



PRESBYTERIAN
WOMEN

HORIZONS BIBLE STUDY – 2021/2022
WHAT MY GRANDMOTHERS TAUGHT ME:
LEARNING FROM THE WOMEN IN MATTHEW'S GENEALOGY OF JESUS
STUDY BY: MERRYL BLAIR
P. LYNN MILLER
ARTWORK BY: CODY F. MILLER
SUGGESTIONS FOR LEADERS BY: MAGDALENA I. GARCÍA

OUTLINE FOR LEADERS PREPARED FOR PRESBYTERIAN WOMEN
OF THE PRESBYTERY OF THE MID-SOUTH AND
THE PRESBYTERY OF ARKANSAS

BY: REV. SUSAN CARTER WIGGINS
ASSOCIATE PASTOR FOR CONGREGATIONAL CARE & NURTURE
GERMANTOWN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
GERMANTOWN, TENNESSEE

NOTES FOR BIBLE STUDY LEADERS

A. Structure of each lesson:

1. Main Idea – each lesson is specific;
2. Scripture;
3. Opening Prayer;
4. Introduction to the biblical woman and the theme;
5. The Story: context – content – background – interpretation;
6. Closing prayer – connects the lesson's character and experience with our own challenges and desires to serve God faithfully.

First and foremost – create a serene and safe space for your Circle members – reminding the women that what they share in Circle is confidential within this safe space.

LESSON ONE: *FAMILY TREES*

“Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers ...”

Remember to incorporate the Introduction (p. 9) into Lesson One (p. 13)

Lesson One -

1. **Main Idea** – Seeing how family stories shape our sense of identity.
2. **Scripture** – Matthew 1 gives us the genealogy of Jesus’ ancestors ... his grandfathers and his grandmothers. This chapter is full of “begets.”

The author **asks** – *Why on earth does Matthew begin an otherwise gripping narrative with this off-putting / hard to pronounce list?*

3. Opening Prayer

4. **Introduction** – **The author** takes you back to the beginning – to Genesis 1 – as an introduction to the cosmic story of God’s creating activity as the backdrop for the particular story of Israel.

She wants our minds and hearts to be open to entering into this study ... entering into the long family story of Israel – with its failures and fresh starts – with new eyes ... so that ... we may gain new perspectives on how, we too, are a part of the continuing story that God is telling.

She **asks**: *Which biblical characters might you include in your own personal family tree?*

5. The Story – context – background - interpretation -

To find the answer – Meryll takes you back into the families of the Old Testament ... using 1 Samuel 11, Judges 21, Numbers 35, and 2 Samuel 12 and 19.

She draws us in, **asking**:

- *What does family mean to you?*
- *How has the family you came from helped you form an idea of who you are?*

All this to illustrate the importance of family relationships ... and more importantly – for Jesus’ genealogy – to provide the structure of the growth and spread of humankind. Genesis 2:4 begins this pattern: “These are the generations of the heavens

and the earth when they were created; in the day that the Lord made the earth and the heavens.”

This verse is the pivot between the creation narrative of Genesis 1 – with its majesty and rhythmic sequences – and the more narrative storytelling style of Genesis 2 – which gets down into the soil of the garden. The genealogy in this narrative suggests that – at the very base of all relationships – the human story is part of a cosmic story – and we can consider ourselves truly family ONLY if we can see that we are also related to the “heavens and the earth,” and all that dwell in them.

Merryl does a masterful job – I think – in guiding us forth and back – forward while reminding of where we’ve been. And then, she asks just the right questions so that we can begin to sense that this is our story, too.

For example:

- What stories do you tell yourself when you feel a need to remember who you are meant to me?

Then, she returns to Matthew 1 ... reminding us of which women are present in the genealogical list ... as well as those who are absent:
Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel – the mothers of the tribes of Israel!

So, why does Matthew include the particular women he includes?

- Each one calls for our attention – and we are invited to hear, wonder, and anticipate what Matthew might be about to tell us in the rest of the Gospel!

See how our appetites are already whetted – by both Matthew ... and by our author?

6. Closing Prayer

LESSON ONE: SUGGESTIONS FOR LEADERS – P. 19

1. Prepare:

- a. photos of their grandmothers;
- b. Recruit helpers;
- c. Invite a non-traditional family – one with multiple generations living together, perhaps.

2. Open:

- a. Welcome;
- b. Light a Christ candle and welcome Christ into your midst
- c. Opening prayer
- d. Use Scope & Sequence (p. 6) and Introduction (p. 9) to introduce this year's Bible study;
- e. Share photos of your grandmothers;

3. Explore the Lesson

Families in the Old Testament – invite the women to consider how the concept of family changes over generations – and from one culture to another ...

Ask –

- *How was the structure of your grandparents' families different from your parents' families?*
- *How do those families compare to your own family?*
- *What has changed over time?*
- *How do factors like geography, economics, gender roles, and cultural heritage influence family systems?*

Describe the importance of family in the ancient world ...

Underscore the basic needs that the extended family provided ... such as defense and protection ... see p. 19

Ask –

- In light of Genesis 1 – how can we honor God's intent that we live as one human family?
- What would it look like to provide defense and protection for everyone?
- What social programs and government policies have this goal in mind?

Genealogies in the Bible –

Explain how genealogies are used in the Bible to make particular points ... see p. 19;

Discuss the use of the verb “beget” used in biblical genealogies –

Ask –

- *How does this sexist language make you feel?*

LESSON TWO: TAMAR

“... Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar ...”

1. **Main Idea** – Tamar’s story takes us into the world of a powerless – but resourceful outsider.
2. **Scripture** – Genesis 38 – Tamar’s story may be the least known – among the women listed in Jesus’ genealogy.
Tamar’s actions will be a strong lesson for the patriarch, Judah – and will contribute to the continuation of the family line that leads to David - and ultimately to Jesus.
3. **Opening Prayer**
4. **Introduction** – Merryl tells us that Tamar’s story bears close reading on its own terms and deserves to be heard in its Near East setting.
As we pay close attention to Tamar, we may even be surprised and shocked to recognize themes we can still relate to.

Most especially – learning her story invites us to listen to the voices of marginal, powerless women who sacrificially do their utmost to keep their families alive and viable.

As we hear her story – we are invited to imagine Tamar’s powerlessness – her sense of otherness – and to listen for the voices of those who are similarly powerless and friendless.

The author invites us to *ask* –

- *What prayer might you offer as you begin to journey with Tamar?*
- *Consider a prayer for women who are abused – lonely – or lack power and choice in their own lives.*

5. **The Story – context – background – interpretation**

To begin – we go back to Joseph’s story in Genesis 37. We are reminded that it is Jacob’s son Judah who suggests to his brothers that they sell the favorite son Joseph into slavery instead of killing him. Keep this in mind as you continue into Tamar’s story.

Next – Judah marries a Canaanite woman named Shua – and they have 3 sons.

Note in Genesis 38:2 – “Judah ‘takes a wife’ for his son Er – this is the common ancient context for women – they are ‘taken’ – without agency of their own. Keep this in mind, too, as you continue into Tamar’s story.

- Tamar’s husband behaves in a displeasing way and dies.
- The Levirate marriage of one brother impregnating a deceased brother’s wife in order to carry on the family line is introduced in Genesis 38:7.
 - In Tamar’s case, however, her brother-in-law refuses his duty, which displeased the Lord, and he also dies.
 - Tamar is then sent back to her father-in-law’s home to wait until another brother is old enough to marry her.
 - Judah is afraid that the 3rd son will also die – so he really has no intention of doing as he should by Tamar.
 - Notice how foreign women are distrusted.
 - Tamar is suspected of something she has not done.
 - Tamar has no choice but to take her future into her own hands. Her survival depends on what she comes up with.

Merryl draws us into Tamar’s story **asking** these questions:

- *We have encountered Tamar as a woman who is helpless in a man’s world.*
- *Does this bring up memories of times when you have felt helpless within your own social structures?*
- *Were your choices severely limited because of your gender or race?*
- *Where have you mistrusted because of prejudice?*

Tamar’s story continues ... and Merryl continues to **ask** us good questions that cause us to ponder and reflect how we relate to her.

