midst of hardship, tears and poverty, she also became the village laughing stock. Daughter decided to go to the city to get a job.

In the city Daughter picked up life again. She met a city man who treated her good. She was able to send money home to Ms Gurti. She felt that this was Mr Right. He wanted a baby. After the baby came, things went downhill and Mr Right got married to another woman. Daughter turned to her girlfriends and they hugged and cried together. One girlfriend, an older woman, said, "Girl you have no luck! I am going to help you to go to foreign (abroad)." The plans worked well. She went to "foreign".

When she came to "foreign", she met a guy who helped out, took her to places and supported her in a strange land. She ended up with the same story, all over again. This time, there was no "mama" to send this baby to. But thanks be to God for looking beyond our faults and seeing our needs. In spite of a tough life, she was able to take care of her mother, all her children, and turn a new page.

John 4 says that, "Jesus had a need to go through Samaria". Instead of simply passing by Samaria he went into Samaria. Jesus arrived in Samaria at the sixth hour of the day. Samaritan Sister Girlfriend came to fetch water. She could not go to the well in the cool of the day. She was a lone ranger. Jesus was at the well. The disciples went to the city to buy food and Jesus was there alone with the Sister Girlfriend. Other women were probably at home taking care of their husbands' business or children or general housework. Jesus met Sister Girlfriend while she was alone, before the others came. Sometimes for us to get a miracle in our lives, we have to be alone with God.

Sister Girlfriend from Samaria was not a novice. She knew what it meant for men to pick a conversation at the well. She also knew her people's history. She engaged Jesus in a conversation. She explained to Jesus why she could

Miss Gurti's daughter meets the Samaritan woman

not give him a drink of water. When Jesus explained who he was, she said "Sir, give me to drink!" I can hear her saying to herself, "Deliverance has come for me today".

Then came the hottest part of the story, it was also the hottest time of the day when Jesus asked Samaritan Sister Girlfriend about her husband. She said she had none. Jesus told her that she had five, and the one that she was with, was not her husband. What does Jesus mean when he says the husband she had was not her own? Many people understand this as saying that she was fooling around with a married man. But Jesus said "husband". This part about six husbands does not make much sense. Many pieces are missing from the story.

This is where we need our detective hats! We do not get the opportunity to understand this part of the story as the writer skipped over the details. Why does the writer skip over the details? Where are the five husbands? Does she have children at home? Could she be like Ms Gurti's daughter who kept expecting that each husband would be Mr Right? Are the previous husbands dead? Or did each of them pronounce twice, "I divorce you", since this was how men would divorce women, and no woman could divorce her husband. A man could divorce his wife by going to the appropriate authorities and declaring twice, "I divorce you". If she was a divorced woman, was she divorced because she could not have children?

But what is also absent is the Sister Girlfriend's personal stories of life. What was life like with these men? What were her hopes and dreams? Was she like Ms Gurti's daughter with dreams and hopes that kept going downhill? Was she like Ms Gurti's daughter who started life thinking that a woman's future lies in a man's hand but as life moves on, realized that she could not be more wrong about this? Did she trust any of these men with her heart and life like Ms Gurti's daughter did?

But Jesus had a need to go to Samaria; he was not simply passing through. The need was twofold, Jesus had a need to be challenged about the problems between two sets of cousins, who worshipped the one God but do not even relate to each other. She challenged him. Sister Girlfriend had a need to meet someone who could look beyond the stories about her in the village and see her gifts. She is a bodacious woman who can hold a conversation. Remember how she took on Jesus about coming to her as if he does not know the history between Jews and Samaritans. She debated well. So Jesus sent her to use her giftedness in speaking to spread the good news to even those who considered her "over and done with". She ran to the village with a message, "Come and see! Is not this the Christ?"

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

We do not know what happened to her after she puts down the water bucket and ran. We used to sing a song at church, which goes like this, “The woman of Samaria, the woman, yes, she put down her water bucket and gaan.” In this Bible study, Ms Gurti’s daughter meets the Sister Girlfriend of Samaria and shares stories of how they both met Jesus and were able to put down “their water buckets and gaan”.

Sometimes women are so trapped in their stories of failures in their lives and bad relationships with men that they lose their song and their voice. They are unable to improve their education, even when the opportunities are right in front of them. They confuse their wants with their needs, and sometimes it takes a special touch from God to enable them to see clearly.

A woman’s life story can be such that she confuses her needs with her wants. For a long time she might be living in a condition where she cannot even identify her needs and only a special encounter with Jesus can help her to change her life. A woman can be such that she chooses to either bury herself in pity, anger and regret, or she can allow her life experiences to help her to pull up another sister on the road to claim life.

Living water is a symbol of the spirit of God, received by the Sister Girlfriend from Samaria. When you receive this water, you can never be the same again. You can discover gifts and talents that you never used and begin to use them. You can get rid of the burden of shame, and like Ms Gurti’s daughter, you can even go back to your accusers and invite them to experience life. You can look back at your own life and put the dots and the commas where they belong.

Chorus:

I’m so glad that Jesus rescued me (3x)

Singing glory hallelujah, glory hallelujah, glory hallelujah, Jesus rescued me!

I’m so glad that Jesus set me free (3x)

Singing glory hallelujah, Jesus set me free.

Reflections

- 🌀 The church has to find a way to talk about sex and women’s bodies in the context where mothers/women are afraid to say the word.
- 🌀 We need to talk openly about how women treat their bodies and how young girls can negotiate life by not sacrificing their bodies and committing themselves and their children to a life of poverty.
- 🌀 The church needs to empower women to tell their stories for their own

Miss Gurti's daughter meets the Samaritan woman

healing and also that of the church.

- ⑨ The church needs to teach young boys to be partners with the women in their lives for the children they have conceived, to take responsibility and break the cycle of running away and leaving their children in a perpetual cycle of poverty.
- ⑨ The church should provide spaces to enable young women to better understand their bodies and spiritual needs.
- ⑨ Young women need space to talk about the difference between love and addiction to abusive living.
- ⑨ All women, both young and older need a safe place to talk about their stories and share strategies of “overcoming”.

BLUES OF A MIGRANT

Think I'm leaving this country and all its woes behind
'Cause it's hard to survive in this wretched land of mine
It's so hard to survive in this wretched land of mine

I've given up trying I'm getting on that plane
Going to make a new life in a land that's more humane
Yes, make a new life in a land that's more humane

Have to find me a country somewhere in the West
Some folks say over there opportunities are best
Though the future seems uncertain I'll put it to the test.

Ripe I'll fly with expectation
Realise dreams of higher education
A life of material acquisition
No thoughts of cultural dislocation
Success... my only motivation

Well it's harder to survive in the land of abundance
Yes, it's harder to survive in the land of abundance
Just working like a mule's my present circumstance

Many long years have gone all my expectations fade
Many years have gone and all my expectations fade
I'm all worn out and weary of this charade.

Mrs. Maureen Weekes-Gumbe

WOMEN IN THE DELIVERY ROOM

Rev. Nicole Ashwood

Nicole Ashwood is an ordained minister of the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands. She currently serves as the education in mission secretary for the Caribbean and North America Council for Mission (CANACOM). Nicole who is popularly called Nicqi enjoys creative writing and uses those skills to prepare liturgies to create awareness on issues such as gender based violence and also for regular worship services.

Read Exodus 1.15–21

Have you ever had a moment when you notice something is amiss in a context, and you are not entirely certain what your next move should be? Or have you been urged to stay out of a situation because it did not concern you?

For some time, mothering has been understood as a communal activity. Recently, this has undergone some change in the region, wherein people have taken a singular approach to the shaping of our children and youth. Here is another perspective on ‘mothering’ and an invitation to join others in the delivery room.

Background to the Caribbean context

In the past Caribbean peoples have been very preoccupied with raising and nurturing children into ‘model’ citizens. This has typically been a communal activity, with special responsibility being placed with birth mothers and designated as community caregivers often referred to as nanas or tantes (grandmothers or aunts). Their primary, secondary and sometimes tertiary roles were centred on bringing life into existence (in the delivery rooms) and the follow-up details of maintaining, preserving and defending life, and restoring life to somewhat dead situations. In many instances, this role of midwifery and

For some time, mothering has been understood as a communal activity. Recently, this has undergone some change in the region, wherein people have taken a singular approach to the shaping of our children and youth. Here is another perspective on ‘mothering’ and an invitation to join others in the delivery room.

continuing nurture has existed almost to the total exclusion of men, whose roles have been marginalized (un)intentionally by conscious and subliminal social structures.

It is important to note that in the typical Caribbean society there is usually status and value placed on the 'mother role' and young women and men from early childhood are prepared economically, emotionally and developmentally for parental responsibilities.

During the era of African Slavery in the Caribbean many older women on the plantations were responsible for the care of infants and toddlers. This was especially popular when the mothers served as 'wet-nurse' for the children of the planters, and also when the mothers resumed duties in the house or field. Older women in the community, including grandmothers, aunts, older siblings and other respected women in the community were the ones to fulfil those roles. Along with the school teachers (who were predominantly women), they were also fully involved in shaping the children's minds and providing protection, and ensuring that their precious charges remained protected from harm or threat to their physical, social or spiritual development. Those care giving roles still existed in Jamaica during the 1970s. For, as a child in Jamaica, my thinking was shaped by my 'stay-at-home' grandmother along with several trusted family friends who offered extra pairs of eyes to my working-class parents.

Are there persons who helped to take care of you as infants? Who were they and what are some of the memories you have of their care? Did it make a difference in how you view life at this point in your life? In Jamaica, the rising trend of teenage pregnancy has resulted in a decrease in the average age of grandparents. When this is coupled with the continuously rising cost of living, one finds that there are fewer grandmothers staying at home to tend the grandchildren. This has resulted in many children being left on their own to raise themselves. In the Caribbean society, grandmothers used to serve as mother and father surrogates when the need arose. Today grandmothers themselves are young enough to want to seek new avenues of employment and livelihood elsewhere and therefore migrate. They are no longer available to play surrogate mothers. With the decline in the distinctive maintenance of the care giving and nurture role of our women one finds that the identity, values and attitudes of our children are at severe risk of being permanently destroyed. The increasing number of migrants to the 'north' in the quest for better opportunities has resulted in several children being left with family, friends or on their own. Thus creating an ever-widening gap in the nurture and care afforded our children. These days many of our children are being nurtured by MTV, Disney, Jonas Brothers, Barney, Dora and other media

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

icons who are not necessarily connected to the Caribbean social and cultural milieu.

In light of the absence of parental figures, one realizes that the inherent dangers pertaining to the absence of positive role models and protectors - in much of the Jamaican society, children are raising themselves, creating worry among concerned citizens and agencies regarding the high increase in sexual abuse, incest, drug use and other aspects of gender-based violence in Jamaica. In any society, these dangers can be perceived as a threat to the future of its peoples. And it is this threat which invites us to explore the biblical text placed before us in our study.

Before exploring the text, it is perhaps helpful to consider the number of reported incidences of child abuse in your context and also look at the impact of the broadcast media on our teenagers. Do you see a link/connection between the involvement of the older women in our children's lives and the degree of ethically sound values? How so?

The biblical context (Ex 1.1-21)

The Hebrews – descendants of Abraham via his son Isaac – had long been inhabitants in a strange land, Egypt. Over 400 years had passed, and the pharaohs no longer remembered Joseph or his influence on the Egyptian economy. The new pharaoh, saw the potential threat of the Hebrew to his economy and the potential for gain, rode roughshod on their heads (Ex 1. 8-11, Ps 66.12) to access a critical labour force to build the nation. The Hebrew people not only resisted (as is the case of many peoples under threat of genocide), but their population also exploded (Ex 1.7). And as the Hebrew population exploded, the pharaoh knew that his only option was to wipe out their numbers, beginning with the children. For he was well aware that the less Hebrew peoples he had to contend with, the easier it would be to maintain control.

Can you see any parallels to our Caribbean legacy? Would you say that this is a systemic way of treating people in bondage by the ones in power?

Because of the nature of their work, the pharaoh entrusted this task of population control to the midwives. These were the very persons whose responsibility it was to usher in new lives. The World Health Organisation defines midwifery as that

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which “encompasses care of women during pregnancy, labour, and the postpartum period, as well as care of the newborn. It includes measures aimed at preventing health problems in pregnancy, the detection of abnormal conditions, the procurement of medical assistance when necessary, and the execution of emergency measures in the absence of medical help” (WHO Midwifery definition e-dictionary 29/09/10). Yet the text indicates that the pharaoh insisted that the midwives should kill all newborn boys (v.15). The midwives were being asked to halt the care of the women who already were trying to cope with their postpartum issues, and to care for the newborn by establishing them as ‘dead on arrival’.

Who are the pharaohs in your society? What are the issues which you perceive as threats to the lives of young men and women today? To what extent is this perceived as perpetuation of our plantation heritage?

Can you imagine this - the midwives, the nannies, the tantes and the other caregivers in the society being invited to serve as co-conspirators for the extermination of our Caribbean sons and daughters from birth, despite the other (real and perceived) obstacles to their life’s worth and expectancy? The idea seems ludicrous, absurd, way out and unthinkable. This reminds us of the genocide of Amerindians and slavery of Africans in the region. And yet today, so many of our children are at risk – perhaps not all at birth, although it seems that many are marked for death the day they enter this world.

Who are the pharaohs in your society? What are the issues which you perceive as threats to the lives of young men and women today? To what extent is this perceived as perpetuation of our plantation heritage?

On another note, there is a school of thought which argues that the midwives were not necessarily Hebrews, because the text says that the midwives were outsmarted by the Hebrew mothers at delivery.

The fact is - it is not their nationality which is the matter under question. Rather, it is their defiance of the pharaoh and what he represents which establishes them as women of compassion and valour. One can see that the midwives of the text justifiably represent a critical ‘type’ for the much-needed Caribbean caregiver – one who stares in the face of danger and adversity and uses the very letter of the law to defend and sustain life. In other words, ‘dem stay pon crooked an cut straight’. Sometimes, they are integrally involved in the delivery room, seeing the ‘breech birth’ rescuing the young people from themselves and the condemnation which heralded death, even before they understood their calling.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

It is noteworthy that the pharaoh appeals for the death of the boys in the Hebrew society and not the girls. Since it was understood that males carried the necessary child-creating 'equipment', removing the males from the picture should immediately kill the population growth. And it should have worked. But these midwives faced the pharaoh, conspired against his death-dealing plan and saved the lives of Hebrew boy children. This seems to be the crux of the matter, in the face of imminent danger to our children; we have to act in the interest of life. Truly, we are called upon to nourish and protect systems and structures which enhance and save lives. The story of the midwives reminds us that there is need today for women and men to be in the delivery rooms of life. Our children, our youth, our region's future, are at risk. We must make that difference.

