

The Women Who Form Us

An Advent reflection for St. Margaret of Scotland Parish

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Genealogies are historical documents, researched and written lists of families who pass traditions and genes on from one generation to the next. In Scripture, these types of genealogies often trace the family of the Hebrew people from the creation of the world down through God's chosen people to the birth of Christ. But few of them contain women. What if we reflect on the women who were a part of all of that history?

I have been thinking a lot about the women who have walked before me and alongside me in my journey of "becoming me." In Advent, I turn that curiosity and attention to the women whose stories are told to us in our faith. Here I offer the stories of nine women who receive special treatment in Scripture, women whose lives were before the birth of Christ and whose stories would have shaped Mary and, through her, Christ himself. This list is certainly not exhaustive, and becomes longer quickly if we extend the list past the birth of Christ, exploring stories of women he encountered or who made their mark in the life of the Church. Can you imagine?

These nine stories can make for a beautiful novena of sorts if you choose to read one story each day. How have these women formed you? Who else would you add? Wherever you are in your Advent journey, I hope the lives of these women find you and help prepare your heart to joyfully bring Christ to others this Christmas.

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Eve

Mother of all

Genesis 1:26-31, 2-4

Eve, the first woman, and mother of all life. She is the only one among us who has actually experienced the paradise of living in total communion with God. And yet, even in that paradise, she fell prey to the temptation of sin and the desire to understand and control the world around her. It is certainly a feeling we can all relate to, especially at Christmas time (who, me??).

Even Eve, though, came to understand and take responsibility for the discord caused by her cooperation with sin over God. Recognizing that, and working to overcome it throughout the rest of her life, set all of humanity on a path through which God would eventually bring us Christ, the Savior of us all.

Correcting course means recognizing and taking responsibility for our shortcomings and sins. Take action today to clear out the cobwebs of your heart and make it a room ready for Christ to come. What do you need to do?

Tamar

A story of hope?

Genesis 38

Tamar was a Canaanite woman who married into a Hebrew family. Her father-in-law, Judah, was one of the sons of Isaac and Leah. Tamar first married Judah's son Er, and, upon his death, Judah's son Onan. After Onan's death, Judah tried to shirk his responsibility to Tamar by sending her away as a widow. In desperation, Tamar devised a plan to reclaim the inheritance and security that were rightfully hers according to Jewish law and custom. She disguised herself as a prostitute and slept with Judah, conceiving twins.

Can we call this a story of hope? Some have called it a story of desperation born of *shattered* hope. But, like most of God's stories, the story doesn't end here. Judah was won over by Tamar's commitment to maintaining the family lineage, admitted his sins, and remarked that Tamar "is more righteous than I" (Genesis 38:26). Tamar's eldest twin, Perez, would become an ancestor of Jesus, and Tamar is one of only five women named in the genealogy of Jesus at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel. Nothing about our faith says that the ends justify any means, but Tamar's story reminds us that God stands with us throughout all the circumstances of our lives. No matter our story, God can use us to bring Christ, our Savior and our hope, to our world.

How is God using your story to bring Christ into our world?

Rahab

The ultimate outcast

Joshua 2, 6:22-25

Rahab was a Canaanite, a woman, and a prostitute who lived in the city of Jericho at the time of Joshua. The Canaanites knew Joshua was coming and that God had promised Jericho to the Israelites. Even though Rahab was not Jewish, when she heard the story, she came to believe in God as the one true God, and so she protected Joshua's spies from the King of Jericho when they came to scout out the city, risking her life. Throughout her story, Rahab shows us her faith in God through words - "the Lord, your God, is God in heaven above and on earth below" (Joshua 2:11) - and deeds (she hides Joshua's men, and hangs a red flag out of her window as a sign of her faith). When Joshua conquers Jericho, the lives of Rahab and her family are spared.

A shrewd reader might wonder if, given that the advancing of Joshua's army was well known to all the Canaanite people, and the fact that Rahab didn't have a lot of social capital to lose, perhaps Rahab was willing to profess any faith necessary in an attempt to save her life and the lives of her family members. Maybe. Only God knows her heart. But Rahab went on to join the Israelite family, marrying into the royal tribe of Judah. Her son was Boaz, and the two of them became ancestors of Christ, named in Matthew's genealogy. It's hard to say where Rahab's heart started on this faith journey, but the inspiration of the Holy Spirit records in Scripture that Rahab was a woman of faith.

Maybe there is something to the social adage "Fake it till you make it." Our acts can guide our sometimes more reluctant hearts: happiness begets happiness, and acts of faith, faith. What acts of hopeful waiting will you do today?