Here’s another example: Merryl says,

- *It can be uncomfortable to consider a woman using her sexuality to get her own way.*
 - *How might we look for the deeper issues and socially imposed constraints that can leave a woman so few choices for survival?*
 - *What political and social change might this call us to work towards?*
- Tamar is seen as a trickster in her story. She is a marginal, powerless character who nevertheless uses her wits to turn the tables on those who have oppressed her. She steps from the margins into the center, to

subvert and surprise. Tamar is righteous because she recognizes the importance of the wider story and acts for the good of the family line – when no one else does! In so doing, she redeems herself and her dead husband ... and furthermore, she redeems Judah!

- Through Tamar’s story – we learn that worldly power is not absolute – that God’s promises can be fulfilled through the most unexpected people – and that those the world considers worthy of contempt can show us God’s grace – if only we have eyes to see.
- Tamar – the trickster – then one who moves from the margin to the center – and then becomes the righteous woman

How has the family you came from helped you form an idea of who you are?

All this to illustrate the importance of family relationships ... and more importantly – for Jesus’ genealogy – to provide the structure of the growth and spread of humankind. Genesis 2:4 begins this pattern: “These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created; in the day that the Lord made the earth and the heavens.”

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For example:

- *What stories do you tell yourself when you feel a need to remember who you are meant to be?*
Then, she returns to Matthew 1 ... reminding us of which women are present in the genealogical list ... as well as those who are absent:
Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel – the mothers of the tribes of Israel!
So, why does Matthew include the particular women he includes?

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6. Closing Prayer

LESSON TWO: SUGGESTIONS FOR LEADERS, P. 27

1. Prepare:

- Gather scarves and props to use in a dramatized reading of the text
- Invite the Circle to bring a photo of a wedding party
- Draw a family tree of Genesis 38
- Be ready to explain the Law for Levirate Marriage (p. 27)
- Create a Drama (Reader's Theatre) – see p. 27

2. Open:

- Welcome;
- Light a Christ candle and welcome Christ into your midst;
- Opening prayer
- Alert the Circle that Tamar's story might cause some to feel uncomfortable since it includes aspects of gender violence – assure them that you've got facial tissues as well as (name someone) who will be beside them, if necessary.
- Use Scope & Sequence (p. 6) and Introduction (p. 9) to assist your study.

NOTE – I've changed the order of the Open ...

- Welcome,
- Lighting the Christ candle;
- Opening prayer,
- Then continue

3. Explore the Lesson

a. *A Complicated Family Tree*

- Draw a family tree for Genesis 38 ... see p. 27
- The Law for Levirate Marriage

- Share the wedding pictures the women brought ... discuss how the marriage of the photo they brought came about.
- Read Deuteronomy 25:5-10 ... discuss Levirate marriage

Ask –

- *What role does shame play in a patriarchal society?*
- *In what ways are people shamed today?*
- *What was Onan guilty of under levirate law?*

b. A Drama with Multiple Acts

- Assign parts for a dramatized reading of Genesis 38 – Narrator, Judah, Tamar, Hirah, the townspeople, the midwife. See p. 27 for guidance and suggestions
- Tamar the Trickster

Ask –

- *How does the statement “Desperate times call for desperate measures change our view of Tamar?”*
- *What unfair laws and systemic abuses give rise to “tricksters,” – and ...*
- *What should our Christian response be?*
- *Who are some of today’s “tricksters?”*
- *What unjust conditions / systems give rise to their fate?*
- *What would a just reform look like?*

See p. 27 for additional questions to ponder

4. Respond to the Lesson:

- From the Margin to the Center – research other women who act similarly (see p. 27 for ideas).
- Read Genesis 38:26 again. Notice how in the end, Tamar is recognized as righteous by Judah himself.

Ask –

- *Why does Tamar earn this title?*
- *What women in your church, community, and city deserve this title?*

5. Close:

- Invite the Circle to bring women's / lifestyle magazines to the next gathering.
- Closing Prayer

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LESSON THREE: RAHAB
“... and Solomon the father of Boaz by Rahab ...”

1. **Main Idea** – Rahab – a marginalized women – an outsider – who is intelligent and strong – and who recognizes the power of the God of Israel. When God’s own people are melting with fear – her wit and presence of mind allow God’s plans to come to fruition.

2. **Scripture** – Joshua 2; 6:22-25

3. **Opening Prayer**

4. **Introduction** –

Like Tamar – Rahab also used the only resources available to her to save her family.

Her marginalization includes her profession – she’s a prostitute ... as well as where she literally lives – in the city wall.

She’s susceptible to abuse, violence, starvation.

As we hear her story – our own prejudices and assumptions are brought to mind ... **ask** ...

- *How could someone who sells their body for a living be righteous?*
- *How could God possibly work through such a person?*

We are challenged to see through God’s-eye-view and to questions judgments we make based on incomplete knowledge of a person’s circumstances.

Merryl draws us into Rahab’s story **asking**:

- *What are our responses to a story about a prostitute?*
- *What social and religious assumptions are at play here?*

5. **The Story – context – background – interpretation**

Rahab is an outsider in every sense of the word: Foreigner, prostitute, lives on the margins of society – and the city itself, and ... and ... the survival of her entire family is in her hands!

Before we judge Rahab for her profession – we need to meet her where she is – and then understand how she came to be where she is – why it is that she must live in these ways in order to survive.

- We need, too, to look at the place of prostitution in the ancient Near East.
- We need to look at how women were viewed – how married women added value by producing children, caring for the domestic animals, tending the gardens, producing clothing for the family, and so on and so on.
- We need to look at – what it meant to be widowed – or fatherless. This is when women were the most vulnerable –
- The unattached woman becomes fair game for assault by any man – as violating her body was NOT seen an offense against anyone – including her.

Merryl draws us into Tamar's story *asking* these questions:

- *Do you think attitudes towards women's bodies have changed since the days of Rahab and Tamar?*
- *How do you see similar attitudes in our world?*

Rahab's story continues ... when a woman is without male protection – and she is extremely vulnerable – she also has the freedom to make her own choices – like Rahab did.

- She is “loosed” from being bound to the head of the household.
- Loosed means unbound.
- This is where the term “loose woman” comes from.

The story continues ...

Moses has died in sight of – and yet not crossing over to – Canaan;

- Joshua is the new leader of the Israelites;
- Joshua sends spies to Jericho who immediately go to the home of the prostitute Rahab – who lives in the city wall (she's easy to find);
- The king sends orders to Rahab ... think of this power imbalance – king to prostitute ...
- Rahab dares to lie to the king and hide the spies – why?
- She proclaims her belief in their God – she is able to recite their whole salvation story!

- Rahab begins to negotiate her family’s survival with the spies;
- Rahab points out that she has dealt with the spies with *hesed* – kindness, love between people as God loves us – and she asks that the spies treat her and her family the same way.
- The spies repeat the word *hesed* back to Rahab – and they add *emet* – which means *faithfulness*.
 - Thus, we know that God is at work here!

Merryl draws us into Rahab’s story further **asking** us to consider:

- *Where have you experienced loyalty and faithfulness in your life?*
- *Where, especially, has this experience come unexpectedly?*
- *Where have you offered loyalty and faithfulness to people in ways you did not expect?*

Rahab is seen as a hero – savior of God’s people – and as the savior of her entire family.

Merryl **asks** ...

- *How might we be bound by our responsibilities?*
- *How might we reframe our responsibilities as tools for teaching us strength and courage?*

Through Rahab’s story we see the continual presence of foreignness within the story of Israel.

Rahab keeps us alert to that which might remain hidden – the loyalty and faithfulness of the stranger who is the presence of God amongst us.

We – like the king of Jericho – expect nothing from such a woman – but she surprises us with her courage and wit – and her ability to read the times and make clear and wise decisions.

Rahab causes us to look more carefully for God’s presence around us and within us.

And, finally, Merryl **asks** to consider:

- *Who am I failing to see?*
- *Or where do I feel invisible?*
- *What might be the gift I am missing because I am living out of others’ expectations and assumptions, rather than God’s surprising presence?*

6. Closing Prayer

Lesson Three: Suggestions for Leaders, p. 35

1. Prepare:

(Rahab acts as a midwife and a mother to Israel in its beginning in Canaan) ...

So ...

- Invite a physician or a labor / delivery nurse to share the risks of childbirth as well as the role of the midwife.
- Gather magazines or select video clips of women in advertising for the response activity – *Sexualized Lives* (p. 35).

2. Open:

- Welcome;
- Light a Christ candle and welcome Christ into your midst;
- Opening prayer
- Midwifing – bringing forth a people – hear from your guest speaker(s).
- Discuss – What difference does it make to consider Rahab a midwife and not simply a prostitute?
- Use Scope & Sequence (p. 6) and Introduction (p. 9) to assist your study.