Identify three systems/structures which necessitate the intervention of the midwife-nurturer. Who are the women and men that worked within the systems to critique and subvert them? We often advise our children to 'tek kin teeth cova heart bun', how might we use the culture and the letter of the law to make provision for our children's sake? In short, what are the ways in which Caribbean women identify with Beres Hammond's "Putting Up Resistance" in our role as caregivers?

No I never can understand it
The way the system plan
There's no hope, no chance
No loophole, no escape for a suffering (person)
Cause every time I leave my head above water
And try to save myself from drown
There's an overnight scheme all worked out
Designed to keep ah me down

Still I'm (putting up a resistance)
I'm ah gonna work it out
You know I'm (putting up a resistance)
I've got to work it out

We are also conscious that the salvation of the Hebrew boys by the midwives also represents the salvation of a newly-emergent nation. According to the online Matthew Henry's Commentary, Egyptians tried to destroy Israel by the murder of their children. It is the quick thinking of the women that saves the children, and the nation. Consequently, it is only after their liberation from Egypt that the Hebrew people began to grasp the essence of their common identity and heritage as traced through their common ancestors – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Although the midwives were given a marginal role in the

meta-narrative, their contribution to the life of the nation was significant. What, we wonder, would have happened to the Israelite nation if the midwives had opted to let the infant boys die? If they had not recognized that kairos moment, what would the annals of biblical narrative have recorded?

Linking text with context

The Caribbean has a shared experience of the pharaoh-colonizer of European empires (England, Portugal, Spain, France and the Netherlands). The Caribbean islands and coastlands are identified by the sea which unites and divides. The divide and conquer mechanism used by the pharaoh has often been applied in the region as a means for prohibiting nation growth, regional integration and collaboration. This is evident in the racial tensions and also cultural and identity separations between the countries based on linguistic groups. It is there in the economic arrogance of the more developed toward economically dependent or less buoyant economies and national pride which run counter to a desire to build up rather than tear down during the season of nation-building and early governance. Perhaps it is critical for us to re-examine the women's acts of defiant resistance, so that we no longer remain satisfied with winning short term battles, without winning the war against our shared history, identity and humanity.

How have our modern midwives conspired to protect our children at the most critical points in our nations' histories? How do we honour the legacy of these women?

Caribbean midwives who have played significant leadership roles include Dame Eugenia Charles, Nita Barrows, Janet Jagan, Kamla Bissessar, Portia Simpson, Hannah More, Edna Manley, Nanny of the Maroons, Mary Prince and several other nameless heroines whose sacrifices and acts of subversion have been significant to nation building and development. Through their determination, resilience and resistance these women have earned the right to be numbered among the many whose stories are celebrated in folk tales and proverbs.

Although the stories and achievements of many of these women have escaped the annals of history, we need to recognise that our heritage is marked by such women. Regardless of race, class, nationality or culture, we need to research them and seek to highlight their work. Many aspects of our heritage have been salvaged/retained because of the selflessness of our women. For too long we have downplayed the value of their work.

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Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

critical points in our nations' histories? How do we honour the legacy of these women?

The midwives were women of faith who had courage to stand up to the pharaoh. When faced with a choice between saving the lives of the babies and acting counter to the dictates of the leadership of the country, the women opted to commit treason. They were willing to risk being exposed for their lies and possibly even lose their lives for the sake of the sanctity of lives. Many of us are not willing to risk leaving our comfort zones for the sake of our faith, especially when the children to be supported are not our own. We may be inclined to mouth the platitudes of prayer during a special service to help the poor unfortunate children but we are not always willing to put ourselves out. We are being called upon to live our faith in practical ways, by enhancing the lives of our youth, rescuing one or two from the rivers of teenage pregnancy, drug/substance abuse and the socially outcast. The church in the Caribbean faces a challenge to be a prophetic voice with relevance for people. We are called as women of faith to be caregivers and nurturers – life-giving, life-sustaining and life-restoring.

Points for further reflection and action:

- ④ Can you identify with the Hebrew midwives in your church/community?
- ④ Identify a Shiprah and/or a Puah in your community today and remind her of her importance to the perpetuation of life in your country.
- ④ Retell this story through poetry, dance or song and use the proceeds to support a ministry to the 'at-risk' in your community.
- ④ What are the new oppressions faced by Caribbean peoples, how does the role of nurturer and caregiver realize/effect change in context? How can biblical text help in this move for change?
- ④ What is being birthed and who will usher the new season in?

FOR MOSES' MOTHER

Found . . .
. . . lying amidst the bulrushes

Unaware of the dangers which surrounded you!
Death, discovery, even dismemberment
Removed . . . from the ones who brought you into this world
 Reshaped into the one you had to be
 Renamed as a little part of me!

Rekindling a memory of human frailty
Restoring. . . hope in myself as a compassionate being
Revealing my ability to love anew, to laugh anew, to live anew

Found . . .
 A new aspect of my persona

Unaware of the potential loss of status -
Death to the old me,
Defiance of my father's edict,
Disregarding the status quo!
Removing . . . the old self unaffected by human suffering
 Restoring hope for your people's future
Reigniting their passion for justice and equality
 Remoulding – assumptions of power and femininity
 Revealed in a few lines – with no name, no history
 . . . save for that of

Mother

I couldn't have loved you more if I had given birth to you myself
I couldn't ask for more in a son than the loyalty you gave to me
I couldn't expect you to be other than who we both raised you to be

 Child of her loins;
 Son of my dry and thirsty soul!
Our hands rocked your cradle –
God gave you wings to rule the world!

Rev. Nicole Ashwood

BRAWTA MOSES (A LITTLE SOMETHING EXTRA)

Rev. Nicole Ashwood

An alternative view of women in the delivery room is for us to explore from a practical stand point, ways in which we may get involved. Rev. Nicqi Ashwood's fictitious Caribbean approach to the story of Moses in the Nile, invites us to contextualize the actions of Moses' mother and sister as they negotiated the issue of 'unwanted' children or foundlings. How do we respond in situations such as these?

Moses at the Police Post

But what is this in Jamaica these days eh? P, you never read the headlines this morning? Miss Jane asked Miss P the same question every morning when they met at the river, knowing full well that Miss Pearl never bought the newspaper and relied on her, Miss Jane, for the day's news.

So what is this news today Sister Janey? It not usual for you to be so upset 'bout the headlines. Is what happen, it can't be murder, for that almost normal these days. Sista Janey! Sista Janey! Catch up yourself now, and read the something or pass the paper to me. You trembling like a leaf! Is what so? Miss P asked again.

Miss Jane breathed heavily, a little louder than a sigh, wiped her eyes and read the headlines out loud for Miss Pearl and the seven or eight other women who were laundering their linens at the Comsi River. The Comsi River, located in rural Jamaica, was one of the Radiks community's popular meeting spots. It was the village laundromat, the puisne court, the bank (for women who met to pay their 'partner' or collect their draw), provided a romantic backdrop some evenings around the bend for young couples, and perhaps most importantly, the main source of water as they were not yet blessed with indoor plumbing. And it was the source for hearing the national news, as Miss Jane was faithful in reading the news to all present at the river each morning. And so she began.

Three day old baby found outside backdoor of Riverview Police Post. (This story is based on a few stories which have made it to the actual headlines in Jamaica. The place names and characters are all invented.)

Brawta Moses (A little something extra)

Sources say that two boys who were playing went to the rear entrance of the Police Post to retrieve a ball which had rolled in that direction. Upon hearing a cry, the older of the two boys saw a medium sized packing box with some cloth sticking out and went to investigate. They discovered the baby and sounded the alarm. Medical examiners have determined that the baby, who was approximately three days old, had suffered no severe damages from being at the back of the Police Post. Sources connected to the Close-by Public Hospital have stated that the baby seems to have been a home delivery and revealed that there is no record of a baby being born and discharged from the hospital. The Radiks police are investigating and are appealing to the public for help in finding the birth mother.

She stood and walked around with the picture of the baby, affording all the washer-women an opportunity to see the baby for themselves and then exclaimed, Lawd look what we come to!

Strong Girl, a woman in her late thirties known for her passion on several matters, proclaimed; 'All I want to know is this – how that mother goin' to face her God after she left the baby for dead. Why she have the baby and then leave it behind a Police Post? Hmmn, hmmn? Somebody explain that to me?'

Washing had come to a halt and there were several indistinct murmurs coming from the women. Ms Pearl opened her mouth to speak twice and went silent. Finally she said, "Two things. Just two things I want to put before we, and after that, we all can cast we judgment:"

ONE – why she put the baby at the Police Post? Look how many place is near that Post, she could gone all about; but she went there. We ever figure that she know that somebody must find the baby there or that perhaps one o' the police boy know about that baby? Hmmn, hmmn? Before we cast judgment on the baby mother . . .

TWO – hold on for a second there, let me find my Bible. Yes, right here, Come on Cutie, find Exodus 2 for me. Cutie Pie read from verse 1 through to verse 10, before Miss P stopped her. Ms Pearl was a lay pastor in the community church and prided herself on her understanding and interpretation of the Bible. Everyone knew that a 'sermon' was coming and Miss P did not disappoint.

What really is the difference between Moses birth modda (mother) and di li'l girl who leave her baby by the Police Post? Three days, three months – by how we was all murmuring an abandoned baby is an abandoned baby, yes? But the Bible tell us in verse 2, that when she see how the baby nice, Moses

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

mother put him in a basket and send him sister to watch him while he was placed on the river.

Now you look into it – if that was a Jamaican woman, when she realise the hardship of the pharaoh killing off her boy-child, she ban her belly long before the baby even start to show. And plenty of us know about that. Anyways, she had the baby and realize that if she keep the baby, she going lose it, so after three months – you hear me - after three long months of hiding that baby and keeping him quiet, she realize that something have to give. Desperate means require desperate measures.

Think about how the baby could have died if the basket overturned in di Nile, even if the basket bottom was flat. But she cast him in the very same river that the pharaoh was drowning the boy babies in. So you see, the woman work the system. She ban her belly for a few months, and when he born, she hide him for at least two more months. Den when she realise that she couldn't do any more for him, she let him go. We celebrate Moses' mother for her wisdom and cunning, yet we ready to condemn the mother of the three-day-old baby? Why? You notice that the paper said the baby had not come to any harm in the time behind the Police Post; who to say that the mother wasn't watching her baby like a hawk, just like Miriam watched over Moses? She paused to ensure her question struck a chord.

For me, the question is not what a wicked mother, no siree! My question is what we can do to help? For if Moses' mother had not received help from God through the pharaoh's daughter, where would we be now? Somebody tell me? D'you realise that the pharaoh's daughter may not have been the only one to notice the child in the river, a river just as busy as Comsi River, or even busier. (Oonu (you) never read the Good Samaritan? Eh) But it's she, the pharaoh daughter, yes the pharaoh daughter dem seh, who come to the the li'l baby rescue, without knowing the fact. She never had a word of condemnation for the mother. Because she understood.

She understood pain and suffering and desperation that will cause a woman to do crazy and stupid things for the sake of her child. She understood that if she never got involved, that baby would certainly die. She understood that sometimes the system is just too much for some of us, and that we have to take matters in our own hands. How many of us 'haffi tek kin teet cova heart bun' and simply do what we have to do, regardless? How many of us as women have had to take desperate measures when trouble start to brew? How many of us have had to depend on our granny or the baby granny to help us out when we couldn't help wiself? Hmmn I tell you my dear, is not always about what we see, nuff time it's bout what we don't see or know. For I know,

Brawta Moses (A little something extra)

beyond a shadow of a doubt it's the Good Lord provision why the poor little baby never suffered at all.

Moses grew up in a stranger house, eat out of stranger pot just as if he was one of them. That is like dish cloth turn table towel, yes? But is so the story go. I not worried whether Moses real mother was right or wrong to do what she do. Moses done dead and gone already! I simply want to make sure that we do right by the ones who pass our way. Suppose is you or me, God calling to be 'the pharaoh daughter' in this particular situation. Mind we make holy righteousness (judgmental attitude) block we blessing.

Radiks Police Post is hour and a half from Comsi River, give or take a few minutes. Yet nobody saw the mother, nobody knows the mother?! Steups. How that? Where were we when the mother was desperate for help? How did we manage to miss such an opportunity? And even if she came from town or cross the other side of the River, you mean to say that NOBODY saw her to realize that something was strange? Wid how fi wi people faas, NOBODY neva see har or hear di baby? How dat? As women, what are we going to do bout that now?

I personally think we should go by the police station and see what the little baby needs. Some of us don't have children, and we might even have the means . . .

Miss P looked at each woman for a long moment. Her eyes seemed to delve deep into their souls. Some even remembered other children who never made it to the light of birth. They squirmed, they hung their heads – a cool breeze passed over the Comsi River. Nothing further was said. Nothing needed to be said.

An hour later, the washing was done, and all nine or ten ladies began their journey pondering the headlines and Miss Pearl's sermonette.

The follow-up story in the newspaper revealed that the baby had found a new home. There was no mention of who the adoptive mother was, nor of the goodly women of Comsi. It didn't matter, for the worst was past and the women each knew the part they had played in facilitating the baby's survival.

Points for reflection/action

- 🌀 Why do you think the mother left the baby at the Police Post? Do you think her actions were justified?
- 🌀 What would you have done if you were in the washing group?

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

- ⑨ Are there such cases in your context, how are foundlings treated?
- ⑨ Plan a visit with your church auxiliary to a women's shelter or children's home.
- ⑨ Organise a campaign to highlight some of the problems faced by single parents, and the threat to the social survival of our street children.
- ⑨ Get involved in the care programme at your church, or help to start one. There are always persons in need of food, clothes or shelter.

Investigate the laws of your land regarding foundlings and adoption. While you may not have the means to adopt, there are always other ways to be their advocates.



WOMEN AS CHANNELS OF GRACE, HEALING AND SERVICE

Rev. Dr. Margaret Roberts

Margaret Roberts is a Guyanese Lutheran living and working in Canada as a minister with the United Church of Canada. She was ordained by the Lutheran Church in Guyana and served as a Lutheran pastor in Guyana from 1992 to 2006. Margaret studied Theology at the United Theological College of the West Indies, Jamaica, after which, she attended the Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago, U.S.A. where she graduated with a Doctor of Ministry Degree.

Read Luke 13.10-17

There is an ancient Hindu story from the Mahabharatha that speaks about a group of men on a journey to paradise. On the way all died except for one man, Yudhishtira, and a dog who had joined them on the way and came to be a member of their team. Yudhishtira and his dog finally arrived at the door of paradise. The doorkeeper told Yudhishtira that he was welcome into paradise but not his dog. Yudhishtira looked at paradise and then at his dog. He remembered the difficulties of their journey together, the mountains they climbed, the rivers they crossed, the valleys they went through and thought that paradise is not worth it without his companion. So he and his dog returned down the mountain. On the way down, the dog revealed himself to be the God, Dharma.

