

May We Grow Back, Not to What Was, But to What We Can Become

Sunday, May 9, 2021 | The Fifth Sunday After Easter | [John 15:9-17](#) | [John 20:1-18](#)
Knox-Metropolitan United Church | Regina, SK | Treaty 4 Territory | Cameron Fraser

I grew up in and around communities of the United Church of Canada in the 80s and 90s amidst a movement of engaging with inclusive language amongst mainline churches.

It was at this time (1989 to be exact) that the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible was published making particular effort to be more inclusive when speaking of God and the community - *Dear Brethren becomes Dear Sisters and Brothers*.

Incidentally, as one who finds both books and their development, and the Christian Community's relationship with Scripture, compilation, choices of manuscript, translation, editing, the story of how a particular version of the Bible comes to be is to me, a fascinating one.

Just putting that out there for anyone for whom books as created objects might also be of interest.

Of course, gender inclusive language within the Christian tradition does not begin in the 80s.

For example, Julian of Norwich whose saint day was celebrated yesterday and who ministered herself in a time of plague and quarantine was calling Jesus Mother way before hipster emerging church authors, more than 600 years ago.

Of course, both Julian, the desert mothers from whose legacy she emerged, and the inclusive language movement of 40 years ago were in fact lifting up that which always existed within ancient texts and traditions -- existed but was ignored -- existed but where choices had been made to minimize -- existed as potential, because indeed ancient texts are always contextualized and recontextualized and dominant readings become so only with an attempt to mask this process making them seem self-evident.

Casper Ter Kuile and Vanessa Zoltan, founders of the podcast Harry Potter and the Sacred Text

<https://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/>

And please don't let the fact that their most popular project is a book series written initially for children give the impression that they are working simply in the area of niche pop culture

They speak of the truth that part of what makes Sacred Texts Sacred is their ability to generate

To generate new possibilities of reading and from that, new possibilities of being!

Our siblings in the Jewish Tradition honour the Hebrew Bible and also Talmud and Midrash, teachings and interpretations, and stories and commentary

They consciously read Ancient text with a community who reads in time and place with perspectives reading themselves and their moment into the text and reading themselves and their moments out of the text.

For 500 years in North America Black preachers and in particular Womanist readers have done the same.

I specifically say that they are doing so *consciously* out of a contention that all Biblical interpretation is contextual and political (by which I mean issues of power), and that as was mentioned early, dominant readings within Christianity, White, Eurocentric, Patriarchal and Hierarchical, have sought (and frankly succeeded) to become normative and self-evident.

But they are not immune to resistance

At Knox-Met United Church we seek to lift up diverse readings and last week we explored and pondered the queer and trans potential in the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch.

<https://knoxmetregina.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Sermon-May-2-2021.pdf>

This morning I invite us to read with particular intention around gender, not just inclusive, but expansive.

I am again this morning reading with the tutelage of the Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney, Episcopal Priest and Womanist Biblical Translator and Scholar whose Womanist Lectionary for the Whole Church is forthcoming. It is from her that I picked up the phrase of reading God at the same time as Gender-full and Gender transcendent and embracing.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLfpaRhsSUI>

And so, on Mother's Day, in this, (to use another of Wil Gafney's turns of phrase) the year of our Lady of Celestial Non-Binary Beings, we ponder the Gender-full and expansive possibilities of Scripture's Mothering God.

I hope we do so with an intentional effort to avoid romanticizing recognizing the very real challenges personal and structural around mothering

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/first-person-sage-yathon-motherhood-1.6014941>

I also hope we will not replace one strictly enforced binary category with another, recognizing that as an Affirming Ministry we celebrate a gender-full-ness not limited by biology and chromosomes.

I named this last week and will do again that (as I learned from the Rev. Drs. HyeRan Kim-Cragg and Kwok Pui-lan) that the pulpit is always gendered not only in what is spoken but in who is speaking, in this case a White cisgender-heterosexual male.

And so I am accountable to you listener and viewer and those from whose work I read to be watchful that I am learner and not appropriator, allowing their challenge to unseat my own positioning

I hope as always that this will begin discussion not seek to be the final word

I hope that there is a name or a phrase that will catch in your hearing and thinking

Because there are a lot of names coming each who could be their own sermon

I hope some of these will open a door into another exploration

Invite a question that begets conversation that begets contemplation

Not just of what we read

But of how our readings challenge our relationships, our communities, our institutions.

Our readings this morning, and they so often do centre around the ministry and legacy of Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Christian Tradition names a Christ One

But what if we spoke of this one with a different name?