3. Explore the Lesson

Vulnerable in multiple ways

- Rahab – possibly the most marginalized of all the women in Jesus' genealogy ... see p. 35 for details ...

Finesse and Faithfulness

- Suggestion on p. 35 is to dramatize Joshua 2 and Joshua 6:22-25 ...
- Narrator, Joshua, the king, Rahab, and the spies.

Ask –

- *What does Rahab's offer tell us about her skills as a negotiator?*
- *What do we learn about her spirituality?*

- Discuss these questions from the lesson itself ...
 - *Where have you experienced loyalty and faithfulness in your life?*
 - *Where, especially, has this experience come unexpectedly?*
 - *Where have you offered loyalty and faithfulness to people in ways you did not expect?*

A Model for Steadfast Love

- Joshua 2:12-14 – the expression “deal kindly” is used more than once ...
- The Hebrew term is “**hesed.**” The author explains, “we are more familiar with this word in its association with God’s ‘steadfast love.’”

Ask –

- *Why is it significant that a foreign woman embodies God’s compassion?*
- *What does this reveal about God’s nature?*
- *How does this impact our relationship with people of other faiths or no faith?*

The World’s Oldest Profession

Prostitution is often called “the world’s oldest profession” ... but as the author explains, “Legal systems tend to shame, blame, and punish sex workers while ignoring those who use their services.”

Ask –

- *What circumstances lead women into prostitution?*
- *Instead of penalizing sex workers, what systemic injustices should the courts and governments address?*

Discuss these questions from the lesson itself ...

- *Do you think attitudes towards women’s bodies have changed since the days of Rahab and Tamar?*
- *How do you see similar attitudes in our world?”*

4. Respond to the Lesson:

- Sexualized lives – look at the magazines – asking – how are the women portrayed in the media? (p. 35)

- Look up the United Nations “Not an Object: On Sexualization and Exploitation of Women and Girls.” (website listed on p. 35)
- Women on the margins – discuss “I and You and the Third who is in our midst.” (p. 35 and in the lesson, too).

5. Closing Prayer

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LESSON FOUR: RUTH AND LOYAL LOVE

“... your people shall be my people, and your God my God ...”

1. **Main Idea** – Ruth’s story requires 2 lessons to do her justice:

- Loss & Famine
- Ruth & Naomi – show how ordinary people can bring about divine outcomes when they deal with each other with loyal love.

2. **Scripture** – Ruth 1-2

3. **Opening Prayer**

4. **Introduction** –

The Book of Ruth breaks into the broader sweep of the story of Israel’s struggles to become a nation.

In the middle of battle reports and leadership squabbles – this simple story of an ordinary family provides a welcome still point ...

It begs the question- *why is it here at all?*

Here we are in the midst of very masculine material – and we hear the sound of a woman’s voice – *what’s going on?*

We’re immediately drawn into the ordinariness of life for people – like most of us – who aren’t in positions of political power ...

And we’re reminded that most good things come about because simple, ordinary people – in their simple, ordinary day-to-day lives – live with goodness and compassion.

It causes us to think about how we treat each other – and to look for the godliness in our everyday relationships.

Merryl draws us into Ruth’s story, *asking* us to consider:

- *As you enter Ruth’s story – think of the women who support you – or whom you support.*
 - *Name them silently and imagine them surrounding you as you journey with Ruth and Naomi.*

5. The Story – context – background – interpretation

The Story of Ruth could easily be named “The Story of Ruth and Naomi” for it is very much a partnership between these two women.

Ruth and Naomi’s story could be acted out with a Reader’s Theatre – if you choose. (see p. 38-42):

- **Prologue – Leaving Home;**
- **Act One – The Nature of Famine;**
- **Act Two – A Step Towards Fullness.**

As you move through the story, Merryl *poses these questions*:

- *Elimelech and Naomi had to leave their family and friends to seek a better life for themselves and a future for their children in a strange land.*
 - *How does this experience relate to your life?*
- *Where do you experience hesed – loyal love and commitment – in your everyday relationships?*
- *Have you made promises similar to Ruth’s – either formally or informally – at any time in your life?*
 - *What were those promises?*
- *Naomi’s use of the word famine is a way of describing loss and grief.*
 - *In what ways do you relate to such a famine?*
- *What seeds of hope have been brought into your darker moments?*
 - *Who brought these seeds?*
 - *Did you recognize them at the time, or only in looking back?*

6. Closing Prayer

Observe a moment of silence at the end of the sharing and then thank you guest for sharing so openly.

Lesson Four: Suggestions for Leaders, p. 43

1. Prepare:

- Invite an immigrant woman or family to share their journey, including the reasons why they migrated.

2. Open:

- Welcome;
- Light a Christ candle and welcome Christ into your midst;
- Opening prayer
- Invite your guest to share their journey to a new land.
- Use Scope & Sequence (p. 6) and Introduction (p. 9) to assist your study.

3. Explore the Lesson – moving through the story as a play – use a readers’ theatre approach, for example ...

Famine in the Land -

Introduce the story of Ruth and Naomi as a tale of immigrants who follow a trail of “bread” from their homeland to a foreign land.

Families today also migrate for similar reasons.

Ask –

- *What are some of the push factors (forces that drive people away from a place) and pull factors (forces that attract people to a place) involved in migration?*
- *How do you feel about having economic refugees in Jesus' family tree?*
 - *How does this impact your attitude towards today's migrants?*

Discuss these questions from the lesson itself ...

- *Elimelech and Naomi had to leave their family and friends to seek a better life for themselves and a future for their children in a strange land.*
 - *How does this experience relate to your own life?*

A Hopeless Future -

Explain that the book of Ruth is like a play in 4 acts –

The first 2 will be addressed in this lesson – and the other 2 in the next lesson.

Using notes from the lesson, describe the setting, the problem, and the characters.

- See page 43 – for the outline of **Act 1 and Act 2**

Ask –

- *Have you ever felt, like Naomi, at the end of your rope?*
- *In those moments of loss and despair, where did you find hope?*

Tender Relationships –

Ruth 1:8-9 - Naomi might be heartbroken and helpless – but she isn't mean or manipulative.

- She is generous and grateful.
- Focus on the Hebrew word “hesed” – steadfast love – dealing kindly –

Ask –

- *What is the significance of three women – two of the foreigners – embodying God's steadfast love?*

Discuss questions from the lesson itself -

- *Where do you experience hesed in your everyday relationships?*

Beyond All Reasonable Expectation;

Orpah gives into Naomi's plea and does the logical thing by returning to her mothers' house.

While Ruth clings to her mother-in-law ... pledging her a loyalty that is unrivaled in all of scripture.

- Read again Ruth 1:16-17 – outline the components of the oath offered by Ruth.

Discuss these questions from the lesson itself:

- *Have you ever made promises similar to Ruth's?*
 - *What were your promises?*

Godly Possibilities

Act 2 – assign parts – narrator, Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, the reapers, and the servant in charge of the reapers ... do a readers' theatre.

Godly possibilities begin to emerge ...

Ask –

- *What does the narrative reveal about Boaz's character?*
- *How does his behavior towards Ruth compare with Judah's treatment of Tamar (Lesson 3)?*

Read Ruth 2:11-12 – Boaz praises Ruth for her hard work, exalts her ethical behavior, and blesses her despite the fact that she is a foreigner.

Ask –

- *How are immigrant workers treated in our fields?*
- *How can Boaz be a model for humane and equitable treatment?*

Discuss questions from the lesson itself –

- *Where have seeds of hope been brought into your darker moments?*
 - *Who brought these seeds?*
 - *Did you recognize them at the time – or only in looking back?*

4. Respond to the Lesson – Feeding Compassion –

- Discuss food insecurity –
- Learn more at www.feedingamerica.org – or www.wfp.org – or www.bread.org;
- Watch the video “Rethink Zero” (2:33 minutes);
- Join the Zero Hunger Challenge – promotes a world free from hunger and malnutrition – where all food systems are sustainable – women and family farmers are empowered – and everyone enjoys access to adequate food all year round.
- The video is available on the United Nations website ... the link is on p. 43

5. Closing Prayer

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LESSON FIVE: RUTH AND REDEMPTION
“... and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth ...”