God is our companion on the journey we call life and Dharma is the practice of our daily spiritual values - the embodiment of the dignity of life. What are some of our daily spiritual practices? How do we live out these values in relation to all of creation in our multi-cultural society?

God is our companion on the journey we call life and Dharma is the practice of our daily spiritual values - the embodiment of the dignity of life. What are some of our daily spiritual practices? How do we live out these values in relation to all of creation in our multi-cultural society?

I will engage our conversation reflecting on the text, Luke 13.10-17 with a focus on women as channels of grace, healing and service.

Luke tells the story that Jesus healed a woman on the Sabbath who was bent

Women as channels of grace, healing and service

over for eighteen years. Can you imagine a person kept in a single posture for such a long time? Being bent over meant she could not sit or stand upright. This physical posture denied her the opportunity to enjoy the quality of life God intended for her. It inhibited her balance and 'gracefulness.' Her 'ailment' is described literally as 'a spirit of weakness'. Her disability is caused by a physical problem, an illness. The pronouncement Jesus gave to the woman is, "You have been set free from your weakness/sickness." The perfect tense implies an action, with continuous effects in the present. God's grace healed her and that grace is sufficient for us too.

Everything about this woman, her plight, and her healing, can be understood in a figurative sense. Do we know of women/people who are in any kind of bondage? What are some of the ways our society, churches, or legal systems bind them? How are congregations in bondage to past successes? ("This is the way we've always done it.") Can our criticisms of what is new and unexpected keep us from praising God for the new possibilities in our midst? Is the institutional church in bondage? How intentional are we in listening to the voices of those on the margins? How can we contribute to the liberation of people and communities from the negative aspects of culture, systems, structures, policies and norms and the undergirding powers?

Through the gift of forgiving those who have sinned against us, God's grace frees us from bondage, resentment and revenge. By forgiving ourselves, we are released from continually beating up on ourselves for not taking full responsibility for our actions. Our story is not limited to physical healing; it is more about renewing and transforming relationships with one another, God and creation.

In this drama the characters are the bent-over woman, Jesus, the community and the religious leaders. Do you know of women who are bent over due to osteoporosis arthritis, lack of economic power, sexual, domestic violence and psychological abuse among others? Do you remember praying for one of them in your community? This bent over woman's story in our text is our story too.

Jesus understood it all, her pain, loss of self-esteem, being ridiculed, ostracized by the community and being kept on the margins of her community. On the margins, she encountered Jesus who initiated the process of transforming her, her community and society. She experiences God's love and she knows that she is worth infinitely more than her community communicated to her. Through her healing she became precisely who God intended her to be - a witness, a channel of grace to the religious leadership who themselves were also bent-over by the very laws they had inflicted upon her. They too were

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

held in a posture that was in opposition to the new possibilities God has for an inclusive community. Her healing enables her to become of service to others. While reflecting on this text with my women's network, I identified that this was my story too, a posture on the margins. However, God offers new possibilities and God's grace is a channel to us. God's action towards us is always wholeness - liberation for both those on the margins as well as for the elements of oppression/oppressors in church and society.

Most, if not all of us have heard messages about ourselves, endured actions and attitudes, which have resulted in broken relationships; causing us to experience hopelessness and disappointment in ourselves, and finally causing our shoulders to physically and psychologically stoop under the pressures of life. Usually, it is only then that we become aware of our lost grace. Jesus offers us that same healing power, and it is as transforming as it was to the woman who was restored to health and wholeness.

An anecdote reads, "Do you think a leopard can change his spots?" All the students in the class said, "No," except for one little girl. Asked to explain, she said, "If a leopard doesn't like the spot s/he's in, I don't see why s/he can't change it."

It is the unconditional love of Jesus for all of creation that gives us hope and new possibilities to fulfil our calling to be of service to our communities and neighbours. We promote this message of Jesus as we open ourselves and take a leap of faith. The process of transformation empowers us to be channels of grace, healing and service.

What made the religious leadership condemn Jesus for healing her? The institutional religious leadership needs to engage in the evolving contextual theological perspectives. Such conversations will be effected through the lens of social science. For the social sciences help us to examine the webs of structural systems that are in need of transformation. When religious leadership allows authority to be the norm, rather than the voice of compassion, there is the suspicion of religion being an exclusive community.

What is the focus of Jesus' attention and action in this story? Jesus calls us to take our stories and become a blessing to someone else. In our call to discipleship we have a commitment to practice daily spiritual values. Following Jesus' practices we do not engage in ministry with theories of sin management, rather in our approach we identify the gifts and goodness in each human being. Through our service to others we become God's channels of grace, leading people into right relationships with God and their community of faith. God's will is never for people to be 'bent-over' in the name of the law nor to stand outside the circle of God's love in a single posture.

Women as channels of grace, healing and service

An anecdote reads, “Do you think a leopard can change his spots?” All the students in the class said, “No,” except for one little girl. Asked to explain, she said, “If a leopard doesn’t like the spot s/he’s in, I don’t see why s/he can’t change it.”

How might we bring others from the margins to the centre?

Among our daily spiritual practices is the daily reading and interpretation of the scriptures. Is our interpretation of the scripture inclusive of those who sit on the margins in our society/church? I speak of people who are excluded because of poverty, sexual orientation, language, ethnicity, abused victims/survivors, accent, culture, classism, racism, and political persuasion, among others. The church has a communal responsibility to bring people from the margins into the centre by offering them God’s grace. We are not to be judgmental; rather we become channels of grace through our words and actions towards others. The Word of God is significant in growing in God’s grace and being an instrument of change.

We learn to read the Bible through new lens - re-interpreting the scriptures, re-imagining a community living in unity, eliminating boundaries, reconstructing our faith stories and re-visioning the church. These are some ways of widening the circle and making connections. Through us people can feel, touch, hear and smell the sweetness of God’s grace. As we experience God’s forgiveness in our lives we are converted and transformed. We become a new community of believers, we want to sing, dance and share the joy, love, hope and peace. We are forgiven and we learn to name the sin and face the challenges to bring about change. We become a forgiving people as Christ expects of us. As Saint Paul writes, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5.18).

We become God’s channels of grace, healing and service towards change by engaging in ministry with the hope, courage and boldness that the Spirit is working through us transforming elements in the institutional church and society.

Points for further reflection/action

- 🌀 Name women from your congregation and communities who are channels of grace, healing and service. How are they recognised in your church?
- 🌀 Share some of your bent-over experiences and the gifts of healing and wholeness?

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

- ⑨ Who are the persons on the margins of our communities? What on-going conversations are we engaging in to eliminate the margins that exclude persons from our community?
- ⑨ What are the elements in our culture that need to be addressed in order to bring about transformation?
- ⑨ How do we understand our spiritual journey in relation to other religions in our context?
- ⑨ What emerging theological trends can we develop for our multi-cultural context?

GOD'S GRACE IN THE INNER-CITY - A STORY OF REV. DOREEN WYNTER'S MINISTRY IN THE JONES TOWN COMMUNITY

Rev. Nicole Ashwood

I first heard of Rev. Doreen Wynter's ministry several years ago, and had the opportunity to visit the Jones Town Baptist Church for myself. Nestled in the heart of Jamaica's inner-city, the church was a humble dwelling and though central to its location, formed a backdrop to the ministries it housed.

The place was a hubbub of activity, with staff and general personnel attending to their routines. They were alert and attentive, yet paused for a few moments to say hi to 'Rev.', and her guests, sharing in those moments their mission and presence in and around the complex. We also spoke with persons nearby and the comments were similar.

"Rev Doreen Wynter is the one who facilitated my current position. I heard that she made the necessary steps for establishing this facility several years ago when she saw the number of pregnant girls in this community. These were girls who were not willing or in some cases not able to utilise the services of the Women's Centre in Half Way Tree. We are now an adjunct of the women's Centre, although we maintain some autonomy. Our numbers have grown

God's grace in the inner-city - A story of Rev. Doreen Wynter

from approximately 15 to 31 young ladies” says Mrs. Lewis, administrator of the Women’s Centre.

“Rev. Wynter conducted a survey to ascertain the community’s needs. The end product is the farm. She is a wealth of creativity and innovative ideas. Hence, we approached the Jamaica Baptist Union (JBU) for funding through the JBU Mission Agency, and they subsidized the costs. When we identified a potential location for the farm, we spoke to the representatives at the Ministry of Water and Housing with the purpose of leasing the land (which had been earmarked for a housing project). We drafted a project proposal which secured us assistance from the United Way and the Rural Agricultural Developmental Agency (RADA).”

Sitting on two acres of prime real estate, the farm is subdivided into smaller ‘plots’, offered to community members free of charge. Start-up capital was provided for the ‘farmers’ free of cost (including equipment and seeds), a ‘hand-up’ towards self-sufficiency. Interested persons simply had to sign the contract indicating their willingness to ‘work their ground’ for a stipulated period or accept loss of space to others. Currently there are six working farms, yielding produce to support the families of the 3 men and 3 women who proudly display their goods: scallion, cabbage, lettuce, cassava, sweet peppers, sorrel, tomatoes, and greens. At the official launch in 2010, the Minister of Agriculture, Christopher Tufton assigned them a RADA officer to assist with the technical aspects and continues to offer support.

And, in the most painful of self-fulfilling prophecies, many have rejected themselves, having internalized the refrain: You have no future, no possibilities, because your social location has predetermined your moral and personal mobility and integrity. Rev. Wynter, however, seeks to shift that paradigm, offering a space for transformation, for the individual as well as the community.

Doreen sees the entire community as her parish, although she is aware that many will never seek membership in her congregation or any other for that matter. She is all too aware of the experiences of rejection by members of the community. Many have been rejected by a nation, too troubled and busy with local and international issues to invest quality time and resources to address these issues and crises. They have been rejected by several politicians who offer short-lived and well-intentioned intervention strategies, without the necessary infrastructure to facilitate sustainability.

And, in the most painful of self-fulfilling prophecies, many have rejected

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

themselves, having internalized the refrain: You have no future, no possibilities, because your social location has predetermined your moral and personal mobility and integrity. Rev. Wynter, however, seeks to shift that paradigm, offering a space for transformation, for the individual as well as the community.

She is not averse to hard work, and does not believe in half-measures. Doreen's determination is contagious and she motivates and encourages her team often beyond their perceived capabilities. Her negotiating and persuasive skills have borne fruit as the farming project met with some obstacles which she helped her team to overcome. The land which was leased from the Ministry of Water and Housing had been fitted with pipes and sewage lines. These were unsuitable for food beds and had to be removed before the soil would be ready for planting. The solution was soon identified. The project secured a front-end loader which was loaned to them by a Chinese businessman and this was used to remove the pipes and fittings from the soil.

In another instance, the church hosted a health fair for the community. The fair was scheduled to end at 16:00. The church was filled to capacity and there were several patients who still needed access to the medical team. One participant recalls that the clinic finally closed its doors to the public at approximately 19:00. This made an impact on the residents, who stated passionately that Rev. Wynter's concern for her community transcends denominationalism. The residents have come to recognise this as one of her traits; she cares for people in need and makes every effort to be a change agent wherever she goes.

She does not take herself too seriously, but is instead concerned with shifting the perception – both internally and externally – that persons from the inner cities of Jamaica have neither hope nor a future. She has taken the mantra from Jeremiah 29.11, which affirms, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" and has embodied it for her parishioners.

In accepting God's call to pastoral ministry, Doreen virtually disrupted the status quo. She was often chided by friends and well-intentioned persons for expressing a desire to candidate for ordained ministry, "obviously she didn't know that the Bible says that women are to be silent in church." She was advised that her call to ministry must have been "a call to become a pastor's wife; because women are not ministers." In those days, the church was completely bent over, huddled in a web of traditionalism and complacency. There was need for God's equalizing and restorative grace. And so, as she paved the way for Baptist women to candidate for pastoral ministry, Doreen

God's grace in the inner-city - A story of Rev. Doreen Wynter

ensured that she impacted the lives of those with whom she connected in a positive way.

"I do not see what I do as being extremely different or special. God has called all of us to a ministry which is both proclamation and demonstration. I cannot just teach and preach. I must match it with social action, especially in the contexts where I have been placed.

My ministry spans both urban and rural contexts, and what I say (preach or teach) must resonate with the lives of the people whom I serve right there in their circumstances. This is what Jesus taught. This is what Jesus lived and if the church is to be credible in our witness, this is what we must live."

She began with what already existed, and improved on the solid foundation established by her antecedents. In speaking healing over the socially deformed and marginalized, Rev. Wynter connected her home congregation to denominational and ecumenical partners to formulate a different reality for her adopted community.

She began with what already existed, and improved on the solid foundation established by her antecedents. In speaking healing over the socially deformed and marginalized, Rev. Wynter connected her home congregation to denominational and ecumenical partners to formulate a different reality for her adopted community.

Hers is a ministry touching every stage of human life from the 'cradle to the grave'. She prays for them – there is need for prayer in an area marked (and marred) by much loss of lives – and provides the community with activities that give them reason to stand tall, extending grace in graceless voids. Now, the soup kitchen has expanded beyond those 30 to 70 persons. This was facilitated through networking with the Kiwanis Club of North St. Andrew. Doreen was not content with the offering of the soup kitchen – that of a weekly hot meal. She is in the process of upgrading the service to facilitate a Senior Citizens Care Centre.

Her passion for youth saw her serving as National Chaplain for the Girl's Brigade and with the branch at Jones Town Baptist and birthing the Women's Centre for pregnant teens. Concern for the babies and toddlers led to the inception of the Rotary-assisted nursery/day care centre for working mothers, also providing employment for qualified community members. "We are government-recognized. So we are cognizant of all the regulations and new Education Acts to ensure that we maintain our status," the Day Care Administrator, Ms Hanson, informs us.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

The programmes at Jones Town Baptist Church are beacons of hope in a wilderness of despair. Through its life-giving ministries, young mothers find room for restoration and reintegration in school and society; potential employees find a space to house and nurture their children, seniors find a place to call their own and men and women find a source for gainful sustainable employment. There is no doubt of God's grace and the community is engaged for life in fullness. There was no doubt in our minds that Doreen embodies what she preaches. There was no doubt her work challenged us to partner in the healing and restorative work of bringing those from the margins to the centre, enabling those in the centre to share at table with those who are bent-over by life's circumstances to stand upright.

We left, overwhelmed by the work of a woman whose indomitable spirit and abiding faith in God invites others to taste and see that God is good. Our time at Doreen's church ended and we departed, filled with a renewed sense of call and hope for Jamaica's future. May we, in our ministries seek to empower persons within our parishes and beyond, as we offer grace to all, once and for all.

