



## Clergy Women's Retreat Reflections

### Investing in our Future . . .

Womaen's Caucus Steering Committee recognizes the importance and value in calling forth and supporting women as leaders and shapers for positive growth in the Church of the Brethren. This issue of *Femailings* features the writings of sisters who attended the 2020 Clergy Women's Retreat at the St. Francis Retreat Center in Scottsdale, Arizona. We are also including a sermon by one of our own steering committee members, Dr. Rev. Bobbi Dykema pastor at First Church Springfield, Illinois.

The setting for the Clergy Women's Retreat included the scenic Camelback Mountains, various Arizona cacti, and blooming flowers gracing our pathways daily. Diversity abounded in our ages, years of ministry, theology, geography, ethnicity and ministry settings. We were united as fifty-eight women on a journey to explore, expand and deepen our unique spiritual gifts and expressions of our faith.

We bonded over meals, worship, free time, conversations, and activities that included creative writing, walking a labyrinth, journaling and other artistic expressions. We listened intently to Mandy Smith, our keynote speaker, share about the gifts of vulnerability to strengthen our ministries and our sense of self. A community tea ceremony, sharing our stories, a service of anointing and individual and communal prayers for one another and our denomination made space for honoring one another and God's presence among us.

New to this year's gathering was the invitation for women to bring their children ages infant up to the age of 2. We were blessed by 3 young children who moved among us.

Womaen's Caucus contributed significantly to the Office of Ministry to provide programmatic and scholarship financial support. Additionally, several women were recipients of the Mary Blocher Smeltzer Scholarship Fund. We are grateful for our Womaen's Caucus members financial contributions which allowed us this extravagant opportunity to support and encourage current and future church leaders. As you read our sisters' reflections and engage with Bobbi's sermon, we hope you too will feel the joy and excitement at the Holy possibilities that are yet to be.

### A Sabbath Reflection

By Bekah Houff

The desert moon shining, the crisp air on my cheeks, the silence of the nighttime. . . . As we walked the labyrinth at the Franciscan Renewal Center on the last night of the retreat the lights went out on the

labyrinth's path, and I'm glad that they did. That walk is one that I won't soon forget. I can't remember the last time the moon was bright enough to light my path nor the peace that invaded my heart, mind, and soul.

The Clergywomen's retreat gave me the gift of peace and the gift of Sabbath rest. Of course there were

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keynote sessions, workshops, and worship, but what I valued most were precious times around the dinner table or in the Jacuzzi meeting new friends and catching up with old ones, learning from those who have been in ministry for a long time as well as my friends from seminary, and sharing life and ministry together. This northern Indiana resident also appreciated the days of sunshine and my toes peeking out of my sandals.

Sabbath rest is something I've been yearning for and something I believe my students yearn for. As University Pastor at Manchester University I witness the busy lives of college student's day in and day out: academics, athletics, music, clubs, jobs, there is barely a moment to breathe let alone nurture a spiritual life of regular Sabbath rest. I went to the retreat hoping to gain Sabbath resources to share with my students. I was not disappointed. Mandy Smith's invitation to the creative process of reflection,

making origami during a workshop, yoga at 7 am, and that transforming labyrinth walk gave me plenty of opportunity to plan and prepare a chapel worship service on Sabbath rest to help Manchester students start this semester healthy and spiritually rich.

Our first chapel worship of the semester included biblical reflections on Sabbath and Sabbath stations allowing students to learn and develop skills for Sabbath rest that can be used anytime. We colored mandalas, stretched and did yoga, practiced breathing exercises, and wrote poetry. I hope that starting out this way opened a door to self-care, spiritual renewal, and Christ's peace in the hearts and minds of the students. I am grateful for the opportunity to rest and rejuvenate at the Clergywomen's retreat. The deep peace I felt in Arizona will continue to appear in my ministry as I prioritize Sabbath rest in new ways.