1. **Main Idea** – The stories of Ruth and Naomi continue here in Lesson Five:
 - Once empty and bereft – now they are filled and redeemed through the honesty and care they show one another.
 - The foreign daughter-in-law is praised for her faithfulness ... and in the end ... Ruth is shown to be the main reason King David’s family line can continue.
2. **Scripture** – Ruth 3-4
3. **Opening Prayer**

4. Introduction –

Lesson Five picks up where Lesson Four left off –

- They have settled back into life in Bethlehem;
- They’ve found some relief from famine;
- Naomi has re-established her family connections;

However – they still suffer from their losses – and their futures are still uncertain. They could respond to such emptiness with hopelessness.

Ruth and Naomi – however – invites us to choose a different response – in which we are open to possibilities – recognizing what we have and seeing what step this may lead to next.

While the word *hesed* – loyal love – continues to be a theme in these chapters – a new term comes into focus ...

The Hebrew word *go’el* – translated redeemer – or – next of kin.

It is repeated time and again – it cannot be overlooked – it grounds our understanding of the term in our Christian lives.

We know Redeemer as Christ – and we don’t often think of its depth of meaning. Ruth’s story brings a deeper understanding of the meaning of redeemer to us as a gift.

Before proceeding - Merryl *asks* us to consider:

- *What does the word redeemer mean to you at this moment?*

5. The Story – context – background – interpretation

The “Play” continues ... remember it could be done as a Reader’s Theatre – if you choose (see p. 46-50).

- **Act Three – The Good of the Family**
- **Act Four – Full Redemption**
- **Epilogue – Who is the Redeemer?**

As you move through the story, Merryl *poses these questions*:

- *How does this very practical definition of a redeemer add to the meaning of calling Christ “Redeemer?”*
- *Boaz calls Ruth “worthy, strong woman.” Who would you describe in this way?*
 - *What might it feel like to insert your own name here?*
- *How have you been included in someone else’s generosity?*
 - *What might be a symbol of generosity that you could bring to mind when you feel empty?*

WHY TELL THE STORY OF RUTH? –

1. God’s action is shown through ordinary people who act with godly characteristics.
2. We are called to examine our own prejudices.
3. Discovering the loyalty shown between outsider and insider that gives life and hope.
4. We are reminded of who God is – protector of the widow – the orphan – and the foreigner – that is, the most vulnerable in society.
5. God not only protects the “least of these” – but works through them to enable the story of salvation to continue!

“Moabite” was the most offensive nationality to consider in the story of Israel – what name might we replace it with – to confront our own prejudices and assumptions?

And lastly, consider ...

- *Looking back over our lives, where might we see similar journeys?*
- *What have these taught us?*

6. Closing Prayer

Lesson Five: Suggestions for Leaders, p. 51

1. Prepare:

- Provide paper and pens for the open activity “Half Empty or Half Full”

2. Open:

- Welcome;
- Light a Christ candle and welcome Christ into your midst;
- Opening prayer

Half Empty or Half Full – see p. 51.

Half empty or half full – provide paper and pens – fold the paper in half – open it again with a fold down the middle – ask the Circle members to write down “half empty” – or negative aspects of their own lives on the left ... and “half full” or positive aspects of their own lives on the right.

Ask –

- *What does your balance sheet reveal?*
- *What circumstances might alter the results?*

3. **Explore the Lesson** – moving through the story as a play – use a readers’ theatre approach, for example -

New Possibilities;

Highlight that Naomi has moved from a “glass half empty” outlook to a “glass half full” attitude. And, with Boaz in the picture – she knows that the glass is refillable.

A Comedy of Double Entendre –

- Naomi might lack financial means – but she has other assets – wisdom, experience, and the art of seduction;

- Be sure to look at the questions asked in the Suggestions for Leaders on p. 51 ...
- For example – In what ways do we teach girls and women to groom themselves for others?
- What message does that send about the worth of women?
- Explain the double meaning of “uncover his feet?”

Concrete Actions of Goodness

- Boaz and Ruth are both offered the opportunity to act in the wider interests of the family and they meet the challenge.
- In their own way, they both act as God’s agents – as “redeemer” for a people.

Ask – How does this very practical definition of a redeemer add to the meaning of calling Christ “Redeemer?”

- Ruth calls herself servant – but Boaz calls her worthy wife ...
- The author says - worthy also has the connotations of strength and can be used in reference to an army.”

Ask – What is the importance of the names we give or are given?

Loyalty Has Its Reward

- Full Redemption – assign parts of the narration and read the chapter dramatically (Readers’ Theatre)

Consider –

- *what aspects of your marriage – if you are married – were decided by you and your spouse – and which were dictated by family and tradition?*

A Tale of Our Time – the Story of Ruth ... see p. 49 and 51

4. Respond

No Longer the “Other”

Ask–

- *Remember a time when you were welcome despite being the “Other.”*
- *How can we foster communities where nobody feels like the “Other?”*

More to You Than Seven Sons

The women of Bethlehem sign a song (Ruth 4:14-15) to celebrate that god has provided descendants for Naomi.

Ask– *How are single and childless women celebrated in your church and community.*

- *Commit to special days that honor all women of the church.*

5. Closing Prayer, p. 50

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LESSON SIX: BATHSHEBA

“... David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah ...”

Structure:

1. **Main Idea** – Bathsheba is not named in Matthew’s genealogy. Instead, as the “wife of Uriah,” she is defined by her relationship to a man. At first it appears that she is silent and powerless, but when she steps onto the stage, she finds her voice and exhibits an ability to influence kings. Bathsheba’s story illustrates the corrupting influence of power as well as the support she, as a queen, can provide for her son’s reign.
2. **Scripture** – 2 Samuel 11-12; 1 Kings 1:11-31; 2:13-25
3. **Opening Prayer** – page 53.

4. Introduction –

The best known story about Bathsheba is from 2 Samuel 11:1-17 – where she is bathing on the roof, is seen and desired by King David, and then taken, impregnated, and widowed by David’s machinations so that he can marry her.

The story was celebrated in movies – (notably “David and Bathsheba,” starring Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward, 1951), as well as in Leonard Cohen’s song “Hallelujah” ... with the lyric ...

“Your faith was strong, but you needed proof,
you saw her bathing on the roof;
her beauty and the moonlight overthrew ya”

Bathsheba is seen in various ways:

- the perfect temptress –
- a new incarnation of Eve –
- a woman who brought down the great king with her seductive ways –
- a victim of King David’s power –
- a cipher – that is, a cardboard character with no depth.

In any of these characterizations – and the others, too – women may find themselves relating to her – or finding her story uncomfortable – or both.

And, then we must wonder – why is she included in Matthew’s genealogy – and why without her name – but instead – only as she exists in relationship to a man?

If we enter into her world and come to know Bathsheba, though, we might learn that she, like many of us, has hopes and dreams – and yet, very little power to fulfill them.

The author **asks** us to consider:

- *How do you see Bathsheba? Manipulator – victim – a woman who is ignored or treated as unimportant?*
- *How do your own experiences influence how you see her?*

5. The Story – context – background – interpretation

Bathsheba Taken – 2 Samuel 11:1-13 - this is the story we know best ...

This story interrupts the main narrative – to bring into focus an intimate scene away from the larger sweep of war and struggle.

- David stays in Jerusalem while his troops are away in battle – **why?**
- And, then there's Bathsheba – bathing on the rooftop – **why?**
- David, too, is on a rooftop – his own – **why?**

David seeks to know who this beautiful woman is –

- and then seeks to know her – in the most intimate way possible – to have sex with her – he is, after all, the king – **why not?**
- Then, the worst possible thing happens as a result – she becomes pregnant – **now what?**
- Bathsheba's a nobody – **what can she do?**
- She speaks – but only once (2 Samuel 11:5 – “I am pregnant.”)
- David comes up with an answer – **at whose expense?**
- **What does it matter** – he is, after all, the king – **why not make the circumstances meet his needs?**

Are we appalled?

We don't have to wait long to know God's response – God is appalled (2 Samuel 11:27b) – “The thing David had done displeased God.”

The prophet Nathan steps in with a brilliant parable of power gone array – 2 Samuel 12 –

An interesting aspect to this story is that the name Bathsheba (Daughter of Sheba) – is hidden within the language of the parable – which describes the ewe lamb (within the Hebrew word having similar consonants to sheba) – as a daughter (bath in Hebrew) to a poor man.

David fails to notice the sound of this bath sheba within the story and misses the point completely.

We hear God’s judgment on David in verses 14-21 and the ongoing strife in David’s family ... all of which set up the tragic narratives of David’s sons that will follow into the book of 1 Kings.