Questions to ponder:

- 🌀 In what ways might we engender grace to those outside the social boundaries?

How can we rise above traditionalism to open doors for change in our communities?

WOMEN CRITIQUING CULTURE: THE STORY OF ABIGAIL AND A GUERILLA

Rev. Anna Joycelyn Shrikisson-Sharma

Anna Joycelyn Shrikisson-Sharma is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church of Trinidad & Tobago. She is the pastor of five congregations and serves as chaplain of four primary schools, one girls' high school, and the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT). She is also an Associate Lecturer of Christian Education at St. Andrew's Theological College (SATC).

Read 1 Samuel 25

Introduction

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches, gender manual, *Created in God's Image: From Hierarchy to Partnership*¹ defines culture as the set of commonly held attributes, (spiritual, material, intellectual, emotional, ritualistic, historical, linguistic, geographical, etc.), which characterize a society and/or a community or group. It is referred to as the accepted way of life and the accepted norm, in a society and relates to the means of communication (language, art, material things) that a society has in common and ways of life shared by a particular group.

In biblical times, most women especially in the Jewish culture were looked upon as inferior to men. Women were not granted political rights and furthermore they were not permitted credibility in the public domain. Instead they were counted as part of the property of the men. According to the historian, Flavian Josephus whose writings are of the New Testament times, the practice of the exclusion of women in the Jewish government as legal witness was as such: "But let not a single witness be credited, but three, or two at the least, and those such whose testimony is confirmed by their good lives. But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of the sex."²

During those days, the accepted norm was, "though the woman is subject to the

- 1 SHERATTAN-BISNAUTH, Patricia (Ed), *Created in God's Image: From Hierarchy to Partnership*, A Church Manual on Gender, Awareness and Leadership Development (Geneva: WARC, 2003).
- 2 JOSEPHUS, Flavian, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Bk. IV. Ch. VIII. 15

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

commandments, she is disqualified from giving evidence.”³ Probably, we can find such rules reflected in the book of Sirach or Ecclesiasticus, for example, “better is the wickedness of a man than a woman who does good” (Sirach, 42:14). This patriarchal culture with its injustices and lack of human rights reflected the situation of that time. The Bible reflects God’s people in various cultural encounters from Genesis to Revelation. I now invite you to read 1 Sam 25 as we look at the story of a woman named Abigail.

The biblical text shows that Abigail was a woman beset by trials, ignorance and aggravation. But her bravery, courage and leadership skills are displayed in this passage and serve as a lens from which we may choose to interrogate cultural practices which are restrictive and oppressive to women and which perpetrate injustice.

Abigail as a subversive woman who defied cultural norms

The biblical text shows that Abigail was a woman beset by trials, ignorance and aggravation. But her bravery, courage and leadership skills are displayed in this passage and serve as a lens from which we may choose to interrogate cultural practices which are restrictive and oppressive to women and which perpetrate injustice.

Although we are not told for certain that Abigail’s marriage had been arranged, the history of the times indicated that this would have been the common practice, for it was thought that a girl’s father was more capable of deciding the future of his daughters. Sometimes it did not matter whether the man was kind or considerate, as long as he was rich and lived what was considered a stable and comfortable life. Abigail’s first husband, Nabal, had inherited land, houses and livestock from his father. He was wealthy but was neither kind nor considerate rather he may be considered as a bully.

In the Caribbean context today, though the tradition of arranged marriages is rare, many women still seek to marry men with money or with possibilities to migrate to North America. In some cases, marriages are arranged as a business transaction for migration to the United States and Canada. There are many cases where women endure harsh treatment by their domineering partners, mainly partners of their own choice. Long ago, it was felt that abuse was more prevalent in traditionally arranged marriages where women felt trapped with little options of leaving such abusive marriages. These days, it is clear that domestic violence is prevalent in many households, across, ethnicities, classes, religions and social status.

3 Jewish Talmud, Baba Kamma 88a

Women critiquing culture: the story of Abigail and a guerilla

What are new forms of arranged marriages and match-making in your society? How many women do you know who feel trapped in their marriages? What is the situation of domestic and sexual violence in your community and what is the response of your church? What cultural elements determine the responses?

No one should tolerate such behaviour in any relationship. Women should not accept abusive and bad behaviour in marriages. They should not be forced or encouraged to stay in such relationships, rather they need to be supported by family, friends, the church and society to be free of such abusive relationships or home.

Nabal had a bad temper and this was worse when he drank. People often avoided him. Life was safer that way, including Abigail's. In those days it was accepted that a woman's place was in the private sphere of the home. She was expected to be obedient to her husband. With Nabal's bad temper, Abigail constantly had to make amends with people in their community, finding creative ways to mend relationships.

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Understanding the text of 1 Sam 25

The incident involving the characters of Abigail, Nabal and David, occurred at a time when David, the future King of Israel, was on the run from King Saul who was bent on killing him. Surrounded by men faithful to him, David moved from hideout to hideout, with his centre at Adullam in the Shephelah hills. The story of 1 Sam chapter 25 does not further the cause of David in any material way; neither does it enhance his relationship with King Saul who seemed to be always in pursuit of him. But the story does throw some light on David's character; it raises him above the ordinary levels of life, particularly in his response to, and treatment of the woman of the story: Abigail.

Abigail distinguishes herself in this episode. She is quite the hero(ine). She stands out

Abigail distinguishes herself in this episode. She is quite the hero(ine). She stands out in sharp contrast to her husband Nabal who is churlish in name and nature. "She was an intelligent and beautiful woman, but her husband, a Calebite, was surly and mean in his dealings." Nabal means 'churl'.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

in sharp contrast to her husband Nabal who is churlish in name and nature. “She was an intelligent and beautiful woman, but her husband, a Calebite, was surly and mean in his dealings.” Nabal means ‘churl’.

Whatever the cultural protocols of those times, which regulated the relationships between husband and wife, and the encounter between men and women in public, Abigail behaved to David with such courtesy, astuteness and tact that she commanded the attention of David, and averted the shedding of much blood, including that of her husband. She is deserving of such compliments as have been heaped on her, including that which the future king paid her when he accepted the gifts from her hand, and her hand in marriage later. In modern times, she has been characterised as a “model wife and good woman” (Adele Berlin), a “woman of good sense” (Athalya Brenner).

Her prophetic words of 1 Sam 25.28-51 present her as God’s chosen prophet – intermediary and something of a subversive character given that the words were spoken to a “guerrilla” rebel against King Saul. There is much to be learnt from Abigail’s character and the way she was subversive and challenging to the culture of her society.

Questions to ponder:

- 🌀 What are some of the characteristics you admire most about Abigail?
- 🌀 Does your culture permit women to behave in the manner Abigail did to David and Nabal?
- 🌀 How justified are the descriptions of Abigail as prophetic (subversive), a woman of good sense, a model wife? Discuss.

The Caribbean situation

In the Caribbean today there are many women who can identify with Abigail regarding having male partners with similar characteristics as Nabal. Many women flee their homes because of abusive partners. In some cases women are encouraged to stick out the abuse, hoping for change in their husband’s behaviour. Fortunately, today, some women have the economic means to leave abusive marriages and move on with their lives. Churches tend to turn a blind eye to male abuse of women, and sometimes put pressure on women to return to the abusive home. In some societies, a woman who is separated or divorced is looked down upon. She may be denied roles as elder and other leadership positions in the church.

Women critiquing culture: the story of Abigail and a guerilla

It is important for us to examine the cultural factors which would cause women to stay in an abusive relationship or marriage, whether it is an arranged marriage of any kind or partners by choice. In so doing, we need to critically examine the causes, forms and effects of such violence and find ways of responding to these situations of abuse, with support for the women and children and actions to bring justice and also measures of reform for the perpetrators. Also very importantly, the culture which sustains and maintains situations of abuse must be examined and critiqued with corrective action to transform the culture.

- 🌀 How can the church support women who are constrained by culture to remain in abusive and unhealthy situations/marriages?
- 🌀 How does your church regard women who are divorced? Is it the same for divorced men?
- 🌀 What aspects of your culture allow and sometimes serve as agents to perpetuate unjust gender relations?

Abigail's life-changing opportunity

Finally, a life-changing opportunity presented itself to Abigail. One of the servants from the field came to the house with a message. David had run out of provisions for his men and they were hungry, thirsty and tired. They asked Nabal for food, water and a place to rest for the night. Do you know what Nabal did? He sent back word that he would in no way make provision for an outlaw and thief.

“Nabal answered David’s servants, “Who is the David? Who is this son of Jesse? Many servants are breaking away from their masters these days. Why should I take my bread and water, and the meat I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men coming from who knows where?” (1 Sam 25.10-11)

When Abigail heard what had happened, she explained to Nabal that David and his men were their protectors and had been refused what was, for them, a small request. She saw the present danger and began to plan around Nabal’s decision even as she moved through the house.

“Abigail lost no time. She took two hundred loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five dressed sheep, five seahs of roasted grain, a hundred cakes of raisins and two hundred cakes of pressed figs, and loaded them on donkeys. Then she told her servants, “Go on ahead; I’ll follow you.” But she did not tell her husband Nabal. As she came riding her donkey into a mountain ravine, there was David and his men descending toward her, and she met them. David had just said. “It’s been useless - all my watching over this fellow’s property in the desert so that nothing of his was missing. He had paid me back evil for good.” (1 Sam 25.18-20)

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

How would you have responded were you in Abigail's shoes? How do we as women circumvent traditions when we need to act urgently?

David looked over to the small caravan of supplies that Abigail brought to him and appraised it. Then he looked back to her. David had an eye for beauty, and with her dark hair and eyes, she knew that he was looking at her with admiration and fondness. "What is your name?" he asked. She replied, "Abigail, sir." (1 Sam 25.32-34)

David said to Abigail, "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me, May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands. Otherwise, as surely as the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, who has kept me from harming you, if you had not come quickly to meet me, not one male belonging to Nabal would have been left alive by daybreak."

Had Nabal known that she went to David, there would have been serious trouble for her. Yet, had it not been for her, Nabal and all his people, especially the males, would have been killed. Ten days later, Nabal died of a stroke. Two sad facts about Nabal's life were that nobody loved him while he lived and nobody grieved for him when he died.

Life continued for Abigail. But it was not business as usual. David heard about her being widowed and, with a priest at his side, went to her. Abigail and David were married in a small ceremony, attended only by his men and the members of her household. Later David was crowned as the second and greatest King that Israel ever had.

Conclusion

In many cultural situations, whether north or south, and even where arranged marriages do not exist, the cultural expectation remains the same in varying degrees. Women are expected to be silent on most issues that are other than household and obedient to their husbands, even in circumstances where they experience physical/sexual, emotional or mental abuse. Within the church, the Bible is often cited, as a means of ensuring that women 'know their place.' When women decide that they have had enough, they are sometimes told to remain with the husband, or are accused of being the offensive party and cause of a family break-up. Relationships are still negotiated primarily by the men, and overt actions by women are often seen as aggressive or 'mannish'.

Women critiquing culture: the story of Abigail and a guerilla

Questions to ponder

- ⑨ Have you been or know of someone in a similar situation as that of Abigail?
- ⑨ In what ways does Abigail serve as a means of empowering women who are living in culturally oppressive situations which deny them life in fullness?
- ⑨ How does the church perpetuate or challenge harmful cultural practices?

Activity

- ⑨ Use your Women's Group to help vulnerable women through Bible study, prayer and gender workshops.
- ⑨ Organise projects skills training, including life skills for physical, social, cultural and spiritual development.

A GRIEVING MOM

(Luke 7.11-17)

A heart that grieves for a child,
Who God has called to His land;
The child's love was with a smile,
The life that praised God and went a second mile.

With eyes full with tears,
I see friends and relatives here,
Support was given, love expressed,
Yet, the grieving heart was not addressed.

Until, I walked the street of town,
The Lord Jesus arrived and looked down.
With compassion He was moved,
When He saw my face and mood,

Approaching me He sweetly said: "Do not weep."

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

With his gentle hand, he touched the coffin,
All bearers and others stop to see,
A miracle that was about to happen.

“Young man, I say to you, arise,” He remarked.
My son woke up and started to speak in surprise,
The Lord, presented him to me at last,
While fear came upon all who passed.

“Glory to God,” we all sang the praise,
A great prophet has risen in this place,
And certainly, God has visited his people,
The Good News was told throughout the region.

Rev. Anna J. S. Sharma

TELLING MY STORY - A WOMAN OF COURAGE, DETERMINATION AND HOPE

Ms Denise Shrikissoon

Denise Shrikissoon is a Trinidadian and works as a school teacher. She is on a government scholarship reading for a Bachelor of Education at the University of Trinidad & Tobago. She serves as a member of the St. Julien Presbyterian Church's Local Board and is the mother of two wonderful children.

Where it all began

There were two families who were very good friends. Upon their approval their children got married. One of the marriage partners was me. Similarly, Abigail belonged to a family and was a partner in what was likely an arranged marriage. At the age of twenty-two I was married to an attractive young man, who came from a respectable family and who worked at a commercial bank. For my family and me this arrangement gave a sense of stability and hope. Surely, the circumstance resembles that of Nabal, which was one of the reasons for marriage.

A quick step from wonderful to ugly

In the first few weeks of my marriage my life seemed to be the beginning of something wonderful. As the weeks passed, yes, the weeks, I started to notice a change in the man I married. The happy and kind man suddenly turned into a verbally abusive man. Not only was he verbally abusive, he also began to drink heavily and I was totally neglected. After the birth of our daughter, we were happy for a short while, but then he began to drink heavily again. He condemned everything I did and said. He constantly abused me and my daughter verbally and psychologically. This could be Nabal.

When I was pregnant with my son, things did not get better, instead it worsened. Late one night, my husband came home from drinking and decided that as pregnant as I was, he would “lock” me in the bathroom and leave me there until morning. I slept on the floor and this incident was “the straw that broke the camel’s back!”

I decided to leave this man and return to my mother’s home with my daughter and also pregnant with my son. I was unemployed. I had no money, no property, nothing to sustain me and my children. With the help of my mother, her sister, my sister and cousins, I was supported and able to have my baby, without any help from my husband.

A miracle from God

I was moved from the hospital where my husband’s “girl friend” was working and sent to another medical facility (Mt. Hope Hospital) where I bore my handsome, but ill son. He was hospitalised for several weeks. I was informed that the stress of my broken marriage and abuse had caused this illness. During this period, I spent most of my time praying for my son’s healing. I was determined that I will not let this situation continue as it was. I had to take care of my children and make some changes.

