

"A Moment Like This"

Each week during March we celebrate Women's History Month with activities and liturgies to help us see the unseen people around us. **But these activities are relevant anytime** you, your small group, and/or a church want to reflect on better seeing and helping the marginalized people in our communities.

The four week's activities are provided on the pages that follow.

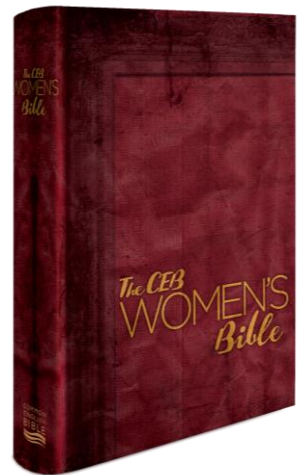


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The CEB Women's Bible invites you into a deeper conversation with scripture by focusing on stories of women, named and unnamed, and by engaging with the reflections and articles that accompany the sacred text of the Bible.

With contributions exclusively by women—including biblical scholars, feminist theologians, clergywomen, and other writers—The CEB Women's Bible helps you find yourself in scripture in a new way.

Find out more at CEBWomensBible.com.



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Week 1: The Persistent Widow

Justice for the faithful

18:1 Jesus was telling them a parable about their need to pray continuously and not to be discouraged. 2 He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected people. 3 In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him, asking, 'Give me justice in this case against my adversary.' 4 For a while he refused but finally said to himself, I don't fear God or respect people, 5 but I will give this widow justice because she keeps bothering me. Otherwise, there will be no end to her coming here and embarrassing me." 6 The Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 Won't God provide justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he be slow to help them? 8 I tell you, he will give them justice quickly. But when the Human One comes, will he find faithfulness on earth?"
—Luke 18:1-8 CEB

There are many unnamed women in the Bible. Pages and pages of them, if you look at the index in The CEB Women's Bible. They are widows, daughters, queens, mothers, servants, wives, sisters. They are labeled mysterious, wise, detested, adulterous, foolish, bitter, possessed, and persistent.

We don't know much about the widow in Luke 18 other than her persistence in asking to receive justice for her situation. The verse reads: *there was a widow who kept coming to him [the Judge], asking, 'Give me justice in this case against my adversary' (verse 3).* She was bothersome. A nuisance, one might even say.

Can you imagine this particular widow asking for justice every day? Maybe she's the woman who you see every morning and night, standing on the street corner pleading her case. Perhaps she is the mother of another young black man who was murdered, and she goes to the local TV station, to the local police precinct, to her church, asking for justice, and every day she is ignored. She nags and badgers; she is relentless. Nevertheless, she persisted.

Who will hear her pleas and respond?

Take a moment and find a comfortable position, perhaps you want to close your eyes or focus on a particular word or phrase, as we try and understand the unnamed woman in Luke's story.

Who is this nameless woman? Does she have a name in your mind? What does she look like? What is this adversity she is seeking justice for?

Imagine you are her friend. Perhaps her neighbor. Or maybe she is the mother of one of your children's classmates. Maybe you sit together every Sunday in church. Perhaps she is a mother who was recently detained because of her undocumented status--separated from her family. How will you walk with this woman as she seeks justice for her situation?

Now open your eyes.

Are there named women in your life who are seeking justice? Who have been wronged? How will you join in their pleas for justice?

Today, say a prayer for those named and unnamed women seeking justice. Ask that God makes you aware of the ways you can journey with these women near and far.

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Week 2: Zelophehad's daughters

CALL TO GATHER

Read the following poem to center yourself.

They cross the camp
dry-mouthed,
hearts pounding:
all eyes are fixed
on the lonely quintet
walking with resolute steps.

They are pious and wise
and they call us to action:
to move from the place
of injustice and bias
and pave the untrodden way.

—Elizabeth (Aliya) Topper, Parasha Poems

HISTORY and COMMENTARY

Zelophehad's daughters' inheritance

The daughters of Zelophehad, Hephher's son, Gilead's grandson, Machir's great-grandson, and Manasseh's great-great-grandson, belonging to the clan of Manasseh and son of Joseph, came forward. His daughters' names were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. 2 They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the chiefs, and the entire community at the entrance of the meeting tent and said, 3 "Our father died in the desert. He wasn't part of the community who gathered against the Lord with Korah's community. He died for his own sin, but he had no sons. 4 Why should our father's name be taken away from his clan because he didn't have a son? Give us property among our father's brothers."

5 Moses brought their case before the Lord. 6 The Lord said to Moses: 7 Zelophehad's daughters are right in what they are saying. By all means, give them property as an inheritance among their father's brothers. Hand over their father's inheritance to them.