As you move through the story, Merrill ***poses these reflections and questions:***

- *The death of the child is a difficult judgment to read here. It may lead us to ask “What sort of God takes it out on an innocent baby?”*
 - *So, we need to read for the symbolism of the story – what do you think is happening here symbolically?*
- *What does Bathsheba think and feel through all of this?*

The parable told by Nathan provides an important interpretive key to the David and Bathsheba story.

- *Does this reading change your understanding of what you may have heard about Bathsheba?*
- *How is Bathsheba’s portrayal as a temptress similar to modern reporting of victims of assault?*
- *How does the naming of this child Jedidiah color the movement from David’s sin to his repentance?*

The Story continues ...

Bathsheba and Politics – 1 Kings 1:11-31 –

- Bathsheba’s story is different ... she is no longer depicted as “the wife of ...” ... but is known as “Solomon’s mother” ... and she takes her place in palace politics.

- Even the prophet Nathan comes to Bathsheba – urging her to approach the king – rather than doing so himself.

Context is important ... Ancient Near East palace politics had particular roles assigned to the women of the harem – most especially to the mother of the king – or of the named successor.

- She is expected to aid the smooth transition of power from one monarch to the next – all for the wider good of the country.
- Look closely at what this all means as you move through the story.

Throughout these biblical narratives, Bathsheba has not had a large part to play- but she has been a catalyst for others to act.

The author poses these questions to us:

- *Who are the women of influence you have admired?*
- *How have they fought for the wider good of the community?*

6. Closing Prayer – page 5

Lesson Six – Suggestions for Leaders, p. 59

1. Prepare

As with Lesson Two – identify one or two women to serve as chaplains ...

Why? Because the lesson discusses David’s sexual misconduct – Bathsheba being taken by force - and the power imbalance between he and Bathsheba.

2. Open –

- Welcome
- Light a Christ candle
- Opening Prayer –
- ***What’s in a name?***– Ask participants about their last name – birth name, married name, or something else?
- Consider how Bathsheba is introduced by Matthew – as the wife of another person – not her own person.

- Use Scope & Sequence – p. 6

3. Explore the Lesson – *Sexual Misconduct and Power Imbalance* –

- Read 2 Samuel 11:1-17 –
 - notice King David’s location throughout the narrative;
 - notice the verbs that denote David’s actions.

Ask –

- *Where is Bathsheba?*
- *Who initiates the action in the story?*
- *What is the relationship between sexual misconduct and power imbalance?*

Look at Bathsheba from different perspectives:

- Manipulator,
- Victim
- Someone who is ignored and/or treated as totally unimportant.
Discuss this ...

A Love Story Without Courtship –

There is no sense of a delicate courtship in Bathsheba and David’s story. The same verbs are used in Bathsheba’s story as are used in the story of the rape of Dinah (Genesis 34:2).

Ask –

- *What is the definition of rape?*
- *Did Bathsheba have the power to consent?*
- *Is 2 Samuel 11 the story of David’s adultery – or the story of Bathsheba’s rape?*

Notice –

The dialogue in the story – and the gaps in the narrative ... such as feelings and motives.

Ask –

- *What is Bathsheba’s only line in the story?*
- *What is the relationship between silence and victimhood?*

From Deception to Murder –

King David's behavior leaves a lot to be desired – he abused both Bathsheba and Uriah – and then he tries to cover up his crimes.

Ask –

- *Can you recall instances where public figures violated their oath of office?*
 - *What were the consequences?*
 - *How were they held accountable for their actions?*

Discuss –

David's quote in 2 Samuel 11:25 ... asking – What is the relationship between denial and abuse?

The Power of Story –

Read 2 Samuel 12:1-15 – discuss the wordplay of the name Bathsheba with the parable the prophet Nathan tells.

Ask –

- *What are the dangers posed by power and privilege?*

When the Gods are Angry –

Chapter 11 closes with suspense sharing God's displeasure with David. Discuss the questions from the lesson – p. 56 and 59.

Palace Politics –

1 Kings 1:11-31 – read or summarize.

Explain the role of women of the harem ... p. 56;

Ask –

- *What is Bathsheba's role in securing that Solomon's reign of wisdom and peace comes to fruition?*
- *And the other questions at the end of the lesson ... p. 57.*

4. Respond

An Ounce of Prevention –

- Visit the website for the “me too” movement at www.metoomvmt.org.
- Notice the factors that impact sexual abuse and assault.

Ask:

- *What role can the church play in education and prevention of sexual abuse and assault?*
- Visit the website for RAINN - Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network: www.rainn.org
- Discuss – Ways to publicize the National Sexual Assault Hotline: 800-656-HOPE (4673) in your church and community.

5. Closing Prayer – page 58.

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LESSON SEVEN: MARY

“... Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

Structure:

1. Main Idea – The biblical account of Mary tells of a young girl – in danger of complete disgrace – who has the courage to say “YES!” to God!

Mary’s experience of motherhood includes ...

- a bewildering birth,
- a risky escape as a refugee,
- and - a message from prophets that warn of the death of her son.

She meets these difficulties with thoughtfulness and steadfastness.

2. Scripture – Matthew 1:18-2:23

3. Opening Prayer – page 61.

4. Introduction –

Of the women mentioned in Jesus’ family tree, Mary stands in a place of her own – and – it’s the final one in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus – Jesus – towards whom the whole of history has been moving since Abraham.

Note – instead of using the customary formula - and naming Joseph “the father of Jesus by Mary” ... Matthew names Joseph “the husband of Mary” – and doesn’t name the father of Jesus at all. This gives Mary the very prominent spot usually reserved for the father – she alone receives the added phrase “of whom Jesus was born.”

And ... And ... Mary is the also the ONLY woman named in the last section of the genealogy – she is the only woman to be mentioned since the time of David and the “wife of Uriah.”

It is obvious that the list of ancestors is building towards Mary –

- *How do the stories of the women we have already studied contribute to the account of Mary?*
- *How does she fit into this line of women?*
 - *Does she fit at all?*

Here prominence calls for particular attention.

The author *asks* us to consider –

- *How are your preconceived ideas being challenged by the stories of the women in this genealogy?*
- *How do their stories prepare you to hear Mary's story?*

5. The Story – context – background – interpretation

Mary might be the hardest of these women to understand.

Why? – Well, like Bathsheba – she doesn't have her own narrative – but instead appears briefly as a supporting actor in a larger story.

Both Luke and John give Mary something to say ... and the four Gospels and the Acts 1 mention some of what she does – but we have no idea where Mary came from – who her parents were – or any other details that might fill in her personality.

And yet – she becomes so prominent in the traditions and faith of the church that the enigmatic Mary of the Gospels has been given a backstory – and she has grown into something quite unrecognizable from her very humble beginnings.

And yet – Mary's inclusion in this genealogy invites us to think about how she does resemble her foremothers –

- As a woman on the outside of her social situation – vulnerable, yet strong – who, through her actions – enabled God's continuing story of hope and salvation.

When Matthew's first chapter gets to the story of his Gospel in verse 18 – he dives straight in –

“Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.”

The events that follow reveal a passive Mary – we have no idea what she is feeling in the midst of the action.

- *How does Mary's passivity show her vulnerability?*
- *Why is this important for us to know?*

Then we learn that Mary is a very young woman – barely beyond childhood herself.

- She faces an arranged marriage.

- Her role was to bring her virginity to a marriage that would build up her family through alliance with another, wealthier family.

Then we hear “She was found to be with child” ... a sentence that undermines the entire arranged marriage plan of her family.

- Mary will be judged. Her family will be judged.

Legally, death was the honorable way to purge the shame. Deuteronomy 22:20-21 designates the punishment for a young, betrothed woman found to be pregnant by someone else to be stoning.

- Mary is vulnerable to disgrace, ostracism, and execution.

Even today, “honor” killings are common in societies where morality defines the family’s standing in society.

Joseph, we learn in verse 19, is a “righteous man.”

- This means that he is aware of and lives by what is right – it could mean that he will do all he can to uphold his family’s honor.

But Joseph responds to Mary’s situation in a very different way -

- He demonstrates that being “right” is to be merciful.
- He chooses to care for the person rather than strictly to impose the law.

This interpretation of righteousness becomes a telling theme as the story of Jesus unfolds.

Joseph’s actions remind us of the actions of Boaz towards Ruth.