## Rocks, Pebbles and Nuggets

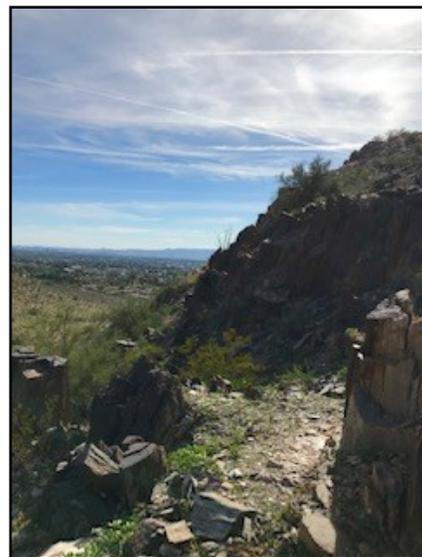
By Deb Peterson

I like rocks. I've always liked rocks and have always had a collection. When I was in elementary school, each summer my teachers would bring me back a rock, stone and even pebbles from wherever they vacationed because they knew how much I loved rocks, and at that time in my life, I brought home one from every state our family vacationed.

I had never been to Arizona until I attended the 2020 Clergy Women's Retreat, "Treasure in Clay Pots." Imagine my delight as we embarked from our Uber (another first for me) and saw the Franciscan Renewal Center, where the retreat was being held. Not one blade of grass marred the beauty of the pebbles, rocks and nuggets that were surrounding the largest and most proliferate species of cacti I'd ever seen that made up this beautiful place. (I like cacti, too. I have a few at home; I chose them over plants because they are very forgiving when it comes to growing. Plants die from my overwatering and neglect. A Cactus thrives in my environment!)

For me, all that awe-inspiring atmosphere accented and blessed the ways of learning and reflecting I received from our speaker, Mandy Smith, from testimonies given during our evening worship services and insights from 58 other clergy women of all ages as we ate meals together. The one message from Mandy that resonated with me

was "Preaching as Testimony." From a book by Anna Carter Florence, Mandy explained it as sharing (preaching) what one has seen and heard, both in Scripture and in everyday life and then sharing what your own beliefs are about that incident. Our worship leaders shared their testimonies on three different nights, and it was clear how each related to the scripture reading for the evening.



*Stoney mountain path*

But there were so many other insights ("nuggets") I discovered in my notes when I got home that I want to share with you—both with the women who were there (because we each hear concepts and ideas differently depending on where we are in our life walk with Christ) and with the women who were not there.

Nuggets from the "Treasure in Clay Pots":

- ◆ "THE BRAVEST THING WE CAN DO IS BE BOLD ENOUGH TO ASK FOR HELP FROM GOD AND

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FROM OTHERS.” (I share this one in all caps because that sentence spoken by Mandy hit me right between the eyes and they are words I repeat to myself every day.)

- ◆ Jesus, “If you think I’m glorious, so are you because you are my sister.” (Read Hebrews 2:10-18)
- ◆ Jesus is connected to the Life Source so we can connect to Jesus.
- ◆ Just like homeless people, we all could hold up a sign saying, “We need \_\_\_\_\_.” We all have needs
- ◆ We can be broken. And we can be broken *open*.
- ◆ “...it is not angels who will control the future of the world...What are people that you should even think about them?...you made them a little lower than the angels...You put them in charge of everything you made.” (paraphrase from Hebrews 2:5-8) We don’t feel the glory we have; we just see our humanness, our ordinariness.
- ◆ We feel empty and hate it, we want to get away from it, to fill up that emptiness with addictions—food, drugs, overspending, too much TV, “spending too much of myself.” Set an alarm while working to stop everything for just ten minutes.
- ◆ Even when I’m accomplishing nothing, God delights in me.
- ◆ I don’t know *what* God will do, but I know what God *can* do!
- ◆ Accept help from others. Just like scuba diving, when one person’s tank is empty connect to their mask for lifesaving “filling up.”
- ◆ God gave the Israelites manna in the wilderness when they asked, but just for one day. They would’ve appreciated a year’s worth, but God is saying, “Come back to me every day.”
- ◆ Be comfortable with uncertainty so others can be comfortable with uncertainty.
- ◆ We’ve damaged our clay pots, but not destroyed. We’ve damaged our clay pots, but not the miracles of God in our lives.

Look for where your help comes from. Look for the rocks and nuggets in your own lives. Self-care cannot be ignored for healthy, happy Christian women.

