A new lectionary that centers women

“If the gospel isn’t good news to the women in the passage, is it still good news?”

Grace Ji-Sun Kim interviews Wil Gafney in the February 23, 2022 issue

Womanist biblical scholar Wil Gafney (Calvin Brown Photography)

Wil Gafney is a womanist biblical scholar and Episcopal priest who teaches at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas. Her books include Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel *(Fortress) and* Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne *(Westminster John Knox). Her current project is to create a new lectionary based on stories of women in the Bible. The first two volumes, Year A (of a three-year cycle similar to the Revised Common Lectionary) and Year W (a one-year composite option), have just been published by Church Publishing.*

Listen to the full-length version of this interview on the Madang podcast.

How did you begin working on this lectionary project?

It began with a frustration about my own preaching that I aired on Facebook and Twitter. In October 2017, I wrote: “Clearly I’m going way off lectionary for this next sermon. I’m tired of seeing the same old thin slices of text again and again.” And then later that day, I asked, “What would it look like if women built a lectionary focusing on women’s stories?” And several of my friends and followers said, “You do it.”

I’ve never felt limited to the lectionary, but as an Episcopal priest I’m in a lot of lectionary-based settings. Congregations that use shared texts generally pull from four lessons each week: a First Testament lesson, a psalm or canticle, an epistle, and then the Gospel. I wondered what it would look like to have lessons that told the stories of the scriptures through women.

I started thinking about what stories would go together. I would ask my writing-oriented Facebook group, “What Gospel goes with this?” Or, “What do you think of these pairings?” During a sabbatical, I visited with religious readers, clergy, laypeople, and seminarians in a variety of denominations—including some international contexts—along with an LGBTQIA focus group. I started thinking about how a focus on women, which is a binary choice, might be done inclusively in order not to cut out nonbinary folk.

I began trying to drive the lectionary from the Hebrew Bible because that’s my expertise. But I found that I had to start with the seasons of the year. First, Advent. Advent is about preparing for the return of Christ, in part by remembering his advent, the first time he came. So what stories are going to tie into that theme? I’d then pull those out of the Hebrew Bible, find a psalm that may partner with that imaginatively, and then find a Gospel reading.

Can you share an example of what it looks like when we center women in scripture?

We can use Advent as an example. I decided to use the four Annunciation stories. Hagar is the first. I paused at that line from Philippians about how Jesus took on human form, even the form of a slave (2:7). Most people go past that to the next part, but I paused there and thought, *This is a new way of thinking about the incarnation*. Jesus, it says, did not just take on human flesh with all of our limitations and frailties, all of our bumps and bruises, but he took on the form of a slave.

What did it mean for Jesus to be a slave in his world? What is it that our cultural heritage tells us about enslavement? I used the story of Hagar being impregnated by Abraham, which is not to be understood as a consensual impregnation. She was held in enslavement. She didn't have the right to consent. That theology of Philippians is saying that Jesus chose the kind of human body that anybody could do anything to—sell, abuse, batter, sexually violate. Jesus did not come as the king of Israel (even though such titles would later be given to him). So using Hagar's enslavement as a visual for the profound abasement that Jesus self-inflicted in becoming incarnate is another way to tell the incarnation story for Advent.

In other places, I found myself asking, *How might the characters in the first lesson have prayed about whatever is going on?* I began using the Psalms to give them voice. One of my favorite pairings is after the story of Tamar's rape by her brother Amnon. I added Psalm 27, which I imagine Tamar praying because there's a line that says, "If my mother and father forsake me, God will take me up." In the story, after the attack becomes public, David doesn't say anything, because Amnon is his firstborn and David loves him.

Tamar is in this situation where her father is saying nothing about her rape because he loves her brother who violated her. I imagine her praying this psalm that says things like, "When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh." What an interesting prayer to pray after a sexual violation! The psalm includes longing to live in God's temple, a place of safety and refuge. That psalm sounds completely different to me now that I've imagined Tamar praying it after her violation.

I'm struck by your use of expansive feminine language and the way you talk about how the word spirit is feminine in Hebrew. Can you say more about spirit language and your translation?

I'm never satisfied with published translations, so I did a gender-expansive translation of my own. I took those expressions like "Canaanites" and expanded them to "the women, men, and children of Israel and Canaan." I took the genealogical information and replaced "the son of Jacob" with "of Rebekah's lineage."

I used a whole variety of language for God, most of it neutral imagery like the Fire of Sinai or the Ark of Safety. If I used gendered language, it was feminine. In the Psalms, for example, whenever there is a pronoun, I invert the gender so God is

explicitly feminine, so people would have that experience of praying out loud and hearing feminine God language.

I've found that when people use neutral language or inclusive language, they're not shifting their paradigms. Somebody who thinks God is an old White man with a beard is going to hear "Father" in their head whether you say Creator or Redeemer or Sovereign or Provider. But when you say "Mother," they have to readjust.

Biblical languages are gendered. Hebrew is a binary language with only feminine and masculine grammatical categories. Some of the language that is used for God is grammatically feminine. But most is masculine, and people know those terms: Father, Lord, and so on. At the beginning of Genesis 1:1, *bereshit bara* ("when beginning God created") has a masculine singular verb with a masculine singular noun as its subject. It says "he created, God."