The author ***asks*** us to consider:

- *What does the word “righteous” mean to you?*

Note that in Hebrew, it is often paired with “justice,” and describes the requirements for living as covenanted community.

Going back to verse 18 – the narrator says, “Mary was found to be with child” ... “from the Holy Spirit.”

- We hear overtones from Genesis 1 where “The Spirit of God” moved over the waters to produce light and life.

- This theme echoes through biblical stories of miraculous births – all life – including human life – comes from God.

Consider:

- *Do you think Mary knew the source of her pregnancy?*

Verse 20 reaches into the genealogy and invites Joseph to join the line of the salvation story saying “Joseph, son of David.” The angel of the Lord tells Joseph that he should marry Mary without disgrace because the child she carries is from the Holy Spirit of God.

- Mary is spared shaming – and will be honored by bearing the savior – long-awaited by God’s people.
- The child has not been conceived in sin ... but will – in fact, save people from their sins!

The prophecy of Isaiah (7:14) seals the narrative – “Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.”

In his prophecy, Isaiah is assuring King Ahaz of Israel that in a certain time frame (measured by the time it would take for a young marriageable woman – a virgin – to conceive, bear a child, and wean him – that God would, indeed rescue Judah from the pressuring armies to the north.

- The thought is that if this vulnerable young woman would be safe enough to have her child and raise him, she would symbolize the safety of the whole city under God’s protection.
- And the name of the child – Immanuel – or “God-with-us” – was the sign and seal of Isaiah’s prophecy – and it reminded the king that – with God in their midst – God’s city could stand firm.

In Matthew 1 – the prophecy is reinterpreted for a new, even more amazing era ... once again in dangerous days of occupation – this time by Rome – and a young woman is still very vulnerable.

To the NT writer – the parallels to Isaiah 7 are clear.

- And, at the same time, the quote from Isaiah weaves another genealogical thread from the rich tapestry of Israel’s history into the emerging present ...

God's saving acts on behalf of Israel in the past now continue will shine on behalf of all people into the future.

The author invites us to ponder:

- *The name "God-with-us" is given twice to a newborn infant. What picture does this give you of God?*

Matthew 2 gives us the fragility of this little family – Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus.

- They are forced to flee to Egypt – becoming refugees whose experiences are shared around the world.
- They are vulnerable foreigners.

Consider the irony of the family fleeing to Egypt ... the very place where the Israelites fled from!

Then comes news of what happens in Bethlehem – the place of our savior's birth – the place where all should be safe – but isn't – the place where King Herod has baby boys slaughtered. As we read of what in verse 18 - we are reminded of Jeremiah 31:15 – and we stand and mourn with these women – and with all women who have had to watch their children slaughtered by armies of powerful men.

Let's consider:

- *Are there stories in the news currently that might take us into the horror and grief of these mothers?*
- *How might we acknowledge and honor their grief?*

Mary's story continues ...

- In Matthew 12:46-50 - She visits with her other sons,
- ... and again in 13:54-58 – when hometown people are dismayed that this boy they've known since he was young could amount to anything out of the ordinary.

When Jesus asks, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" – a new understanding of what family is to be is ushered in.

- *Family not based on blood relationships?*
 - *What does this say about Jesus' genealogy?*

In light of Mary's early experience of being pregnant before marriage – but taken into Joseph's household as an honored wife – we might suppose that she would understand this expanded sense of family ... and perhaps Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba did, too).

Lesson Seven – Suggestions for Leaders, p. 67

1. **Prepare** - Search the Internet or public library for pictures of Mary from different times and cultures. Prints some for display – or set out books of pictures – or put a PowerPoint or slide show together.

2. **Open** –

Enigmatic Mary – Share the pictures of Mary.

Ask –

- *Which is your favorite picture of Mary – and why?*
- *How do you visualize Mary at the time of Jesus' birth?*
- *What do we know about Mary's life and character from the Gospels and the book of Acts?*
- *How can those details enrich our reading of the birth narrative?*

Use Scope & Sequence (p. 6) and Introduction, p. 9 to assist your study

3. **Explore the Lesson** –

- The Husband of Mary
- As you read Jesus' genealogy – focus on verse 16 ...

Ask –

- *How is Joseph described?*
- *What is the author trying to communicate by avoiding the customary formula?*
- *What is the theological significance of not naming the father of Jesus?*

Read verse 20 ...

Ask –

- *What title does Joseph receive?*
- *How does being called "son of David" restore his honor?*

At Risk of Execution –

Read Deuteronomy 22:20 –

Ask –

- *What risks did Mary face as a result of being “found to be with child” prior to marrying Joseph?*
- *What other social situations are considered to bring shame upon a family?*
- *What countries still practice “honor” killings today?*

The Source of Mary’s Pregnancy

Read Matthew 1:18 – highlighting the phrase “she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.”

Discuss –

- *Do you think Mary knew the source of her pregnancy?*
- *How does reading Matthew 1 alongside Genesis 1 change your interpretation of the birth narrative?*
- *What are the implications of affirming that all light and life are a product of God’s Spirit?*

Mercy Embodies Righteousness –

Read Matthew 1:18-25 – focus on verse 19.

Ask –

- *Based on this verse – how would you define “being righteous?”*
- *Why is it easier to associate righteousness with justice and integrity than with mercy and compassion?*
- *How do Joseph’s actions echo those of Boaz in the Book of Ruth?*

As we consider how Joseph chose to care for the person rather than strictly impose the law in this situation –

Ask –

- *In what sense is Jesus truly Joseph’s son?*
- *Make a list of episodes in Jesus’ life and ministry that make you think of Joseph’s influence on Jesus’ character.*

A Prophecy Reinterpreted –

Read Matthew 1:23 – explain the source and background of this quote from the prophet Isaiah.

Ask –

- *What was the concept of God's presence in the Old Testament?*
 - *How did that concept evolve in the person of Jesus?*
 - *How does the incarnation shape our view of God?*
- *What picture does the name "God-with-us" give you of God?*

The Holy Family as Refugees –

Read Matthew 2:13-15 – using notes from the lesson – highlight the irony of leaving Bethlehem (house of Bread) for Egypt (land of bondage) in order to be safe.

Ask –

- *Where do most churches usually conclude the narrative of the birth of Jesus?*
- *What would happen if we included Matthew 2 in our readings and Christmas pageants?*
- *How would our attitudes towards refugees and immigrants change?*
- *Invite participants to write and put on a pageant that includes the flight to Egypt!*

4. Respond

- Empty Arms and Broken Hearts –
- Read Matthew 2:16-18 alongside Jeremiah 31:15 –

Ask –

- *Can you identify with Rachel and the women of Bethlehem?*
- *Have you or someone close to you suffered the loss of a child?*
 - *How did you express the grief?*
 - *What words and actions brought you comfort?*
- *Are there current stories from the news that light take us into the horror and grief of these mothers?*
 - *How might we acknowledge and honor their grief?*
- *What role can the church play in education and prevention of sexual abuse and assault?*

The Courage to Say "Yes!"

- Both Mary and Joseph had the courage to say "YES!" to God's unusual requests revealed through angels.

- Invite participants to think of “angels” who have made special (risky and costly) requests of them.

Ask –

- *How did you respond?*
- *What counsel did you seek to help discern the appropriate answer?*
- *Where is God calling you – and the church – to say “YES!” today?*
- *Identify a cause and launch a “SAY YES!” campaign!*

5. Closing Prayer – page 66.

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LESSON EIGHT: MARY IN THE FAITH AND TRADITION OF THE CHURCH

“Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you.”

Structure:

1. **Main Idea** – No biblical woman has captured the imagination of the faithful as thoroughly as Mary.

As someone who understands the fears and grief of motherhood, she has been a sympathetic figure to women through the ages.

Mary is also the model disciple for all followers of Jesus – because of her trust in God – God was able she allowed God to work in her despite the risk and – thus, pointed others to faith in Jesus.

2. **Scripture:** Luke 1:26-56; 2:1-52; John 2:5; 19:25-27

3. **Opening Prayer** – page 69.

4. **Introduction** –

While little is said about Mary in biblical accounts – she has both captured the imagination of people – and been used for particular ends – throughout the centuries.

Having heard her story – brief as it might be – it is valuable for us to spend time looking at how Mary has continued to represent the marginalized.