As Yeshua Ben Myriam of L'Nazareth

To use Jesus' Hebrew name challenges the potential anti-Semitic and Supersessionist tendencies

In the Christian Tradition

And to name this one

The child of

Mary of Nazareth

Myriam bat Hannah (Mary, daughter of Anna)

Theotokos – the God Bearer

How might we re-read this one's life and ministry and receive this one's legacy

When this one is the child of Myriam the prophet of Luke's Gospel

Myriam without whom we cannot begin the story of the Christian Scripture or the Season of Advent

That season which itself is like a womb, a resting in the possible,

in the rich enfolding embrace of darkness

Myriam who names God as the one who fills the hungry and tears down the thrones of empire

And so when her child flips the tables in the temple and the witnesses ask

"who does he think he is"

We might reply,

You think that was something, you should hear his Momma preach!

Yeshua Ben Myriam

Whose matrilineage refuses to be forgotten

Resisting the tendency of the text to name the man who begets the man who begets the man...

The Christian Scriptures remind that this one, this child of Myriam is also begotten of the matriarchs

Ben Sarai

Ben Tamar

Ben Rahab

Ben Ruth

Ben Bathsheba

(Ben of course being Hebrew for child of)

Dr. Gafney reminds that this Yeshua Ben Myriam

Waded in the waters of the rachamim almah – the womb of the maiden

(And the way that word gets translated and its implications is a whole other conversation)

Those waters reflect how this one then wades in the waters of the Jordan while John the Baptizer, the outsider, midwifes his emergence as Beloved

So named by the creative voice of Sophia

Spirit

Dove

This Jesus then learns to love expansively from Justa the Canaanite whose name denied the myth of her people's erasure from the Promised land and whose insistence made her daughter well

Jesus who learns what it means to love extravagantly through the tears of Myriam of Magdala, Mary she who is like a Tower, she who is the church's first preacher on Easter morning!

What does it mean to name Jesus as learner as much as teacher?

Jesus who knew the motherly longing to gather in Jerusalem to his breast like a mother hen her chicks, a baby lamb like a shepherdess in the Galilean hill country, a woman who searched high and low for the treasure that is lost.

What does it mean for Jesus to play with such language of tenderness and nurture

Jesus around whose broken body Myriam and the women gather, begging for its return from the hands of the state – an experience of too many mothers and daughters today.

Jesus who dwells once more in the womb, this time the womb that is the belly of earth before being delivered once more in an Easter birthing of Resurrection.

What does it do to our understanding of Jesus to read him in this way?

Born of Myriam Bat Hannah,

Named in the water as Sophia's Prophet, Wisdom's child

Wisdom/Sophia -- fertile and generative

Weaver of possibilities not borders

This way of reading can draw us into the fertile possibilities but also grief and pain and sorrow

The Christian Tradition has long declared that

God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

But in saying God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, what is not being said is that God is the God of Hagar, Sarah, Keturah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah.

(Gafney's incredible presentation on this matrilineage is both enlightening and disturbing)

<https://evolvingfaith.com/all-podcast-episodes/episode-6-wil-gafney>

The matrilineage of Holy Scripture does not shy from violence and pain and grief.

This focus on the women opens our eyes to the generative possibility but also the way in our Sacred Text that the bodies of women (and the non-conforming like Joseph in her dreamy Princess Dress) are also site of violence from the men of Genesis and their presumed entitlement to space, land and bodies.

This way of reading does not easily resolve.

Yet when we resist the triumphal Lord of Christian domination, the stern Victorian Father God

The violence, exploitation, exclusion of Scripture and Tradition

No longer require explaining away

But is a problem to sit with and reconcile with

When we're no longer after purity and certainty and immutability

In our text or in our world

remembering so many of those models of reading were with an aim to reinforce positions of power

But when we read with an eye to what is possible and a compulsion to tell the truth

Mother God and her children who the ink of the text itself limits to objects and victims,

In text made flesh in context, instead witness to us

Boldly and prophetically

I'm not erased, We are not erased, And we won't be.

Their voices resonate in our moment today

Our text becomes midwife to the possible

Today I would highlight the possibility of nurturing empathy within ourselves

And challenging to recognize when our need to contend with and do the work of healing our pain

Where it has become a barrier to empathy

To learning how (as Parker Palmer suggests) listen others into speech

And calling us from space occupying to space making and sacred nurturing relationship

There is of course so much more to say and imagine

And I hope we might follow threads that have stuck out

But we close for now with words of thanksgiving

<https://www.woodlakebooks.com/search/results/inventory/All-Products/Ecology/If-Darwin-Prayed>

This Universe, O Holiest One, is the garb of your spirit.

In Evolutionary Expansion Flaring forth in all directions, birthing and blessing space and time with fireworks beyond compare - clothed in spiral galaxies - neutron stars a crown of diamonds.

You are known in the longing within our atoms for connection, the urge within each molecule for self-expression, the knowing within each cell of its dignity.

Being and beauty flows freely into and through all of creation

A great procession of life

We give thanks O Mother Earth, Spirit enfleshed, giving birth from your oceans, carrying nutrients by your rivers, inspiring through your forests, feeding from your soil, delighting with your beauty.

God is Love

Her Body is All Creation

She is a Tree of Life

Who Gathers Her Children in Love