As I had not done too well at high school, I decided to take the advice of my cousin and her husband, to repeat mathematics and a science subject. I added five more subjects and was successful, attaining seven subjects in the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC). The same relatives saw to it that I applied for a position as a teacher. I got an appointment with a school. I was successful and did well. Later I received two government scholarships, one in Early Childhood Education and a Bachelor of Education, which I am presently pursuing, with full salary.

Conclusion

I am proud of myself - moving from no salary to a full salary and fulfilling my dream as well. I must say that my self-esteem has been significantly lifted.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

I see myself as a woman, who took chances to change my life, and be a good mother, caring for my two wonderful children. I see my future with a male companion, who is kind, considerate and loving.

In conclusion, I thank my God every day, for empowering me to get out of a terrible situation, to something that is life fulfilling.

I also say thanks to all relatives, friends, family members and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago for assisting me in making my dream a reality. Thanks to the Caribbean Women for giving me this opportunity, to tell my story in order that other women may be encouraged to follow their kind heart and “DREAMS” with prayer and hope. I am happy. You can be happy as well fellow sisters.

I see myself as a woman, who took chances to change my life, and be a good mother, caring for my two wonderful children. I see my future with a male companion, who is kind, considerate and loving.

Next steps:

- 🌀 Can you get out of such abusive situations? Think about it.
- 🌀 Do you have a dream?
- 🌀 Do you have that faith in God; Jesus Christ in whom everything is possible?

You must make the first step. Be brave like Abigail and me, you can do it. God Bless.

THE GIFT OF A GARMENT

A BIBLE STUDY ON ACTS 9.36-43

Rev. Dr. Marjorie Lewis

Read Acts 9.36-43

The Jamaican artist Dawn Scott died towards the end of 2010 and I was asked to officiate at her funeral. My strongest memory of Dawn was around the purchasing of a garment made in her exquisite batik work with complementary tie dye accents. Dawn had arrived in Kingston from her home in the rural area one weekend and just called to say she was in town and had a few things. Every garment was a work of art.

I went to look at her garments and there was one piece that when I put it on it felt at home, as if it were already mine, waiting for me to claim it. On the face of it, it was really a size or two, too big for me, but once on, it was definitely mine. I decided to make the purchase and Dawn said to me, “Do you know what the name of this piece is? It is ‘Surplice’”. I was surprised. Dawn was not a ‘Churchy’ person as I remarked in the service, yet an artist who was not involved in the Church, who had explored Rastafari but whose spirituality could not be contained in any religious ‘box’ had designed a garment called ‘Surplice’ that eventually found a home on a woman in the Christian ministry.

It was preparing the sermon for Dawn’s funeral that brought to me the significance of this encounter. A gifted artist of uncertain religious allegiance had created a garment that became an affirmation of the ministry of a woman in ministry who had wrestled with her pastoral identity.

It reminded me of the story of Dorcas (Tabitha), recorded in Acts 9.36–43. Dorcas was also a woman who made garments for others. She exercised a priestly function, the only woman in the New Testament to whom the female form of ‘disciple’ is attributed.

Although her work is not expressly described as ‘ministry’ she mediated God’s presence to poor, outcast widows through her creativity and labour, making garments just for them. In so doing, she tacitly affirmed that these widows mattered, were important, had value, and are not just statistics. God had heard their cry, seen their plight and responded through the attentive Dorcas.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Perhaps Dorcas had found a way to deal with her own loss as a widow herself, by having compassion on and reaching out to others who suffered similar adversity and points to a way to experience meaning from life's reverses. Perhaps Dorcas knew that our sermons and service in the name of God can be expressed in ordinary experiences like sewing clothes and quietly reaching out to others. God often comes with no fanfare, but if we are attentive, we can see the hand of God in ordinary, mundane encounters and hear the sound of the still small voice calling us to service.

Dr. Carolyn Cooper in an article in the Jamaica Gleaner of September 26, 2010 reflected on Dawn Scott's work, in part, with these words: "The name of Jesus is summoned by many of us in a variety of circumstances whose religious significance is not immediately apparent... In any case, great art does inspire a sense of reverential wonder at the magical process of creation. In the beginning there is nothing. Out of the void the blank canvas – or in Dawn's case, a length of plain white cloth – come light and vision."

Like Dawn Scott's garment, Dorcas' gift remained not only as a physical item, but also as inspired and treasured memory of an ordinary encounter where god's presence was experienced – long after death.

For reflection

- 🌀 How can you pass on the gift of God's grace in ordinary, everyday activities?
- 🌀 How can you be more attentive to the ways in which God is blessing you through encounters with others?

For meditation

Jesus, where can we find you
In our world today?
Jesus, where can we find you,
Incarnate Word today?

Chorus
Look at your brother beside you;
Look at your sister beside you;
Look! Listen! Care!

Doreen Potter, Jamaica



TAKE ACTION TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Rev. Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth

For change to happen people must stop thinking of violence against women as something that “is just the way things are” or that it is the woman’s fault. Talking about the abuse is the first step in changing it – for example, finding other women who have the same problems with violent and abusive men and sharing ideas with each other, finding men who also believe that violence is wrong, making violence something that people talk about and think is wrong.

There is no excuse for abuse. No one has the right to abuse anyone. Women, children and men have the right to live in safety and security and be free of fear.

Look out for the following signs of danger and entrapment:



DVP, Inc. Kenosha, WI, 1992

(Training Workshop For the Counselling Services of Help and Shelter, Guyana, Faith A. Harding, January 2009 <http://www.hands.org.gy/files/ManualforDVCounsellingWorkshopJanuary2009.doc>)

Take action to end violence against women and children

AS A RELIGIOUS LEADER YOU CAN HELP

- ⑨ Be supportive to women who have been abused and are seeking help.
- ⑨ Remind families and the community that no religion accepts violence against women and children.
- ⑨ Develop a personal understanding of the issue of violence against women.
- ⑨ Encourage relationships of respect, cooperation and partnership in families, and discourage relationships of power and control over women.
- ⑨ Believe a woman who tells you about abuse. Too many people do not understand that a problem exists. Tell her it is not her fault, and that no one has the right to hurt her in any way. This will help her gain some self-confidence to take whatever steps she needs to deal with the abuse.
- ⑨ Deal with the issue of abuse of women in your sermons and teachings. Speak out against violence in marriage. Let it be known in the community that you are a person an abused woman can trust.
- ⑨ Watch out for signs that a woman may be living with violence and her abuser may be keeping her away from the church.
- ⑨ Ask direct questions when you suspect that there is abuse going on.
- ⑨ Do not discuss confidential information with the husband or partner. This could be a real danger for the woman's safety, even if she does not think so.
- ⑨ Make sure the message that "violence is always unacceptable" is part of any premarital and marital counselling.
- ⑨ Be informed about the spiritual needs of women who are in, are leaving, or have left abusive relationships.
- ⑨ Support interfaith dialogue on the issue. Allow space in your church for women's groups and others dealing with the issue of gender-based violence.

There is no excuse for abuse. No one has the right to abuse anyone. Women, children and men have the right to live in safety and security and be free of fear.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

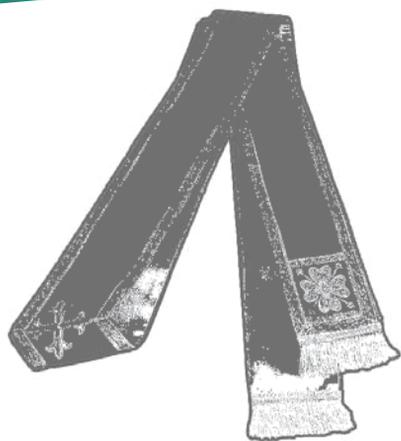
Unhelpful responses:

- ⑨ Blaming the woman for the abuse or suggesting that if she just tried harder, or was more supportive to her husband, the abuse would end.
- ⑨ Making excuses for her abusive partner, such as he is under stress, or it is due to his alcohol or drug use.
- ⑨ Trying to take control of the situation and telling her what she must do.
- ⑨ Minimizing the abuse, and telling her to be grateful that it is not worse.
- ⑨ Discounting the abuse by saying that it is part of the culture.
- ⑨ Quoting biblical texts out of context to justify the actions of the abuser.

YWCA of Canada – *There's No Excuse for Abuse, Community Action on Violence Against Women, 1994*



Training Workshop For the Counseling Services of Help and Shelter, Guyana, Faith A. Harding, January 2009 <http://www.hands.org.gy/files/ManualforDVCounselingWorkshopJanuary2009.doc>



LITURGICAL
RESOURCES



INTRODUCTION

Rev. Nicole Ashwood

The gathered community in worship can also be a powerful space which enables transformation and change. It is the responsibility of the worship team (planners, liturgists, worship leaders, musicians, choir, poets and dancers) to ensure that the flow of the worship is smooth, especially at transition points, and easily followed by the congregation. What is also important is the commitment of the liturgical crafters to balance theology, creativity, aesthetics and enactment. Sometimes, there is a need for liturgies to mark special occasions and creative resources are not readily available.

It is important to:

- identify the important issues which need to be reflected in the liturgy
- source relevant and appropriate material for use by the participants
- prepare the congregants for the shift in the worship format
- ensure that the songs/poetry are 'accessible' and appropriate for the congregation
- provide sufficient material for use by the worshipping community

As one who enjoys working with various resources for use in the preparation of liturgies in my home context (Jamaica) and beyond, I have found that there is a dearth of material for use in services which are related to women or contextual issues such as gender based violence. The liturgies below have been specifically prepared with this in mind and it is my prayer that you will find them useful for your community. Each liturgy is preceded by an introduction and brief notes on preparation required in the hope that this will assist you in your preparations whether or not you are a trained worship leader/planning team member.

A SERVICE OF HEALING AND RECONCILIATION

There is a school of thought, which says that the best way to bring about healing is for the afflicted and the perpetrator to agree on the actual wrong

that has been done. In many instances, this requires a naming of the series of events which sometimes is very hard for listeners to hear or for the offended to recount.

One could attempt to restore relationships by creating awareness through testimonies and stories. Rituals for healing in the Caribbean are not readily available and so many persons would seek to bring about healing in the traditional folk expressions of religion. While this service seeks to reflect the element of the folk, it is not to be confused with a traditional healing service. Rather, this seeks to offer a way of confronting the issues and beginning the process toward life-giving awareness, forgiveness, healing and wholeness.

Preparation

Prior to the service, the worship team needs to assemble a team to prepare crosses from palm fronds, secure rods/staff, a large cross, towels/blankets, a large box and bags (to discard one's burdens). The team should also determine whether there are persons willing to share their stories or if printed testimonies will be used. The readers must be familiarised with the testimonies a week in advance.

Processional Chant/Chorus

A come wi dis a come,
a come wi dis a come
an we no waan no bodderation oh (x3)

Opening sentences

- Liturgist : Give thanks unto God
 Women : For God's mercies are everlasting
 Liturgist : Come give thanks unto God
 Men : For God's mercies are everlasting
 Liturgist : Come let us give thanks to our God
All : We will worship and praise God's name for ever
 Liturgist : God lifts up the poor and the lowly and raises them to higher heights
 Men: God walks with the oppressed and abused and redeems them out of their misery
 Women : When they cast whips and trampled upon our backs, when we journeyed through fire and flood
All : It is you, O God who brought us through, to a place of great abundance!
 Liturgist : So we lift offerings of prayers and praises to Your name
All : Giving thanks to our God whose mercies and grace endures forever! Come let's praise our God.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Hymn

Prayers of adoration and thanksgiving

Chorus: God is a good God

Responsive Reading: Psalm 66

Welcome and Invitation - the Minister/Liturgist welcomes the congregation and adds the following:

“There are so many wrongs that have been administered against our women and our children. And we as the church, as God’s representatives have not been as vocal in our involvement. We have kept silent while those who often are considered the weakest in our societies have been battered, raped, emotionally, verbally and psychologically assaulted and left for dead. We have been too busy minding our own business or saving our own lives or making excuses for those who have continued the cycle of abuse, that we have not gotten involved. But no longer.

As the people of God, who serve a living and compassionate God, we declare that today we are standing as advocates for those who are not able to speak for themselves, who no longer have tears left for them to cry, whose scars are found deep within and those who are not yet scarred.

We begin by confessing our complicity in the acts of violence – for even if we did not actually participate in deed; our silence is just as much an offense to God as what the others have done.

After the period of silence where we examine our actions, I invite you - as you are led - to join in the prayer of confession:

Prayer of Confession

Holy God, God of love and compassion:

You have created us to share your love with each other,

We recognise that in our haste to attend to our own issues.

Neglecting our sisters and brothers who suffer and whose voices are not heard.

Many of us have opted for non-involvement in matters of gender-based violence,

Or any form of oppression, because of our own self-protection.

Yet you call us to go to the highways and byways to seek the lost and wounded.

Healing God, you have called us to bind the wounds of the hurting.

We have been crippled by the principalities and powers at work around us,
And often fail to realise the power there is in solidarity.
We have made assumptions about people's lives and lifestyles and often fail
to advocate for change.
Some of us have been perpetrators of abuse in various forms – emotional,
psychological, verbal, sexual or physical, and yet we dare to throw stones
round about us.

You call us to go to the highways and byways to seek the lost and wounded.
Healing God, you have called us to bind the wounds of the hurting.

**Forgive us and heal us of our abusive ways;
Restore us to our rightful minds as we become the change we want to see.
Have mercy upon us O God we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.**

Chorus/Hymn Search Me O God

The Lord's Prayer (Kumbaya version)

Act of Healing and Reconciliation

Dance 'Black Mother Prays' (Jimmy Riley)

Chorus 'Hear My Cry O Lord'

Prayers of empowerment for advocates and activists

Liturgist: Sisters and brothers, we have heard the cries, seen the bruises, some of us been wounded also, and unless we do something, until we say something – everything will remain the same, and change will never come. We participate in the healing of memories by listening, crying and pouring the balm on the wounded hearts and lives as we hear the testimonies of survivors¹. And, if their story sounds similar to one you know, please come forward and stand in the gap as we offer prayers at the end of each testimony.

Chorus: There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole

1 N.B. The testimonies included here are suggestions, which have been adapted from the real life stories of survivors and should not be included in the printed liturgy. It is quite feasible to select persons from the context to share their own testimonies.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Testimony 1

I left him, moved from one location to a place far away. I went to work and when I got home, he had paid a truck to move my furniture, paid my rent in full and told my landlady to give me the taxi-fare (which he had given to her) for me to return home. Two days later, the abuse started all over again. I lost everything. The children, my little sister and my daughter, later told me how hurt they were and how badly they felt that they couldn't do anything to help. God has been good to me though, for I finally escaped when I relocated to the United States. Life was hard, but I am still alive and even ended up helping to bury him.