The author *asks* us to consider –

- *What paintings, statues, or other forms of art have you seen that depict Mary?*
- *What was your response to these images?*

5. **Mary’s Continuing Story – context – background – interpretation**

Looking at the wider biblical pictures of Mary –

- Luke and John give her a more prominent role than Matthew does.
- Luke – it is Mary to whom the angel announces the miraculous birth in the first chapter.
- Mary says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word,” – this recitation of events is seen as the first example of the response of an ideal disciple.

- Luke’s Mary is also contemplative – she is perplexed at the words of the angel – and later, she holds the words of the shepherds and of the prophet Simeon in her heart – treasuring and pondering them.
- Acts 1:14 shows Mary as an active part of the early church “All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus as well as his brothers.”
- John begins and ends Jesus’ ministry with scenes that include Mary.
- Beyond these mentions in scripture – nothing else is told of Mary’s background.
- Interest in Jesus’ life and history increased as the church grew – and so did interest in Mary.
- Her life became a source of speculation prompting many works about Mary – one – Protevangelium of James (mid-to-late 2nd c.) – an extensive picture of Mary’s early childhood and growth to adulthood – and names her parents as Anna and Joachim.
- Written / Published prayers / petitions to Mary are plentiful.

Let’s wonder –

- *Why petitions to Mary?*
- *Why is she “uniquely holy” and “uniquely blessed?”*

These questions are explored in this lesson ... along with seeing Mary as the figure of Wisdom – from Proverbs 8:22-31.

Then, the author explores the picture of Mary as Woman Wisdom – asking –

- *How does this image of Mary resonate with you?*
- *Do you find it something you can relate to?*
- *Does it make you uncomfortable – or make you free?*

People of faith have found a need to balance the masculinity of most depictions of God with a feminine side that could understand the struggles of women – struggles not in wars and politics –

- but in the heartbreak of rearing and losing children –
- of trying to make ends meet and feed families –
- and in the day-to-day care of those who were too old, too young, or too sick to care for themselves.

Mary depicted in art:

- The image of the seated mother holding a child on her lap was common in the ancient world –
- So – making this image of Mary simply involved adding halos to the baby’s head and to hers.
- This made the strong, loving, protective mother figure easy to identify as the feminine intermediary who understood the struggles of women.
- As the Church gained in power and stature – the Councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, and Ephesus were called to establish systems of doctrine.
- Church leaders were not humble members of society – but were rulers of prestige and strength.
- This is when images of Mary began to change into an imperial model in which Mary dressed in expensive robes and was crowned like an empress.

The author *asks* us to consider:

- *How is this change in how Mary was portrayed a betrayal of the simple village girl – the pregnant teenager?*
- *Or does this change help elevate the place of women?*

Perceptions of Mary continued to adjust and change as social models shifted – and these are explored in depth in this lesson.

By the time of Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s “The Women’s Bible” in 1895, she noted that people of the Catholic faith had one strong female figure as a role model for women – while Protestant women had none!

And, in modern times, there has been a strong reaction against the idea of Mary as the role model for all women and the convention that motherhood – and only motherhood – is the proper role for a woman.

Let's consider, then ...

- *Strong protective mother; powerful woman ruler; Our Lady; Queen of Heaven; grieving mother – which of these images of Mary resonate the most with you?*

In 2004, a joint statement on Mary was issued by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) - Called “Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ,” – this statement affirmed that Mary was not meant to be a role model for women only – but a role model for all Christians.

Again, in Luke’s gospel, she declares “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

The statement stressed the importance that Mary is, in effect, the first disciple.

Mary is seen in so many different ways:

- As a woman of danger to King Herod in Matthew’s gospel,
- As a woman of faith and justice – a witness of sorrow in Luke’s gospel,
- As a woman of surrender and faithfulness in John’s gospel.

Through the ages all these images have influenced how everyday people have experienced Mary –

Ordinary people identify with her ordinariness – and have found hope in her extraordinariness.

Mary is more than the end of the line of mothers in Matthew's genealogy – she is the woman who brings to life the strengths of each woman in her own story.

The author asks us to ponder these questions –

- *Could it be that Mary summarizes that line of women and stands with each one of them?*
 - *With Tamar – who was under threat because of her pregnancy – but nurtured the life within her for the good of her people;*
 - *With Rahab – who was brave in the midst of danger and protected her family;*
 - *With Ruth – who was faithful and created a new family in a place that was not her own;*

- *With Bathsheba – who was acted upon but still grew into a strong influencer of leaders.*

6. Closing Prayer – page 74.

Lesson Eight: Suggestions for Leaders, p. 75

1. Prepare –

- Find an audio recording of the Magnificat for possible use as part of the exploration of Luke 1:26-56.
- Bring images of Mary from Lesson Seven and add others that depict Mary across centuries and cultures – e.g.,
 - as a protective mother,
 - imperial ruler,
 - humble lady,
 - queen of heaven,
 - grieving mother,
 - ordinary human,
 - and/or indigenous woman.

2. Open –

- Ideal Woman and Model Disciple – Invite participants to name Jesus’ disciples in the Gospels. Make a list as people are mentioned.
 - Look at the list together and **ask** –
 - *Which women made the list?*
 - *Which ones are missing?*
 - *What criteria was used?*

3. Explore the Lesson –

A Song of Liberation

- Read Luke 1:46-56 – if you have a sung version – play it either the reading – or allow the sung version to be the reading itself;
- Share that Mary’s song echoes Miriam’s song in Exodus 15:21 and Hannah’s song in 1 Samuel 2.
- The name “Magnificat” comes from the opening word of the Latin Vulgate text “Magnificat anima mea Dominum” – “My soul doth magnify the Lord.”

Ask –

- *What is your reaction to the lyrics?*
- *Do you find these words comforting or threatening?*

- *How do the words of the Magnificat alter your view of the divine and God's actions in the world?*
- *What are some reasons that women like Mary – young, poor, at risk – continue to find inspiration and hope in this song?*

Members of God's Household

- Read John 2:5 and 19:25-27 – notice Mary's place at the beginning and the end of the Gospel of John. Mary's presence is like bookends of Jesus' ministry.

Ask –

- *What does Mary's validation of Jesus at the wedding at Cana tell us about her?*
- *Who was there at the beginning of your ministry and life of faith?*
- *Who validated your gifts and call?*
- *What does Mary's presence near the cross along with other women tell us about her commitment?*
- *Who stood by you in your darkest hour?*
- *What can we learn from Mary's willingness to let go of Jesus and embrace a new family?*
- *What sacrifices has God called you to make?*

Struggles of Women

- When you discuss the pictures you have of Mary – ask – which images more closely identify with your own journey of life and faith?

4. Respond

The First Disciple –

Read aloud Luke 1:38 – “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Ask –

- *How is Mary displayed in our church ... as the mother of Jesus – or as a disciple?*

Discuss the possibility of prominently displaying images of Mary as a disciple in the sanctuary and other gathering spaces. Consider buying art prints or commission paintings that reflect Mary as a disciple.

The author offers us a definition of discipleship as – “The state of learning to live within earshot of God speaking.”

Ask –

- *How does God speak to us today?*
- *What do you think about this definition of disciple?*

5. Closing Prayer – page 74.

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**LESSON NINE: WHAT ARE THESE WOMEN DOING IN A PLACE LIKE THIS? -
“An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah,
the son of David, the son of Abraham.”**

Structure:

1. **Main Idea** – The final lesson summarizes what the grandmothers of our faith have taught us ... and imagines what they may have taught Jesus. Through the stories of outsiders and marginalized people we see the kingdom of God in which the last are made first.

2. **Scripture:** Matthew 1

3. **Opening Prayer** – page 77.

4. **Introduction** –

At this juncture in “What My Grandmothers Taught Me” – we’ve read the stories and we’ve thought about the importance of family trees.

- In this last lesson – we will have a go at bringing it all together ... And exploring what these women are doing together in this unusual place.
- We’ll look at what scholars have theorized ... that is ...
 - They are present in Matthew’s genealogy because ...
 - They all are sinners, and they foreshadow the coming of the one who will take away all sin;
 - They are all Gentiles and make a bookend with the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:19 – “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ...”
 - They all have stories of marital and sexual irregularity and ... therefore, prepare the first century Jewish reader (and us) for the shock of Mary’s pregnancy before marriage to Joseph.;
 - They are all women who made history happen by acting to secure their own survival.