Numbers 27:1-7 CEB

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. These are the daughters of Zelophehad, Hephher's son, Gilead's grandson, Machir's great-grandson, and Manasseh's great-great-grandson, belonging to the clan of Manasseh and son of Joseph; women introduced to us through their patrilineality, or a family's male line.

We learn that their father has died, they had no brothers, and therefore are left with no right to inherit their father's land because they are women. "Why should our father's name be taken away from his clan because he didn't have a son?" they ask (Numbers 27:4).

And then the women, in all their boldness demand: "Give us property among our father's brothers."

Property given to the tribes by God was intended to stay within each of the tribes, as we read in Leviticus 25:23-34. Because inheritance ran through the male members of the family, the property of Zelophehad and his daughters was at risk of going outside the tribe unless the daughters were allowed to inherit it. Moses hears their request and takes it to God, and God sides with the daughters. In Chapter 36 their decision is amended to stipulate whom they can marry, but it is upheld.

Women today continue to stand up and demand what is rightfully theirs: reproductive choice, educational equity, equal economic opportunities, freedom from gender-based violence. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah remind us today that the demand for justice has been going on for thousands of years.

REFLECTION

Recall the poem you read at the beginning. Imagine what Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah must have felt as they approached Moses, asking for their inheritance.

Who are women you can name silently or aloud, who have or continue to blaze trails for us to walk? Who are those women, through their silent and public witness, continue to cheer you on and nudge you forward?

For the women who continue to give us courage and lead by example to crack the glass ceilings, give thanks.

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Week 3: Women in Ministry with Jesus

Women who followed Jesus

8:1 Soon afterward, Jesus traveled through the cities and villages, preaching and proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom. The Twelve were with him, 2 along with some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses. Among them were Mary Magdalene (from whom seven demons had been thrown out), 3 Joanna (the wife of Herod's servant Chuza), Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources.

—Luke 8:1-3 CEB

When we think about Jesus' ministry and his crew, what likely comes to mind are his male disciples. We hear their names often throughout the New Testament, and even those who didn't remain in his inner circle, we still recall.

But there must have been women, right? Who were they? What were their names?

In Luke 8, after Jesus travels through the cities and villages with his twelve, we hear of "some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses ... and many others who provided for them out of their resources." Their names: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna.

Mary Magdalene we hear of more than once, but who are Joanna and Susanna, and what faith gave them the boldness to follow Jesus and the Twelve, when the rabbis of Jesus' day thought it scandalous to even speak to a woman in public?

Susanna's name is only mentioned once in the Bible, and it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women who reported back to the apostles what they saw at the empty tomb. What courage and faith these women had to follow Jesus and support his ministry without recognition, and likely with ridicule and scandal.

Though female disciples were not as often explicitly named throughout the Bible, we know they were there. Picture them whenever you read of Jesus' disciples gathering in large crowds: the seventy-two being sent out in pairs in Luke 10; organizing a hungry crowd of five thousand to receive a meal in Luke 9; partaking of the Passover meal in Luke 22; and at the cross, burial, and tomb of Jesus in Luke 23-24.

A LITANY OF THANKS FOR BOLD AND COURAGEOUS WOMEN

If there is a large group, different people can take turns being the leader. The different groups who respond may also be changed to fit your group.

Leader: Inclusive and calling God, we give thanks today for the witness of bold women. From before we could recall until today and into the future, courageous women show us how to live as God's beloved children, called to love and serve our neighbors in the name of Christ.

Leader: For Eve, mother of us all, we proclaim:

All: Thank you, Lord!

Leader: For both Sarah and Hagar, who left their respective familiar surroundings to continue their journey with God, we proclaim:

Young women: Thank you, Lord!

Leader: For Mary, mother of Jesus, who pondered the angel's words in her heart, we proclaim:

Mothers: Thank you, Lord!

Leader: For Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and the other women who reported back to the disciples the news of the risen Christ, we shout:

All: Thank you, Lord!

Leader: For the five daughters of Zelophehad who demanded their inheritance, we say:

Mothers: Thank you, Lord!

Leader: For the Syro-Phoenician woman, bold enough to challenge Jesus himself for her child's sake:

Daughters: Thank you, Lord!

Leader: For Mary and Martha, who loved and served the Lord together in their own ways, we say:

Sisters: Thank you, Lord!

Leader: For the persistent widow, who would not rest until she received justice, we say:

Widows: Thank you, Lord!

Leader: For the bold women who stayed we say:

Widows: Thank you, Lord!

Leader: There is no shortage of bold women today. Some of them we encounter daily, some we read about, others we know go unnamed and unrecognized. For whom do you give thanks today? Name her aloud as we thank God for her life and witness.