(The person who shared the testimony moves to the foot of the large wooden cross which is in the centre of the room. Two persons from the congregation take the bag, which represents the burden shared and places it at the base. Someone is invited to pray for the abused.)

Testimony 2

Everybody was intimidated by him. He abused everyone in the house. Son, daughter, step-children, wife/sweetheart, everybody. We were crippled by fear! We felt that we couldn't do anything to help. And he cheated on her in the midst of it all. And she couldn't do anything about it. For if she tried, he would simply beat her again, and again, and again. It was abuse in all forms – mental, sexual and physical.

I wasn't raised totally by him. And I was not used to that kind of behaviour. So I decided from early that I would not marry an abuser. The boys became abusers themselves and that is what hurt me so badly. There were women in the community who warned her that he was like that. But she took up with him anyway. I don't believe that she could help it . . . Remember women that are abused tend to select other abusers as their partners. So intervention is critical at an early stage.

We can't ask the church to intervene unless there is a relationship. For the man can simply insist that the church representative leave, and they would have to leave! Just like that. But an abused woman needs a friend, a confidante, someone who is authoritative enough to confront the man and provide an alternative space for the woman to be. And of course, we also need to make certain that the abuser gets some serious counselling.

Chorus: 'It's me, it's me, it's me O Lord'

(The person who shared the testimony is escorted to the foot of the cross. As the baggage is taken others who have been exposed to abuse of their parents

or guardians join in the circle. As the stones/baggage is placed at the cross, a prayer is raised.)

Prayer for children who are caught in the cycle

Reading: Isa 53:3-5,7

Testimony 3

The beatings got to the point where I had a restraining order out on him, even though we had children together. One night he had our big son come forward and knock on the door. The moment I opened it – to save my son, he rushed through, machete sailing chopping me and everything in his path. When I came to, my second son was dead and I was on the path to months of rehabilitation and surgery. They soon stopped giving me the meds to stop the pain – probably because the pain was not just across my back which was scarred, nor my right hand (which only had a thumb remaining); it was deeply embedded in my heart. And no liquor, no stuff could really change that. I'm glad that the folks at the halfway house rescued me. It's been 27 months since I been sober, but nothing, brings my baby back to me.

(As she enters the circle, someone offers her a rag and a staff. Her burden is taken, others come to the centre and prayers are offered)

Prayers for those caught in the cross-fire

Testimony 4

He brought us sweets and nice treats every day. We were happy to be getting food in our stomachs – we thought he was like a god. I remember clearly when he found out that I was interested in the boy down the road. He boxed me and said that he can't be paying down on the goods and another man benefiting. I was to stop talking to the boy. When my mother asked him about it, he said I was lying, and he was only trying to protect me.

A few days later, he was in my room waiting on me when I got home from school. I tried to run, but he blocked the exit. I screamed out and bit him. He boxed me twice so till my face feel as if it twist. I hear a rip and is my skirt him tear off. I tried to scream again, but I didn't have no strength left. When he saw me fall to the ground, he think I faint and so he swear and left me there – for dead I guess. When I start to feel better, I never wait to tell my mother, I know him going tell her all sort of story anyways, but I wait till night come, an I creep out under the cover of dark and I jus' run way. My only worry is for my two little sister them, for they of age now, and I sure that unless they run way too, he going rape them, for him not making deposit without getting

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

something for him troubles. Have mercy pon dem lawd.

(She is draped with a shawl and taken to the centre. The bag is also placed at the foot of the cross while the chorus is sung):

Chorus: *Lord, listen to your children praying*
 Lord we need your Spirit in this place
 Lord, listen to your children praying
 Send us love, send us power, send us grace!

[In the background a voice cries out 'Mighty God, forgive them, forgive us!']

Prayers for perpetrators of gender based violence

Testimony 5

I can't remember too much, for you see, I am not too bright. In fact, everybody knows I dunce long time. My mother know it, she know I ugly too – at least that's what them tell me why she run away and leave me. Say she couldn't cope with a 'big-head bud' like me. When I do go to school, nobody talk to me, nobody want anything to do with me. That hurt, but the worst part is when I hear them calling me all sort of names and saying things about me. That is when it feel as if they tek a wire brush and trying to strip my insides off. The words just eat out my inside till I feel so bad is like I going vomit.

Granny, she say is because I am a girl, and a ugly one to boot. But she say I am a hard worker. I don't really like to work hard y'know, but when I work hard they give me money and they don't curse me so much – unless I do the work wrong. Sometimes I wonder why God bother to mek me born, cause they say I ugly like sin. I guess I should be happy that they never bother to kill me off, but I not too sure that this is not worse than death. I like when I go by the church though. They give me food sometimes and they don't scorn me or laugh at me. I wish, I wish - ha boy!

Reading Matt 11:28-30

Hymn 'The Servant Song'

[As the song is played, all persons gathered are invited to place their own palm crosses at the base of the larger cross. S/he selects a note of encouragement from the table beside the cross and hands it to the next person in the line. When all persons have received, the final prayer – to end GBV is offered by the minister, selected intercessor or liturgist.]

A brief reflection

Cl.

Hymn 'Let us Talents' OR 'The Right Hand of God'² (with appended final verse)

*The right hand of God is working in our lands,
Restoring relationships gone sour
God calls the church to stand
And start working in all lands
To combat violence and abusing of power!*

Benediction

SERVICE FOR ENCOUNTER

Preparation

This service works best with an intentional move towards informality. However, if the congregation is not very open to lots of change, create the difference with candles or by repositioning the 'altar' so that it is not only in a prominent space, but also at the centre of the gathered worshippers. In any case, ensure that the worshipping community knows what the order is, before they enter the worship area.

There are three poems which set the stage for the divine encounters, and so it would be fitting to have four persons to read or perform the same (the third is better with two readers). It is most helpful if the persons are given an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the texts prior to the worship, so that they may read without prompting. Do not print the words of the poems for everyone, thus inviting them to experience the encounters with their senses and not just by reading the texts.

Call to Worship

Liturgist : In the beginning was the Word
And the word was God
And the word was with God

Liturgist 2 : The same was in the beginning, now is and always will be with
God . . .
He came unto us all . . . and to those who believe, to all those
who receive
This Word is given the power
To be!

All : And so we are . . .
Come now liberating Word and dwell with us!

2 Noel Dexter (music) Patrick Prescod (lyrics) © 1981. Additional verse appended by Rev. Nicole Ashwood for Bible Study Manual, 2010.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Invitation to Prayers: 'God will make a way'/'Be Thou my Vision'

Reading: Ps 103, Eph 3.14-21

Prayer of approach

Loving God, you meet us in the highways and byways of life, and call us into relationship with you. Today we pause to recognize you in our midst and ask that you to reveal yourself to us as we seek your face in this moment. Guide our thoughts we pray. Amen.

Invitation to encounters (Texts for the three encounters are included at the end of the liturgy.)

The liturgist introduces the encounters by saying: As you connect with each character, we invite you to your own personal encounter with our God who is with us in the midst of all our experiences.

Song	'Come Just as You Are'
Encounter 1	Envisioned
Chorus	'Open my Eyes Lord'/'Open the eyes of my Heart Lord'

Encounter 2	On the cusp of becoming
Chorus	Let the power
Silent Reflection	

Encounter 3	Just as you are
-------------	-----------------

Reflection and response

Prayers of intercession

(For this time of prayer, there are several options: Invite specially selected persons to pray or have extemporaneous prayers which cover the gamut of needs reflected in the gathered community. Persons may also be asked to place their prayer needs in a specially marked container and these prayers are lifted up at this time, or the minister/liturgist may opt to bless all congregants at this time.)

Closing Song: 'Take Home the Good News'³/'You shall go out with Joy'

Benediction

3 © Kimberly Ramlochan and TIM 2007. (Used with permission).

Encounter 1 – Envisioned

I guess I should be happy that
He had the decency to give me his name
Valour, hmmph!
More like like 'unclean' or 'son of a worthless, good-for-nothing piece of dirt'
At least, that's how I was treated mostly, normally.
But there was nothing normal about that day, nothing, nothing at all.

I was restive, dreaming dreams as one who had sight
Having visions of being worthwhile, of amounting to something of doing more
than sitting in this same spot day after day, begging for ridicule, scorn, bread
and small change.
And suddenly, I sensed the rumbling,
A change in the wind, an urgency and poignancy in the movement of the
people on the street!

What is going on, I asked myself.
Then I heard it – the Teacher is in town. He's headed this way. Maybe, he will
heal my daughter
like he did the soldier's servant. Maybe he'll feed us again like he did at that
wedding they talked about.
Maybe he will perform some great feat or give us new ideas for freedom
Maybe . . .

I did not wait to hear more.
I knew this was what was behind my visions.
I knew my destiny was about to change.
I threw off my coat – it was a hindrance to my jerky, sightless movements.
I ran as much as possible for one with my condition.
A sound came up from the bowels of my need as I cried out:
Son to Son, created to Creator!
He heard me. No words of scorn or disdain, no sarcasm or disgust
He simply asked me what I sought from him – my night was turned to day. My
vision to reality.

I was finally worthwhile, Son of valour!
Removed from the gutters of unseeing squalor, into the streets of worth and
gain
O the possibilities! Imagine my joy that at last put end to shame!

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Encounter 2 - On the Cusp of Becoming

I stood there trembling
Half kneeling, half stooping, knowing
Death was certain.
My fate sealed with the unwanted caress...
Knowing touch - knowing his actions were never questioned,
never subject to their judgment.
Only mine.

'Teacher,' they said, 'we caught her good and proper.
Well improper, really.
What would you have us do to her?
We are figuring you'd wish to observe the law – a man of your stature and
all.'
I waited ... not a sound, till finally he said,
'Sure, let's apply the law'.

I was a goner for certain. I really thought he would have understood.

'But if we're applying the law, the person who initiates the process must be
above the long hand of the law. So let's begin. On with it' he demanded.

I thought about that self-righteous bigot.
Standing in the crowd as if he was innocent.
And of the Neanderthal, whose interests I had spurned
Yep! They may not have been innocent,
(But according to their laws, neither was I) I was a goner . . .

I felt the pelting, the hurled imprecations. Insults and curses
I waited for more... nothing came. Silence.

He sent me away without even allowing me to thank him
In my own special way
For saving me, setting me free, giving me wings to simply be.

Never again,
Bound by the whims and fancies of the pious crew
Restored. Renewed. Revealed. Released. Resurrected. Redeemed.
Once again, Free!

Just As Yuh Are, Girl⁴

Come just as yuh are girl,
 Jus come as yuh are
 I done justify yuh by My grace -
 As if yuh never sinned
 Or been bruised by her or him.
 Come, cause yuh put a smile upside Ma face!

Leave the sink an come, Lawd?
 Who gon mix di drink, Lawd?
 what about the cleanin an the beds?
 Plus the kids don't have no fatha -
 I'm a single motha
 Won't comin jus bring worries to ma head?

Come just as yuh are girl,
 Jus come as yuh are
 I done justify yuh by My grace -
 As if yuh never sinned
 Or been bruised by her or him.
 Come, cause yuh put a smile upside Ma face!

Me can mek You smile?
 All ma choices are futile
 Everyting I touch jus turn to mush.
 Blind to consequence
 All I'll bring Yuh is a stench
 How could Yuh really love me all dat much?

Come just as yuh are girl,
 Jus come as yuh are
 I done justify yuh by My grace -
 As if yuh never sinned
 Or been bruised by her or him.
 Come, cause yuh put a smile upside Ma face!
 I'm bleeding and I'm sore

I jus don't have no more
 Abandonment and bitterness know me.
 The church don't need my pain

4 © 2010 Rainbow Ashwood Jamaican (Used with permission).

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Or to pray for me agen.
When I've sorted all this out, well then we'll see.

Come just as yuh are girl,
Jus come as yuh are.
'Cause I have justified yuh by My grace
As if yuh never sinned
Or been bruised by her or him
Come, cause yuh put a smile upside Ma face!

MOTHERS'/WOMEN'S DAY SERVICE

Preparation required

This is intended to be an inter-generational service with children and youth being integral to the service. It would be helpful to begin rehearsals and preparations a month before the actual service, especially for the movements/dance, ring game and drama. Invitations to the various community personnel should also be extended in advance, and members urged to invite as many women as possible to the service. If refreshments or tokens are being provided, the organising team should confirm the numbers at least two weeks before the service.

For the act of confession, sufficient safety, common and diaper pins are to be in place in the printed copies of the liturgy (or distributed before the beginning of the service). Likewise, the collection baskets for the pins should be in place before the service begins, unless ushers are named for the task. The youth group may wish to make the brooches, corsages and boutonnieres or they may be ordered in advance.

The worship should flow as follows:

Dramatic Prelude

Children proceed to the altar, and weave their way around the chancel singing the adaptation of the ring game "Thread O" or a chorus familiar to the congregation. At the end of the second verse, they hand flowers to several women in the pews, pausing to kiss them on the cheek and honour them.

Chorus

Thank you, bless you
 Women of strength
 We love you, need you
 You give us nuff help

Aunty, mother, granny, sister
 Women of strength
 In our trouble, joy or sorrow
 You give we nuff help
 Village lawyer, counsellor, teacher
 Women of strength

Chorus

If we ever need to talk
 You listen to we
 No matter how you long you face
 You naah lef we
 When other people turn them back
 You there for we

Chorus

Invitation to Worship

Liturgist I was glad when they invited me
All **To enter into God's house of praise**
Liturgist I was glad when they offered us
Men A chance to celebrate our women for their special ways
Liturgist Come one, come all let us sing praises
 To our God, to our creator
Children For the gift of women
All **Big and small, we bless God for you all!**
Liturgist We are gathered in God's house – come let us worship!

Processional Enter Into Jerusalem

Prayers of Adoration and thanksgiving

Liturgist Creating God, everyone wants to find a real Caribbean jewel -
 For they know her true worth.
 She is far more valuable than gold, or diamonds, bauxite, oil,
 or pitch.
Men Her smile is more compelling than mist rising in Grand Etang
 Her warmth hotter than the ash flowing down from Soufriere
 Hills

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Her beauty outshines the wonders of all our coral reefs
Thank you God for the gems found in these islands of the
Caribbean Sea.

All **Her generosity flows deeper than the waters of Kaieteur Falls
In times of trouble or danger she will answer our call**
Love never ending like the vastness of Pitch Lake.
God she gives so willingly and we just take and take!

Liturgist So precious and true, she is a gem most rare,
Lord we love her, to the very last strand of her hair.

All **Mother, sister, lover, friend**
Stranger to none, compassionate to the end
You've blessed us with these gifts
Our diamonds in the rough.