The author asks us to –

Spend some time thinking about each of these women ... and ***ponder:***

- *What has touched you over the time of your study?*
- *What about her story has spoken to your own experiences?*
- *Consider writing a “thank you” note to one or more of these women for how they’ve inspired or accompanied you.*

5. Jesus' Grandmothers and Matthew's Gospel –

- Biblical scholar Raymond Brown notes – “Matthew uses the genealogy to stress Jesus' insertion into a history and a people.”
 - In other words – Jesus' comes from a family – and doesn't just appear out of nowhere.
- The list of people in the genealogy is like the passing of a baton in a relay – the story and the promise are handed on through the generations and never lost despite broken people who fumble and drop the baton or trip over their own feet from time to time.
- These five women belong in this long sweep of story.
- The mention of them in the genealogy points backward – and also forward.

Together you've delved a little more deeply into the narratives of the Gentile – the foreigners to the Israelite people ... and then consider the prophet Isaiah's teaching: “... the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be the Lord's servants ... these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer.” (Isaiah 56:6-7)

Consider –

- *What did the inclusion of foreigners ... and later Gentiles ... mean to the early Christians – who were first Jewish Christians only?*
- *Who are those who've been left out in the 21st century?*
- *Have you been excluded?*
- *Have you excluded others?*

Through these Gentile women named in Matthew's gospel we've seen their standing in contrast to less faithful Israelites.

Looking forward, the voices of these grandmothers' echo through Matthew's Gospel – Gentiles and others who stand in the margins are exemplars of faith – while the people in authority – both religious and secular – constantly miss the point of Jesus and criticize his ministry.

Consider the faithful Gentile – the Roman centurion – who in Matthew 8 calls Jesus “Lord,” expresses his own unworthiness before Jesus and states his complete trust that Jesus need only “speak the word and he will be healed.”

- The centurion’s words so resonated with disciples down through the centuries that they entered traditional liturgy as a part of the preparation for receiving the Eucharist “Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof; but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.”

Consider ...

- *Imagine standing alongside the centurion and speaking these words with him.*
- *What feeling come to you as you imagine yourself in this scene?*

Jesus’ response to the centurion is a stunning statement in a Gospel noted for its attention to Jewish roots:

“Truly I tell you, in on one in Israel have I found such faith!” (Matthew 8:10-12).

Matthew recounts Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28 – and we hear echoes of Jesus’ grandmothers in this narrative – as she, too, is an outsider ... and like them – she appears to have nothing but her wit and her belief to bring her strength ... and like them, wit and belief are all she needs ... for her faith is affirmed by Jesus himself.

Consider –

- ***The Canaanite woman’s story –***
 - *Is Jesus testing her?*
 - *Joking with her?*
- *Is Jesus in need of some education – and a good slap on the wrist from his grandmothers – via the Canaanite woman?*
- *What do you think?*

Throughout Matthew’s Gospel – Jesus meets with others who are marginalized –

- tax collectors, sinners,
- women,
- children,
- and the sick.

His primary ministry is to those who come to him and express their need.

- They leave his presence after receiving healing, forgiveness, cleansing, and acceptance.

- The memory of Jesus' grandmothers flows strongly through these encounters and upends any idea of privilege or favoritism that the insiders might feel.

The women of the genealogy set up a positive lens through which we read the Gentiles and other women in the rest of the Gospel -

- Women are also prominent at the end of Jesus' story –
- They surround him at his crucifixion –
- Receive the first news of his resurrection –
- And bring the good news to Jesus' other disciples.

Matthew's Gospel announces that Jesus' new family –

- those who are committed to following his way of doing God's will – includes people from the margins.

Jesus' family does not have a hierarchy – or assign privileged places due to race or gender.

- Women are equal in discipleship to men.

By including the stories of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary in the very first verses of his Gospel, Matthew alerts us to the startling newness of the Realm of God – that pulls the rug out from under the feet of those comfortable and settle with how things are –

- a realm that laughs gently at those with pretensions of insider status –
- a realm that requires us constantly to question our areas of exclusion and our points of prejudices.
- We are given an invitation to stand with these women and with all who witness to Christ's resurrection
- We are called to continue telling the Good News so that all – without exception – may be overwhelmed with joy!

The author then invites us to ponder ...

- *Who are your "grandmothers" in faith?*
- *How have their stories inspired and strengthened you?*

- *How did they overturn expectations and shake up the way things are?*
6. **Closing Prayer** – page 82 – including bringing forward the names of your grandmothers in faith – biblical women – women in your family tree – Sunday school teachers – your preachers – women who faithfully encouraged you to live with grace and love. You might want to light a candle in memory of – and gratitude for – these women.

Lesson Nine: Suggestions for Leaders, p. 83

1. Prepare –

- Create a “Gallery of Strong Women” – by gathering pictures and biographical notes for contemporary women – who – like those in Matthew’s genealogy – have become icons despite their humble beginnings.
- See suggestions on p. 83 and also find others whose narratives resonate with you.
- Preview and arrange to show the TED Talk “The Danger of a single story,” (18:33) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie at https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=3n.

2. Open –

Strong Women Making History –

- Introduce the “Gallery of Strong Women” you’ve assembled ... name their qualities you admire – and discuss.
- Reach Matthew 1:1-17 – highlight one more time the names of women in Jesus’ genealogy.
- Invite participants to name the qualities they admire in these women.
- Discuss the scholars’ theories about why these women are included.
- Discuss the questions from the lesson.

3. Explore the Lesson –

- Passing the Baton –

- As you discuss what biblical scholar Raymond Brown says about Matthew's genealogy of Jesus –

Ask –

- *What is the significance of Jesus being called “a son of Abraham” and a “son of David?”*
- *Why is this “passing of the baton” important for Matthew's community?*
- *What difference does it make that Jesus is the fulfillment of a promise?*
- *What does that tell us about God?*
- *How does this impact our own faith?*

A Jealous God or and Inclusive God?

Read Exodus 34:10-16 –

Ask –

- *How does this passage echo Exodus 20?*
- *What conditions are stipulated by God for the renewal of the covenant?*
- *What is the main reason for the commandment against marrying foreign women?*
- *Where do we draw the line between faithfulness and hospitality?*

Read Deuteronomy 7:2-6 –

Ask –

- *What do you find agreeable or problematic about these commandments?*
- *How would you justify obedience to a God who calls for the destruction of others and the denial of mercy?*
- *How does this kind of language (and thinking) continue to influence laws, society, and especially, hate groups?*

Read Nehemiah 13:23-27 –

Ask –

- *What is your reaction to foreign women being blamed for King Solomon's sin?*
 - *How does this foreshadow the tendency in our own day to shift blame from the perpetrator to the victim?*

Read Ezra 9 –

Ask –

- *In verse 12b, financial interests are introduced as part of the reason to keep foreigners at bay?*
 - *How is this also a part of today's anti-immigrant rhetoric?*

Read Isaiah 56:6-7

Ask –

- *What guidance is given here for the treatment of foreigners?*
 - *How does this illustrate the danger of reading the scriptures out of context?*

Embracing the New

- Summarize the first part of Acts 10 ... then ...
 - Read Acts 10:34-38, 44-46 ... then ...

Ask –

- *Upon whom did the Holy Spirit fall?*
- *Why was this astounding for the Jewish believers?*

Discuss these questions from the lesson ...

- *Who are some who have been left out of the Church?*
- *Have you been excluded?*
- *Have you excluded others?*

The Faithfulness of Foreigners

- Divide the group into two ...
- Ask Group 1 to read Matthew 8:5-13 – the healing of the centurion's servant)
- Ask Group 2 to read Matthew 15:21-28 – (the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter).

Ask –

- *How do these foreigners demonstrate their faith and devotion?*
- *What is the significance of Jesus praising their faith?*

- *How should Jesus' ministry with the marginalized inform our own ministries?*

Discuss the remaining questions in the lesson ...

4. Respond

- Multiple Narrative –
- Watch the TED Talk “The danger of a single story,” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie at https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en.

Ask –

- *What does this TED Talk teach us about the importance of viewing our faith grandmothers in context and from more than one perspective?*
- *Discuss this quote by Adichie: “Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person – but to make it the definite story of that person.”*

5. Close –

- Thank everyone for being a part of this study.
- Conclude with the Closing Prayer – page 82.

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Primary Bibliography:

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 García, Magdalena I. “Suggestions for Leaders,” in *Ibid*.

Annotated Bibliography:

Blair, Merryl, “What My Grandmothers Taught Me: Learning from the Women in Matthew’s Genealogy of Jesus,” p. 84.

Additional Resources:

Jewish Women's Archive; <https://jwa.org>; accessed 082621.