After names are done being said aloud, the leader may pray this prayer, or the group can pray together:

Inclusive God, we give thanks for the witness of bold women. May the examples of Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and other female disciples show us how to live as God's beloved children, called to love and serve our neighbors in the name of Christ, even when cultural norms may say otherwise. For the witness of all bold women, yesterday, today, and tomorrow, we give thanks!

(Liturgy was adapted from theafricanamericanlectionary.org)

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Week 4: Women who provided sanctuary for Moses

1:15 The king of Egypt spoke to two Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah: 16 "When you are helping the Hebrew women give birth and you see the baby being born, if it's a boy, kill him. But if it's a girl, you can let her live." 17 Now the two midwives respected God so they didn't obey the Egyptian king's order. Instead, they let the baby boys live.

18 So the king of Egypt called the two midwives and said to them, "Why are you doing this? Why are you letting the baby boys live?"

19 The two midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because Hebrew women aren't like Egyptian women. They're much stronger and give birth before any midwives can get to them." 20 So God treated the midwives well, and the people kept on multiplying and became very strong. 21 And because the midwives respected God, God gave them households of their own.

22 Then Pharaoh gave an order to all his people: "Throw every baby boy born to the Hebrews into the Nile River, but you can let all the girls live."

Moses' birth

2 Now a man from Levi's household married a Levite woman. 2 The woman became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She saw that the baby was healthy and beautiful, so she hid him for three months. 3 When she couldn't hide him any longer, she took a reed basket and sealed it up with black tar. She put the child in the basket and set the basket among the reeds at the riverbank. 4 The baby's older sister stood watch nearby to see what would happen to him.

5 Pharaoh's daughter came down to bathe in the river, while her women servants walked along beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds, and she sent one of her servants to bring it to her. 6 When she opened it, she saw the child. The boy was crying, and she felt sorry for him. She said, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children."

7 Then the baby's sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Would you like me to go and find one of the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?"

8 Pharaoh's daughter agreed, "Yes, do that." So the girl went and called the child's mother. 9 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I'll pay you for your work." So the woman took the child and nursed it. 10 After the child had grown up, she brought him back to Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I pulled him out of the water."

Exodus 1:15-2:10 CEB

BACKGROUND

We don't live under Pharaoh, yet there are powerful and violent forces that shape our lives in ways we cannot control, with power-hungry leaders making decisions based not on what is best for the people, but in response to other interests. Marginalized communities are further pushed out of sight, while refugees and undocumented immigrants are without asylum.

As modern day Christians, it may be easy to read this passage from Exodus simply as a beautiful story of women taking a stand to save the lives of thousands of baby boys.

But in doing so, we overlook a story with a radical invitation to us: to provide sanctuary for God's beloved.

The passage opens with a new Pharaoh in Egypt, who decides to unite his empire by setting it against the Israelite people, calling them to forget their history. Hebrews are forced into slave labor, and the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, are instructed to kill all the baby boys. These midwives are among the first of a persistent group of women throughout scripture who resisted and chose not to obey unjust policies.

Then there is the baby's mother—a Levite woman—who hides her male child away as long as she is able, then places him in a basket among the reeds on the Nile. Soon after, we meet Pharaoh's daughter, who finds the baby and has him pulled out of the water. The baby's resourceful sister speaks to Pharaoh's daughter and arranges for the baby's mother to be his wet nurse until he is old enough to be adopted, and named Moses.

Moses, who lived and went on to lead his people out of slavery, did so because of the saving actions of many, because of the bold, persistent actions of women in his life. Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives, refused to follow Pharaoh's orders and provided sanctuary for him: They chose life. As did the baby's mother, his sister, and Pharaoh's daughter.

Stepping into this child's life required the boldness of many people—named and unnamed. It is a story of God's liberating action in the world.

It is also a story about us: midwives, women and children, and those in power. We are all invited to resist evil and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves, and work against those powers that destroy human potential.

We cannot opt out of all these systems of power, but we can make choices.

As we witness violence, marginalization, and oppression are we willing to provide sanctuary—safe and welcoming spaces in our homes and lives—to these individuals and communities? Will we be people who show compassion and honor the dignity of all, in the face of unjust and immoral laws? What does providing sanctuary look like today?

ACTIVITY

Make a list of the ways you, your group, community, or congregation can make small changes with lasting impact. Choose one thing you will do this month and continue to build that list in the coming year. Invite others to join in this work with you, and follow up!

Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Sign your name on a petition
- Choose fair trade
- Volunteer at a shelter
- Serve at a food bank
- Write a letter to your elected official and thank them for serving, and ask them to address a concern in their jurisdiction
- Volunteer to teach ESL or citizenship classes
- Sponsor a refugee family
- Have a conversation with your congregation about providing sanctuary to a vulnerable group or individual
- Host a community dinner and conversation
- Visit juveniles in jail