

Women posing problems

In the gospels and in the world today, women get in the way and make the world new.

by [Melissa Florer-Bixler](#) in the [September 2024](#) issue

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Century illustration (Source images via Getty)

This is a strange and dangerous time to be a woman, but it has always been a strange and dangerous time to be a woman. Building on decades of political maneuvering, in the past two years legislative bodies across the United States punished women with draconian restrictions on access to reproductive health care. The US maternal death rate is shocking, in some states triple that of countries with

comparable incomes—with Black people three times as likely as White people to die in childbirth. To date, one in three women in the United States report physical assault, rape, or stalking from an intimate partner, while murder is the third leading cause of death among Indigenous women. For trans women, especially Black trans women, deadly violence is epidemic.

Women's bodies are back on trial in conservative churches that previously offered reprieve to women in leadership positions. Earlier this summer, Southern Baptists attempted to ban from the denomination any churches that call women to be their pastors. They narrowly missed the supermajority required to enact the change. This year more than 300 clergy and a Texas diocese of the Anglican Church in North America called for the elimination of women's ordination after a visiting UK conference speaker named Calvin Robinson described women's priesthood as a "cancer."

It is a painful time to be a woman pastor. Misogyny, in and beyond the church, is unsettled business. Misogyny gathers and swells before it crashes upon us. Even when we sense calm, we know that beneath the surface energy builds to punish women in familiar but fresh ways.

It is easy to become exhausted, to wonder aloud to one another, "Haven't we been through this already?" But within that exhaustion I remind myself that each crashing wave is a time when women's existence effectively names a problem in our world. This world is not as it ought to be. Feminist theorist Sara Ahmed says it this way: "When you expose a problem you pose a problem." It is a burden and a gift to pose a problem.

In recent years our congregation has supported the decades-long effort of the Apache Stronghold to protect Oak Flat (Chi'chil Biłdagoteel), their sacred land, from mining and extraction by Resolution Copper. The site, near Phoenix, is where Apache ceremonies must take place, including the Apache women's coming-of-age Sunrise Ceremonies. When he describes Oak Flat, Wendsler Nosie Sr., an Apache Stronghold leader, says, "We are sitting on a female mountain."

In 2022, the Ninth Circuit Court refused to protect the Apaches' sacred site. The one dissenting judge on the panel, Marsha Berzon, wrote that the majority's ruling led to an absurd conclusion: that "blocking Apaches' access to and eventually destroying a sacred site where they have performed religious ceremonies for centuries does not

substantially burden their religious exercise.” As I listened to the legal argument, I realized that the court could not imagine, did not have the framework for a religious identity in which the land was a co-participant.

The Apache women pose a problem. They call into question the US treatment of land as reducible to extractable resources independent from the lives of other creatures, including human creatures. “Destroying Oak Flat would be an act of violence against Native women,” writes Zinaida Carroll of the National Indigenous Women’s Resource Center. “It would strip young women of their Sunrise Ceremony, the sacred ritual which connects them to the land and helps build their identity as Apache women.”

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In these years of political support and accompaniment of Apache Stronghold, I have paid attention to the ways my own body can pose a problem. For women, particularly White women, this isn’t guaranteed. We must learn. We make our compromises with misogyny because, as Ahmed reminds us, “being unwilling to participate can be dangerous.” At times, when the danger is especially near, we may want to avoid giving name to the problem—“this is sexism,” “that is racism”—because in drawing attention to the problem we are drawing attention to ourselves.

But the ground is fertile to pose problems as women clergy, and the resistance we see gathering in various quarters of the church reminds us of the possibility and hope that our disruption disturbs the structure and the business of church. Women in ministry are a bellwether for anti-racism, the inclusion of LGBTQ people in the full life of the church, the protection of trans people. At our best, we invite others to consider that the world is not as it should be. Our bodies, not in their assigned places, call the question.

We are in good company. In the gospels, women perform the first priestly acts of the church. At Jesus’ birth, Mary is the first to offer his body to the world. At his tomb, a group of women are the first to preach the gospel. Women enact the beginning and the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry, and at both points women take up the priestly task at great personal risk. At both beginning and end, the first priests of the church are not believed.

Joseph does not believe—he plans instead to dismiss Mary quietly so as not to cause a scene for either of them. The male disciples do not believe—the story told by the women must be nonsense. The women's bodies get in the way of orienting the world, of making sense of reality. They pose the problem of a new order, one in which men receive rather than proclaim, give out, make known.

I remember these women, the problems they posed and how their getting in the way made the world new. I also remember women like Naelyn Pike and her ancestors, generations of Apache women who have refused the reality of the broken treatise and broken promises by the federal government, who have caused a problem for mining companies on Oak Flat, who go up the mountain as girls and return as women, who will bring their own daughters up the mountain.

To pose a problem is a burden. It is also a gift.