But in the next verse, *w'rûªch élohiym m'rachefet al-P'nëy haMäyim*, the spirit of God is feminine: "she was fluttering [or hovering] over the face of the waters." So Genesis uses both genders with God. This makes sense in terms of the narrative they're crafting, because when God says, "Let us make humanity in our image," the humanity that is created is in each of those binary genders that God has inhabited.

Now, in English, and for some other languages as well, when the Spirit comes up and takes a verb, translators—in what I call a conspiracy—only repeat the noun. Instead of saying "the Spirit, she came upon Saul," they just say "the Spirit came upon Saul." They always translate "the Spirit does," "the Spirit moves," or "the Spirit is," rather than "she did," "she moves," or "she is," so the reader never sees the feminine pronoun. These translators don't use the wrong pronoun and make it masculine. They just trust that people have been conditioned to read masculine into God.

Adding gender to God is the work of the White missionary imagination (or lack of imagination). In a variety of languages in which God is not gendered, it was important for translators to impose a gender, either by adding a term or by choosing a different term for God in order to saddle a particular masculine construct. Worshiping the right God the right way meant worshiping with this gender baggage. This allowed the missionaries to impose gender hierarchy in the church and in the home.

When you're doing the translations, you avoid certain words, like *kingdom*. Can you expand on that?

When we talk about who God is, what God is, and where God is, all of our human language is limited. We already know we are starting from inadequacy to describe the Divine. A kingdom is a political and economic system, and it's a system of governance. That's not what God is. When God welcomes us to the space and place in time for which the Greeks used the word that is translated as kingdom, God is really not inviting us into a feudal governance system. God is inviting us into their reality, into their community and communion, into their presence, into their love to share in their reflected glory. So I use language that reflects that.

Sometimes I use *majesty*. We will be inheritors of God's majesty, because it's really about the splendor and the glory, not about kingdoms fighting tooth and nail for a footprint. Sometimes I use *reign* and *realm*. Sometimes I use *dominion*, but I'm not using masculine language for God and I'm not reifying kingdom language or empire language. I don't use *the Lord* because that's not God's name.

I also don't use *servant*. We know that neither Greek nor Hebrew has discrete words that distinguish between enslavement and servitude. We also know that people didn't own their bodies, didn't own their reproductive cycles, and if they had children and were freed, they could not take their children with them. That's not servitude. That's enslavement. It makes some of the passages hard to read, but we need to be more familiar with how pervasive and how normative slavery was, even on the lips of Jesus. I don't whitewash the scriptures.

Do you think readers will be surprised by this?

In the introduction, I talk about the translation in broad strokes so readers will know what they will experience and why. I started that in *Womanist Midrash*. There is a translator's appendix, where I explain why and how I translate and how gender is implicated in the Hebrew language and in English. This differentiates me from other translators. And it's what all theologians of liberation know: that we identify our context.

We don't say, "This is what the text means." We say, "I am doing this work as a womanist, who is committed to Black Lives Matter. And I am translating this in this way for this reason." I don't claim that my way is the only way to translate the text or the only right way. But because the project aims to make women more visible and

to use a variety of language for God and humanity, I'm using this approach.

We've had 2,000 years of European, heterosexual, male theologians and biblical scholars giving us all this masculine language, including in the church's lectionaries. How do we go about fixing this problem in our seminary classrooms and faith communities?

If you talk to people about this linguistic phenomenon, they'll often say, "Yes, this language occurs, but God is male." And then you ask, "Why is God male?" They'll often say it's because of all of the Bible's masculine language. Well, if that's the case, then shouldn't you say that God is this percentage masculine and this percentage feminine, based on the ratio of male and female language?

Or they'll say, "God is male because God is the father of Jesus." Biologically, though, Jesus was not conceived like any other person. No one would make the argument that God formed a penis or deposited sperm. His conception was miraculous because it didn't follow the rules of human reproduction.

Culturally, it makes sense for God to be Jesus' father, given how androcentric and patriarchal the context in which he was born was. But is that determinative? Does God even have a gender? Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg says the pronoun for God is *God*. This language question arises in a structure in which the masculinity of God has been affirmed and defended and decided as immutable, connected to things like male hegemony and headship.

Simply pointing this out is not going to unravel the whole thing, but it frays the edges. Part of what I want to accomplish is for people to know that even though the Bible is androcentric—parts of it are patriarchal, parts of it are paternalistic, and parts of it are misogynist—it's possible to frame preaching texts around passages that include women and tell some new stories, while reckoning with how women are treated. If the gospel isn't good news to the women in the passage, is it still good news? If it's not good news to those who are enslaved in the passage, is it still good news?

It's not good news to the Canaanites, who have a foreign people come in and say, "This is our land because our God said so." How do we read that in solidarity with Native Americans or the native Africans of South Africa? This project is going to push at those questions, as does all good theology. I think we begin to change by how we hear scripture, how we read scripture, how we teach scripture, and how we preach

scripture. This is a biblical literacy project, a project of getting people to know more of what’s in their Bible and ask questions about what they think they know.