Ruth

A story of joy, and joyful women

Ruth 1-4

Following a famine, Naomi and her family moved from Bethlehem to the land of Moab. There, her two sons married Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. But both of Naomi's sons died, as well as her husband, leaving the three women widowed. Naomi decided to return to the land of her heritage, Bethlehem, and released both of her daughters-in-law from their marital obligations. Orpah returned to her family, but Ruth insisted on remaining with Naomi, saying, "Wherever you go I will go...Your people shall be my people and your God, my God" (Ruth 1:16). Back in Bethlehem, Ruth's commitment to Naomi led her to seek work. God's grace landed her in the field of Boaz, a rich and kind man who was a relative of Naomi's. Eventually, Ruth and Boaz

married. Their son, Obed, was the father of Jesse, who in turn was the father of King David, an ancestor of Jesus.

The story of Ruth is a story marked by kindness: the kindness of Ruth to Naomi, of Boaz to Ruth, and of God to all of them. Through continually renewed commitment to one another, God helped Ruth and Naomi care for one another and eventually become part of a secure and loving family - the family which brought us our Savior - the joy of the world! Even the women of Bethlehem remarked, “Your daughter-in-law loves you, and has done more for you than seven sons” (Ruth 4:15). Our sisters in faith are true gifts in our lives and help us grow into the women who will bring Christ to others.

Today is not a day to do. Spend time in prayer remembering and soaking in gratitude for the women who bring joy and kindness to your life. Speak their names.

Hannah

A story of promises fulfilled

1 Samuel 1:1 - 2:11, 2:19-21

A woman of the Old Testament, Hannah was childless until later in life. She prayed earnestly for a child, and eventually gave birth to a son, Samuel. As she had promised, she dedicated Samuel to God, and he grew up in the Temple, learning how to serve God under the priest Eli. God looked with favor upon her willingness to dedicate Samuel to Him and gave her three more sons and two daughters.

Although Hannah is not a direct ancestor of Mary or Jesus, we see her influence on the women in Luke’s nativity story - namely, Mary and Elizabeth. All three women gave birth as a direct result of God’s intervention to a son who would play an integral part in God’s plan for our salvation. And the song of praise that Hannah sings foreshadows Mary’s own Magnificat and runs parallel to it in so many ways. In fact, it seems reasonable that since Mary, a young Jewish woman, would have often heard Hannah’s story and her song - shaping her heart and mind until the day when she sang her own song of praise:

Hannah: “My heart exults in the Lord . . . I rejoice in your salvation.”

Mary: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.”

Hannah: “There is none holy like the Lord.”

Mary: “Holy is his name.”

Hannah: “The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength.”

Mary: “He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.”

Hannah: “Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger.”

Mary: “He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.”

*What is a mannerism, habit, practice, or way of praying that was formed in you by a woman?
How does that practice bless your life?*

Bathsheba

A story of grace

2 Samuel 11, 12:15-25; 1 Kings 1:11-31

There is nothing uplifting about the story of Bathsheba. She is almost certainly a victim of sexual assault and rape at the hands of King David. After realizing that he had gotten Bathsheba pregnant, King David attempted to cover up his wrongdoing by having her husband killed and marrying her. Scripture is not kind to David about this: it is clear about God’s displeasure with David’s actions and places all of the blame for these incidents with him, not Bathsheba. God even sends the prophet Nathan to David to lecture David over his sins, and the child conceived in David’s extramarital affair with Bathsheba dies. We are told this is God’s way of punishing David.

Nonetheless, Bathsheba and David do have another son, Solomon. At the end of David’s life, Bathsheba is there, reminding David of a former promise, advocating for her son, and securing his position as successor to David. Solomon becomes one of the great kings of Israel and an ancestor of Christ. And Bathsheba appears, too, in the genealogy of Christ found in Matthew’s Gospel, named as the woman “who had been Uriah’s wife” (Matthew 1:6). Her inclusion under this title reminds us that all of us fall to sin. We need the grace of the coming Messiah. It will heal our hearts and redeem our relationships of unequal power to the life of love and freedom that God promises us.

What relationship in your life is in need of God’s restoring grace?

Elizabeth

A story of being the first

Luke 1:5-80

When you look at the Gospels as a whole, Elizabeth really only appears briefly. But Luke, marked as the Gospel writer who shows special concern for women throughout all of his writings, gives ample time and space for her story, interwoven with his narrative of Jesus's birth. He paints her as a fiery woman, unafraid to speak her mind. These characteristics aid in her understanding of God and allow her to see His will before others in several cases.