Liturgist For our precious Caribbean gems dear God, we thank you ever
so much!
You have filled our lives with magnificent women in this region
O Lord.

All **Hallelujahs we raise in one accord**

Act of Confession

Liturgist: the pins you have received today have several uses – they hold our babies' nappies in place, provide quick repairs for our hemlines, they guide our seamstresses and tailors in making beautiful clothing for us all. But pins also have been used to pierce and wound and inflict pain. We all have been guilty of abusing others, especially our women with the pinpricks of our words, of our attitudes, our actions, our music, our blows and even our thoughts.

I urge us today to identify one action we have participated in which could be considered as evil against a sister or brother. And as we confess our wrongs, let us drop the pins of torment, strife and hurting in the basket at the end of the pew, symbolising our repentance from the old ways. Let us now each take a brooch as we move to adding beauty and creativity in the lives of those around us. May God help us to be instruments of peace.

The Lord's Prayer

Poem *Caribbean Woman (see page 129)*

Scripture: Genesis 38; Mark 14:1-9

Drama/special item orca song dedicated to women

Sermon

Hymn

Prayers of intercession (written by Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth)

Almighty and everlasting God
born in pain, struggling towards life,
We pray for our world.

Our pain at what we have done to creation.
Our wonder yet at the beauty of that which we have not spoiled.
Our concerns for justice and peace.
We place these prayers in your open hands,
Trusting that your love is enough.

We pray for women who have demonstrated their commitment,
To working for renewal and transformation within church and society,
May their faith be strengthened to love and serve you,
Especially in difficult times when we are so easily overwhelmed by
bureaucracies, systems and anxiety in fulfilling our day tasks,
May all of us bear faithful witness in word and work to your way of being
with us.

We pray for those who known to us personally,
And for those whose pain we read between the lines of media reports and
statistics;
for societies torn apart by violence, poverty,
for those who are hungry;
for battered wives and abused children;
for the homeless, for the lonely and broken-hearted;
Strengthen us, we pray for what lies ahead to do what we can
to work for peace and plenty for all people,
peace on the earth; peace with the Earth.

Aaronic Blessing of women in service and ministry

Recessional 'A Prophet-woman broke a Jar'

A SERVICE FOR WOMEN'S SUNDAY

(Adapted from a liturgy used for International Women's Day at the Ecumenical Centre, Geneva, 2009)

WOMEN AS WELLS OF NOURISH AND HOPE

Rev. Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth

Introit: For those tears I died (verse 1 and chorus)

Introduction

Worship recalls the past, but that is not all; Worship creates our future. Let us rejoice in our faith heritage and tend the flame of leadership. In sovereign love God created the world and made everyone equally in God's image, male and female, of every race, to live as one community.

We recall our foremothers: Sarah, Miriam, Shiphrah and Puah, Huldah the prophet, Judith, and other brave women... many of whose names are lost to us. We honour Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the other Marys, and women who helped form the early Christian community.

The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and lives in Christ through Scripture, engages us through the Word proclaimed... and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.

Call to worship

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3.27-28)

Litany:

Voice 1 Through the waters of the womb, we entered this world as our mothers laboured to give birth to us.

Voice 2 Through the waters of the deep sea, our grandmothers in faith travelled before us, as God made a way before them.

Voice 3 Through the waters of baptism, we have been reborn as Christ's sons and daughters, for God's own Holy Spirit has bathed us.

Congregation: We speak as one to thank God for our beginnings in life and in faith.

We are here to praise God, from whom all life's blessings flow and who promises us life in fullness.

Song: Fill my cup Lord

Prayer

Leader: Loving and merciful God, you create each of us in your image.
You grace us generously with a variety of gifts.
You prepare each of us for unique ways of loving you by serving each other.
Yet, we tarnish your image, we waste our gifts,
We run from your call to follow, we fail to live in peace with others,
And to participate in your transformative works of healing and reconciliation.

Assurance of pardon

Leader: Hear the good news!

Christ died for us, Christ rose for us,
Christ reigns in power for us, Christ prays for us.
Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation.
The old life has gone; a new life has begun.
Know that you are forgiven and be at peace. Amen.

Renewing Our Baptismal Covenant

Leader Sisters and brothers, do you renounce all evil, and all powers in this world which defy God's righteousness, justice, equality, and peace?

Congregation We renounce them.

Leader Do you renounce the ways of sin that separate you from the love of God and that keep you serving your community?

Congregation We renounce them.

Leader: Brothers, do you commit yourselves to respect, support and nurture women of this congregation and in your homes and communities?

Men We do, with God's help.

Leader Sisters, will you be Christ's faithful disciples, obeying Christ's Word and showing Christ's love, always?

Women: We do, with God's help.

Leader God of our fore-mothers and fathers, You are Living Water, a River of Mercy, our Source of Life! You quench our thirsting; You refresh our weariness; You bathe our wounds. Be for us an Eternal Fountain of Life. Be for the world a River of Hope, bubbling up in the desert of despair. To You be honour, blessing, glory and praise forever! Amen.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

The Lord's prayer

Scripture readings: Organise to do a biblio-dramatic reading of:

John 4.1-15, Isaiah 12.2-4

Hymn:

Announcement:

Offering:

Message:

Song: Go tell it on the mountain (Women's Day version)

Prayers of intercession (done with different voices, singing a brief prayer chorus in between)

Creator God, giver of life, mother and father of us all:

We pray for women and men, who struggle for life on a daily basis,

For those who are hungry,

For women from countries torn by war and conflict who live daily with violence and terror,

For battered women and abused children,

For the lonely and broken-hearted,

We pray for those who are known to us personally, and for those whose pain we read between the lines from media reports and statistics. (silence as we lift up their names)

Response: Chorus

We pray for children in Guyana and every corner of this world who are hungry for food and hungry for love,

For children abused by their families and tossed aside by society,

And for those far away from their homes, alone and afraid,

For those who are denied opportunities to dream and for those who feel hopeless.

Response: Chorus

We pray for women and men, who work to bring hope to people,

Those who work for renewal and transformation within the church and society,

May their faith be strengthened to love and serve you especially in times of difficulty when they can be overwhelmed by bureaucracies, systems and

daily anxieties,
Grant them courage as they trouble the water and make waves to bring for
transformation and reconciliation.

Response: Chorus

God of our foremothers and fathers, you are living water, a river of mercy,
and our source of life!

You quench our thirst; you refresh our weariness; you bathe our wounds.

Be for us an eternal fountain of life.

Be for the world a river of hope, bubbling up in the desert of despair.

To you be honour, blessing, glory and praise forever!

(We light a candle and pray together):

Congregation: God, our peace and our hope,
You have made us human beings to need each other.
Help us to listen to each other, to play our parts, and to
recognize that we need to learn from others.
And as Mary, earthly mother, common woman sang to her
son of a changing world,
May we, too, learn to listen and delve to the deep human
source of her heavenly music.
So we say in Jesus' name:

Women: My soul praises God,
my spirit rejoices in the one who has raised me up and has
remembered me in my humiliation.

Men: All those to come will honour me because of the great things
God has achieved with this small life.

Congregation: The name of God is not like any other name!

Women: Throughout all time, God has shown compassion upon the
dispossessed poor, overturning the armies and the arrogance
of the powerful with one sweep of the hand,

Men: Lifting up the little ones, the invisible, filling the hungry with
good things and sending the rich away with nothing.

**Congregation: God's promise to our mothers and fathers still lives. It will
be made good.**

Bless God, O my soul. Amen.

Song: We shall go out with hope of resurrection

Blessing

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Go with us, Spirit of Wisdom, as we leave this place of refreshment;
Baptize us with the water of peace;
Anoint us with the oil of justice;
Feed us with the manna of solidarity.
Go in peace. Serve the Lord.

Song: Fill my cup Lord

A SERVICE TO CELEBRATE EMANCIPATION

*(This liturgy was prepared for the World Alliance of Reformed Churches
Executive Committee
Pilgrimage to Nelson Island, Trinidad, October 24, 2007*

Rev. Robina Winbush

Gathering of the Community

Choral Invocation *“Wa wa wa Emimimo”*

Call to Worship

By the waters of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion,

On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?

(Psalm 137: 1- 4)

Song of Lamentation *“Senzenina”¹*
Senzenina, Senzenina, Senzenina

Remembering Resistance

For the millions
For the millions of Africans chained to the slave ships,
For the millions of scars on the backs and faces by the
bullwhip

1 Senzenina is a Zulu word that is translated... “What have we done to deserve this?”

For the millions who jumped overboard
 For the blood that poured on the shores of
 the Caribbean, North America, South America,
 Central America, Europe...
 each ripple in the ocean...
 is a grave to an African
 who refused to be a slave!

Response *“Senzenina”*

Re-Membering Hebrews 12.1a

After the first two reflections, “Senzenina” is sung as a community response. After the third reflection, the community is silent as the drumming speaks.

Prayer:

God of our ancestors unknown, God of our mothers and our fathers, God who has so graciously made yourself known in the liberating life and work of Jesus, we come with heavy hearts as we remember the horror of millions of Africans stolen and forced onto ships in the horrific middle passage where many died and survivors were brought to the Caribbean and the Americas as enslaved people. The agony of people in chains, being bought and sold and use to build the wealth of Europe and the Americas still terrorizes us today. By the power of the Holy Spirit, sanctify our memories that pain and guilt might be transformed into power and redemptive action for our generation and generations to come. Grant us a glimpse of the shalom you desire for all of creation and make us agents of transformative and healing justice for the world you created and love.

Hebrews 12.1b-2

Response *“Oh Freedom”*
Oh Freedom, Oh Freedom, Oh, Freedom over me
 And before I’ll be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave
 And go home to my Lord and be free.”

Readings

Hebrew Scripture **Amos 5.21-24**

Contemporary Reflection

At the Elmina Castle in Ghana, the Dutch merchants, soldiers, and Governor lived on the upper level, while the slaves were held in captivity one level below. We entered a room used as a church, with words from Psalm 132 on a sign still hanging above the door (“For the Lord has chosen Zion...”).

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

And we imagined Reformed Christians worshipping their God while directly below them, right under their feet, those being sold into slavery languished in the chains and horror of those dungeons. For more than two centuries in that place this went on. In angry bewilderment we thought, “How could their faith be so divided from life? How could they separate their spiritual experience from the torturous physical suffering directly beneath their feet? How could their faith be so blind?”

WARC 24th General Council (2004) Letter from Accra *(Silent Reflection)*

Epistle Philemon 8-16

Contemporary Reflection

Our focus is on Onesimus, the subject matter of this letter, a voiceless and powerless slave who ran away from his enslaver and was converted to the Christian faith by the Apostle Paul. By running away he initiated a debate between Paul and Philemon, leaders in the early church who before taken an ambivalent attitude towards the institution. Indeed, Philemon house was the meeting place for the church in Colosse and he had slaves in his household like many other well to do citizens.

They saw nothing morally wrong with it because it was legal. At least, so he thought until Onesimus became converted! His conversion forced Paul to rethink his views about slavery. How can a slave who became converted enter into just relationship with his enslaver? Does one’s relationship in Christ fundamentally alter his or her social and economic relationship with others who confess to be in Christ?

By running away Onesimus placed the issue of liberation at the centre of the church’s deliberation. The church was faced with a crisis of conscience! No more could it fold its arms with a kind of innocent neutrality. That was unacceptable. Onesimus action awakened a new consciousness.

Roderick Hewitt, Lest We Forget
(Silent Reflection)

Gospel Matthew 26.17-25

Contemporary Reflection

Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people. As members of such an economy, we have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion.

Audre Lourde, Sister Outsider

(Silent Reflection)

Prayer of Confession

- One : We confess that so much of our standard of living lies on the foundations of a system of slavery – a system that held human life cheap, destroyed families, transported human beings as cargo, and condemned millions to a shortened life of hopeless misery.
- All : **God help us to acknowledge our past and forgive us**
- One : We confess that this system was conveniently accepted as commercial necessity and justified for centuries by Christians who were also beneficiaries.
- All : **As churches and individuals, we were silent as the power of personal and institutional racism grew and expanded. Today, we confess our complicity in the atrocities of slavery and racism. Too often we have been silent when we should have spoken, we have been indifferent when we needed to show concern and we have blamed others rather than ourselves for what has happened.**
- One : Open our hearts and minds to recognize the ways in which we have participated in the systems that separate us from us - sisters and brothers and from you. With your overwhelming love, forgive us.
- All : **Turn us around so that we will challenge racism and oppression wherever we encounter them. Teach us the**

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

ways of dismantling racism in this day and time. Lead us in the ways of reconciliation, reparation and restoring dignity. May the commitments of our lives and the commitments of our churches make a difference as we seek to be your transforming and transformed people. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

An Offering of Ourselves

"I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use Me"

Invitation to the Lord's Table

On the night of his arrest, Jesus gathered his disciples to celebrate the Passover meal—a meal that recalled God's liberating work for an enslaved people. As we have committed ourselves to work for a world in which none are enslaved and all have access to the fullness of life promised in Jesus the Christ, we gather at the table following his example, taking the bread of life and the cup of salvation, knowing that in Christ we are set free, we are made whole and we are one. In celebration of God's liberating work in Jesus the Christ, let us come and give thanks.

- One : Lift up your hearts
All : **We lift them up unto the Lord**
One : Let us give God thanks and praise
All : **It is right to give God thanks and praise.**

Great Prayer of Thanksgiving

Mother, Father, God, Creator of the universe; Who has been known to us as Amen Ra, Oludamare, and Onyame;
It is truly right and our greatest joy to give you thanks and praise

You, O God, being life, are the source of all life.
Creation is united by the harmony of your Spirit.
You created the universe by the power of your Word.
In the beginning, O Lord, You created our ancestors in your image,
forming them from the dust of Alkebu-lan,
which the Greeks later named Africa.
You gave us your Spirit, thus, making us children of God.

You spoke to our consciousness giving us divine wisdom.
We built powerful civilizations:
Kemet, Timbuktu, Ghana, Mali, and Songhai.
We became proud and did not return your love.
We strayed from your holy ways, and began to exult ourselves to the level of divinity.

Your prophets called us to return to your ways.
We did not, so you dispersed us throughout the earth.

Slavers came against us,
first Arabs, then Europeans.
You sent Jeshua Ben Joseph, whom the Greeks called Jesus,
to show us the way to eternal life, and to redeem us through the example of
his life.

Through him, our Great Ancestor, we have been made into a new family; a
people washed and purified in the waters of transformation:
the Nile, Congo, Atlantic, Caribbean, Black River, Essequibo, Mississippi,
Potomac, and Chattahoochee.

Your grace extends like the gift of a million years.
Blessed are you, O God.
Our genius was stolen, people exploited, and culture destroyed
But, in your faithfulness you did not forget us.

In communion,
joining with those who have come before us,
and now live with you in eternity,
we lift up praises to your name.

**All: Heaven and earth praise your name!
Let the elders praise your name!
Let the youth praise your name!
Let the children praise your name!
Let our children's children, and all generations that follow
praise your name!**

Blessed are you, O God Most High,
for wrapping yourself in African flesh,
and living with us, in our joys, our pains,
our sorrows, and our struggles.

Blessed are you, O God Most High,
for giving us the sign of the cross;
a symbol of powerful transformation from death to life,
from mental bondage to intellectual freedom,
and from disunity to unity.
Like the sun rising from the east,
you got up from the grave conquering death, and crushing all evil.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Blessed are you, O God Most High,
for the gift of your Spirit that
revives, renews, and unites all of your children;
the living dead, the living, and the yet to be born. **AMEN.**

Blessing the Bread and the Cup

We give thanks that on the night before Jesus died,
He took bread.

After giving thanks to you, he broke it,
and gave it to his disciples, saying,
“Take, eat. This is my body, given for you.
Do this in remembrance of me.”

In the same way he took the cup, saying,
“This cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood,
shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.
Do this in remembrance of me.”

In remembrance of your mighty act in Jesus, the Christ,
we take from your creation this bread and this cup
and celebrate his death and resurrection,
as we await the day of his coming.

Accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving,
as a living and holy offering of ourselves,
dedicated to your service,
that our lives may proclaim the mystery of faith.

Gracious God,
pour out your Spirit upon us,
and upon these your gifts of bread and fruit of the vine,
that the bread we break and the cup we bless
may be the communion of the body and blood of Christ.
By your Spirit make us one with Christ,
and one with each other as we share this meal,
until we eat together in the joy of your eternal kingdom. **AMEN**

Friends, this is the joyful feast of the people of God. This is the Lord’s Table.
Our Liberator invites those who trust him to share the feast, which he has
prepared.

Sharing the Bread and the Cup

(The Bread and Cup are shared and received by intinction)

The Passing of the Peace

“Halle, Halle, Hallelujah”

Prayers of Intercession

- One : Let us pray for communities and individuals that are held in bondage by human trafficking, economic exploitation, military occupation and intimidation, gender based violence and other systems that seek to deny the fullness of life for all of God’s creation.....
- One : Let us pray for churches, communities and individuals who actively resist imperial powers of oppression and who live as agents of light and liberation that God’s reign may be realized throughout this world....
- One : Let us pray us for churches, communities and individuals who either passively or intentionally betray the Christ and work to uphold systems of oppression and exploitation...
- One : Let us pray for what only the Spirit can give us utterance to pray...
- One : Let us join in the family prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, each praying in their own language.

The Lord’s Prayer

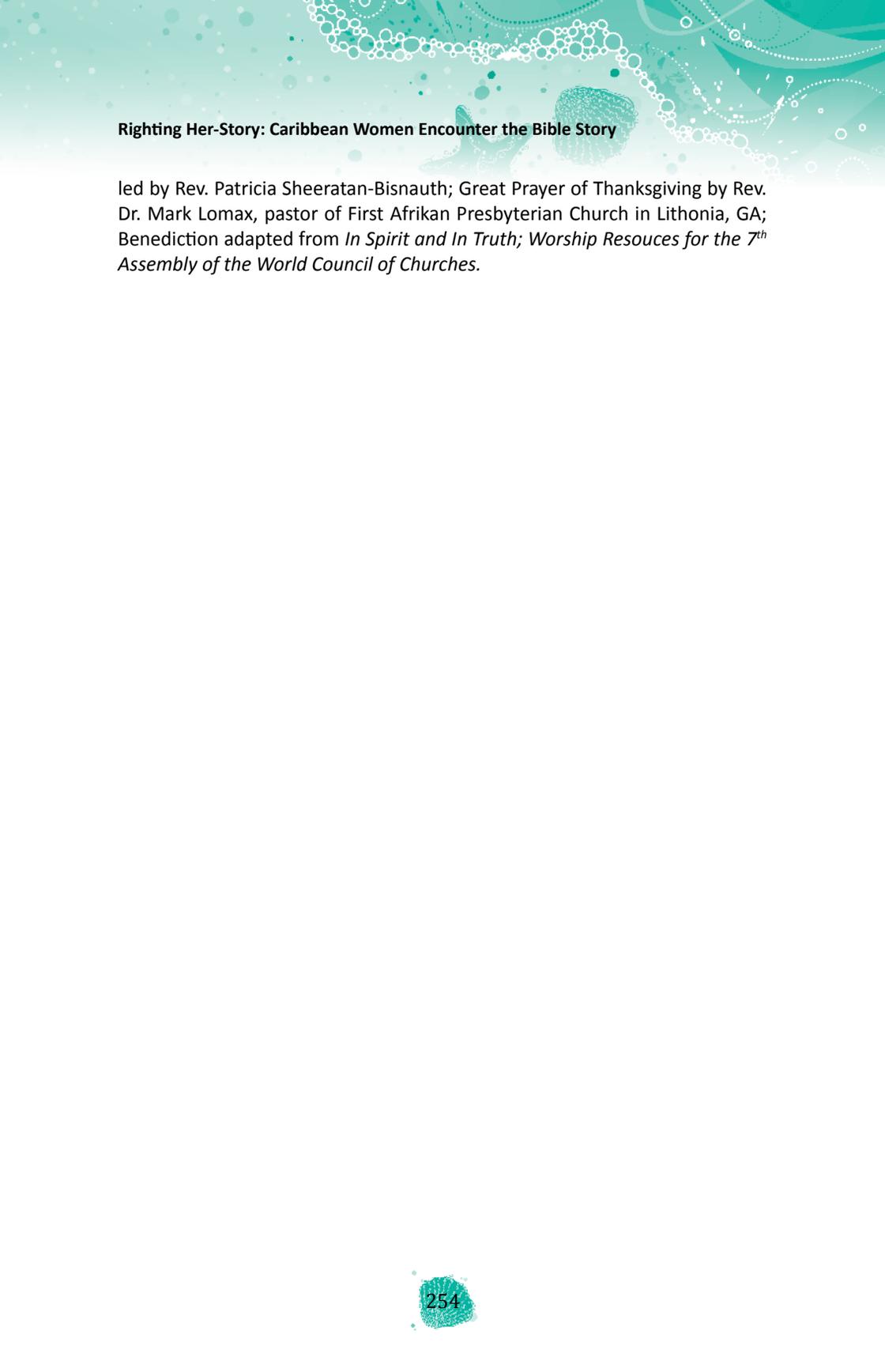
Closing Song *“The Right Hand of God”*

Blessing

God of power,
may the boldness of your Spirit transform us,
may the gentleness of your Spirit lead us,
may the gifts of your Spirit
equip us to serve and worship you
as agents of transformation and liberation
now and always,
Through Jesus Christ our Liberator and Lord. **AMEN**

Departing Song *Slavery Chain*

Resources: “For the Millions” excerpted from a poem by the Last Poets; Prayer of Confession from 30 July 2007 Worship Service at the Ecumenical Centre



Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

led by Rev. Patricia Sheeratan-Bisnauth; Great Prayer of Thanksgiving by Rev. Dr. Mark Lomax, pastor of First Afrikan Presbyterian Church in Lithonia, GA; Benediction adapted from *In Spirit and In Truth; Worship Resouces for the 7th Assembly of the World Council of Churches*.

GLOSSARY OF WORDS AND TERMS

Androgynous – biologically being both male and female.

Bodyself – our entire self/being -- body, soul and spirit.

Biblical resistant reading - takes the view that biblical hermeneutics within a Caribbean context needs to focus more on the meaning of biblical texts for lived realities and less on the Bible as historically and contextually conditioned and thereby ideological. Further, the work outlines the difficulties of combining biblical hermeneutics and social praxis within the context of the Caribbean and particularly within Christian communities that descend from a long history of slavery.

Conscientization – refers to a type of learning which is focused on perceiving and exposing social and political contradictions. Conscientization also includes taking action against oppressive elements in one’s life as part of that learning.

Dalits – refer to those communities that were considered untouchable in the Indian caste system.

Dehumanization – treatment of persons as if they were less than human.

Discrimination – various types of social prejudices (i.e. racism, sexism, and classism) are contained within and enacted from positions of power, within society, against the offended groups.

Double entendre – figure of speech in which the meaning of the phrase can be understood in either of two ways, with the second meaning often being risqué. This device is often employed in Dancehall and Calypso, e.g., “Saltfish is sweeter than meat”.

Eisegesis – (a Greek word) is the process of misinterpreting a text in such a way that it introduces one’s own ideas, reading into the text. This is best understood when contrasted with exegesis. While exegesis draws out the meaning from the text, eisegesis occurs when a reader reads his/her interpretation into the text. As a result, exegesis tends to be objective when employed effectively while eisegesis is regarded as highly subjective.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Exegesis – relates to correct Biblical understanding. It means literally ‘to lead out’. In the context of Bible study it means to get out of the text what the text is saying. This may include a number of things to aid the process such as reading the context in the chapter, cultural awareness of the time of the writing, and identifying the author and even the target audience.

Emancipatory theology – is rooted in the idea that theology is not neutral. It can either support the status quo or oppose it. Emancipatory theology then refers to that theology that opposes the status quo in order to propose a new social order.

Gender – describes socially constructed (and often unequal) roles, responsibilities and expectations culturally and socio-politically assigned to women and men and the institutional structures that support them. Unlike biological sex, gender is learned and can be transformed. Throughout history gender roles and expectations have been changing.

Gender analysis – is a tool that seeks to understand social, religious and cultural processes that create and maintain gender differences – in order to design informed responses of equitable options. It involves the examining the different roles women and men play in society and the differential impacts of policies related to politics, economy, social relations and religion on these roles. Extending from the idea that gender differences are based more on social, cultural and religious defined values, than on biology, this type of analysis recognizes and challenges the value systems which are responsible for the different (and unequal) impacts and benefits experienced by women and men of any given society.

Hegemony – refers to dominance over another with the aim to control.

Hermeneutics – is the science or art of interpretation and includes the entire framework of the interpretive process, encompassing all forms of communication written, verbal and nonverbal and also experiential.

Homophobia – is a term used to describe irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuals.

Idiom – common way of speaking.

Immaculate conception – is, according to Roman Catholic doctrine, the conception of the Virgin Mary *without any stain* (“immacula” in Latin) of original sin. The core belief is that Jesus was conceived by Mary through the Holy Spirit and not through sexual intercourse with another human being.

Immutability – refers to unchanging over time or being unable to be changed.

Marginalization – is the social process of becoming or being made marginal - to relegate or confine to a lower social standing or outer limit or edge, as of social standing.

Masculinity – pertains to males and is used to speak of the roles and behaviour that are traditionally assigned to men and sometimes of the properties or characteristics of men.

Metonymy – a figure of speech in which something is not called by its own name but by the name of something intimately related to it, e.g., the government of Jamaica is referred to as “Gordon House”, the place where the parliament meets.

Mutuality – as is directed and received by each toward the other; reciprocal.

Nana – is a midwife; nanny or nurse.

Nannyish theology –as proposed by Marjorie Lewis is “a contextualized womanist theology. It is interfaith and multi-faith, and based on a consensus in the Jamaican society about the significance of national heroine, Nanny of the Maroons, as the ‘quintessential’ Jamaican woman. Nanny was a leader of the Maroons - Africans who fled to the interior of Jamaica in 1655 when the British captured the island from the Spanish. The Maroons waged a successful guerrilla campaign against the British to remain free. They eventually signed a peace treaty with the British in 1739, gaining self-government before slavery was abolished. Nanny, a renowned Maroon guerrilla leader, represents women who are empowered to safeguard the freedom of the community.”

Omnipotence – is the quality of having unlimited or very great power.

Omniscience – is the quality of knowing everything.

Parenthetical – is inserted into a passage as if not essential, and marked off, usually by brackets.

Patriarchy – is a word used to describe the situation where women’s stories and thereby, their experiences, have been ignored, forgotten, misinterpreted and devalued, while stories about men and thereby their experiences have been elevated, remembered, emphasized and overvalued. Patriarchy also refers to systemic societal structures that institutionalize male physical, political, economic and social power over women.

Righting Her-Story: Caribbean Women Encounter the Bible Story

Platonic dualism – rooted in the metaphysics of Plato, it is the belief in the existence of two radically different substances, categories of things or principles, e.g., mind and body, good versus evil, material versus physical.

Post-colonial – is the act of reclamation and reaffirmation against the past colonial and current neo-colonizing tendencies which continue to exert influence even after territorial and political independence has been accomplished, it is the analysis and criticism of the cultural legacy of colonialism from the perspective of the excluded.

Poverty – is a state of insufficient resources necessary to maintain a basic and sustainable standard of living. It includes the lack of access to food, shelter, clothing and social services, i.e. health, education, water, sanitation, peace and security.

Procreation – the bringing forth of children.

Racism – is an ideology whereby individuals or groups of a particular race are discriminated against and become the target of unfair assumptions and/or unfair or unjust treatment because of their race.

Redemptive masculinities – is the belief that there are certain aspects of traditional male behaviour that can contribute positively to the building of community and society. That not all male behaviour is necessarily destructive.

Sex – is the biologically determined and physical differences between women and men.

Sexism – refers to attitudes, conditions, or behaviour that promotes stereotyping of social roles based on gender.

Socialisation – is a process through which people are consciously or subconsciously instructed by the values, beliefs and mores of a particular society. It refers to an educational process which informs persons and makes them fit in and function as a member of society.

Stoicism – Ancient Greek philosophical tradition which highlights indifference to pleasure or to pain.

Synopticists – refers to the authors of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Tante – is an aunty or aunt.

Tribalism – is the organisation, culture, or beliefs of a tribe.

Violence – is an act of aggression causing physical or psychological harm.

Womanist and feminist – are ideological, theological and ethical perspectives and liberative practices which have as their goal emancipation, wholeness and fullness of life for all of God’s creation. While feminist theology first arose among white women in the North Atlantic, these terms are used in many locations globally. Womanist theology speaks from the depths of African American women’s lives and communities. Caribbean women identify with the womanist concept.

Xenophobia – is an abnormal fear or hatred of foreigners and strange things.

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What we do

WCRC coordinates joint church initiatives for economic, ecological and gender justice based on the member churches' common theology and beliefs.

Our objectives are to foster unity among our member churches and promote economic, social and ecological justice.

Why

WCRC's member churches believe that Christian faith is based on actions which respond to the spiritual needs and economic and social rights of all people in society and that this includes ensuring responsible use of natural resources.

How

WCRC is committed to collaborating with other church movements on issues of common concern such as climate change, gender justice and theological dialogue.

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