Notably, Elizabeth was the first to believe the angel's announcement that she would have a child despite her age. Her husband was so obstinate about his disbelief that God made him mute (honestly, what a blessed reward God gave Elizabeth - to have a mute husband throughout her pregnancy, amiright?!). Elizabeth was the first to announce her son's name: John. Elizabeth was the first to recognize Christ while he was still in Mary's womb, crying out her joy when Mary visited: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Luke 1:42). Elizabeth's story is masterfully laid out as a forerunner to Mary's to foreshadow for us the role that John will play in announcing Jesus's ministry.

We speak of women's intuition, but what I know is that God speaks to us in the quiet recesses of our hearts and whispers His plans to us when we are listening. Elizabeth models for us how to trust that whispering deep in our hearts and proclaim it to the world, showering those around us with joy and confidence in God's love, building up their resolve to seek and trust God.

Who will you build up today? Consider that person's love language - what actions can you take to speak directly to their heart of God's love?

Anna

Prophetess and proto-evangelist

Luke 2:36-38

We meet Anna (whose name, incidentally, is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name Hannah) in Luke's account of Jesus's presentation in the Temple as an infant. Luke calls her a prophetess, making her one of a small group of women specifically given that title in Scripture. Luke doesn't record any of her words when he describes her encounter with the infant Christ, but says afterwards "she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the

redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38). Elizabeth may have been the first to recognize Christ’s divine nature, but Anna is the first evangelist to announce to others the good news of salvation through Jesus.

What is even more striking about Anna’s notable role in the story of the Gospel is her lineage: she is from the Hebrew tribe of Asher - one of the smallest, remotest, and least significant tribes in Israel. Due to its geographical remoteness, the culture of the tribe tended towards the traditions of its gentile neighbors. It had been conquered by the Assyrians and its people dispersed with only a few migrating south to rejoin the remaining tribes of Israel, and Anna was one of these. Luke’s inclusion of her in his Gospel reminds us again that Christ’s message is not just for the royal and priestly families of the tribes of Israel. Christ reveals himself to each one of us - we all have distinct and irreplaceable roles in bringing God’s love to others.

What unique gifts of yours will bring Christ to those around you this Christmas?

Mary

Mother and model

Matthew 1:18-25, 2; Luke 1:26-80, 2; John 19:25-27

We all know the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Her role in Salvation History is unmatched and unquestioned. But although she begins as a prominent figure in the story of Christ’s life, her presence fades into the background as Jesus grows and begins his own ministry. Nonetheless, the gospel writers leave us clues throughout their stories that show how she shaped Christ and offer us opportunities to allow her to shape us into Christ-bearers, as well.

Matthew names Mary as one of five women in his listing of Christ’s lineage. He names her as the wife of Joseph, as it is Joseph’s lineage he has laid out for us. Luke also refers to Christ’s place as a descendant of King David, but he does so by introducing us to Mary, and to referencing Mary’s own place in David’s royal lineage (Luke 1:27). Luke shows her to us as a humble woman of faith whose questioning of Gabriel’s announcement to her (“I am a virgin. How, then, can this be?”) portrays not disbelief (like Zechariah’s, just a few verses prior) but faith seeking understanding. We watch with her through the Magi’s adoration of her child, not really understanding, but remembering everything to wonder about later. Then we see her question her young son Jesus when he got left behind in the Jerusalem Temple - and we can tell by the rest of that interaction that it was not so much a rebuke as a desire to know what is driving Jesus’s actions.

Mary’s presence is next noted at the wedding of Cana, where she plays an instrumental role in pushing Christ into His public ministry (despite his firm objections - what a mom move!). In that

moment, we also see that she was motivated to call Jesus to action out of her concern for others (the embarrassment of the bride and groom), and that she was willing to subvert cultural norms to do it (as if getting pregnant as a virgin wasn't enough, at Cana she had the gall to tell male waiters what to do against the strict wishes of her adult male son!). Mary pops in and out of the Gospels throughout Jesus's ministry - sometimes she is not mentioned by name, sometimes there is a Mary mentioned, but we are unclear if it is her. Nonetheless, we get the sense that she is always nearby, learning from her son, standing by him as his mother. And then, in his final hour, when all of his chosen disciples have gone, she is there - walking with him, standing in agony at the foot of his cross, carrying him to his grave.

But of course, that is not the end of the story. Mary sees her son again as the Risen Christ, and is overjoyed to receive the power of the Holy Spirit with the apostles at Pentecost.

Mary is the ultimate Christ-bearer in our world. By allowing her to mother us, as she mothered Christ, she can help us grow closer to her Son and, in our own ways, help us bring Christ into the lives of others.

What part of your life have you modeled after Mary? How does that help you prepare to welcome Christ with joy this Christmas?

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