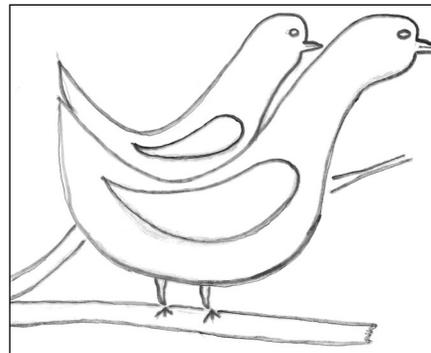
## "That's too good to be true."

Reflection by Kathryn LaPointe

I stood with my hand physically, actually resting on the faded flyer taped to a wall. I don't remember the event it was advertising, but I remember reading the words "peacefully - simply - together" and rolling my spiritual eyes.

As a lifelong participant in Christian churches and organizations — Catholic, evangelical, ecumenical — I had seen my fair share of distinctly not peaceful. And together? Yeah, just ask people of color, the differently abled, or the LGBTQIA+ community. Simply? I was far too familiar with convoluted teaching on theology and the bitterness of building campaigns to trust that either.

But I kept coming back. Why? Because in 2018 I was training churches to respond to the asylum crisis in San



*Simply, peacefully, together*

Diego by providing shelter to immigrants. First Church of the Brethren was one of the first to respond, and to date continues its sacrificial and sustained commitment.

Pastor Sara Haldeman-Scarr met with me regularly to discuss the shelter, but soon became a mentor and friend. Much of my lifetime of church ministry, as is common for women, featured plenty of the responsibility and labor of ordained work, but not the title nor compensation. And, as a Presbyterian pastor's wife, I held an even more significant leadership role. Unfazed by the lack of letters before or after my name, nor by the fact that I was then unfamiliar with Peace Churches, Sara treated me as a peer.

One day, we started talking about the male and female verbs in Genesis. "You know," I mentioned, "Phyllis Tribble talks about those in God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality." Sara stood, and pulled the 1978 feminist exegetical anthem from her shelf. Ah, my people.

I started reading the history of anabaptism in general and Church of the Brethren in particular. My husband and I had served an international, ecumenical church in Bonn, Germany for five years. Only two hours

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from Schwarzenau, I could easily imagine the rolling hills, the Eder River, the consequences of opposing the state church. I was mesmerized by its early commitments to abolition, service, community building.

I joined the church, and began to consider ordination. "Kathryn, you are more Brethren than you know," Sara encouraged me, as I worried that my last name of LaPointe would quickly reveal that I was a first generation convert.

Isn't it the best of Brethren, though, to honor ministry and service and aligned values more than titles and degrees and circumstances of birth? Pastor Sara and her community demonstrated their denominational values by inviting asylum seekers to live on their campus. They also welcomed me into a leadership role, despite my eclectic religious background. And I felt welcomed, as well, at the Clergy Women's Retreat.

I had long ago been rendered ineligible for evangelical leadership due to my gender, my lack of an advanced degree, my positions on abortion, inclusivity, and my waning belief in penal substitutionary atonement as the singular and exclusive way to experience the divine. Disqualified due to my age. By my family's need for me to have a "real" job.

Mandy Smith, plenary speaker at the retreat, broke my heart wide open on the first morning. "What is it that is inherent in us that it feels like we are disqualified from a place where God can show his power?"

I knew that God was showing not just Her power, but Her love and mercy and creativity and generativity and kindness through the immigrant ministry in San Diego. I watched as the community lived out denominational values of peacefully, simply, together. My spiritual eyes returned to level.

But as I considered taking the next step, I still wrestled with not being a birthright Brethren, inherently infant baptized as I was as a Catholic. In that weakness, I arrived at the Clergy Women's Retreat. I met so many inspirational women who have been leading with grace and determination and resolve and wisdom for more years than I have time to tally. And I was strengthened by being accepted, yet again.

I left the retreat full of immense gratitude for the sisters who invited me to join their table: peacefully, simply, together.

## Messy prayers . . .

By Elizabeth Ullery Swenson

Messy prayers.

Messy ministry.

Messy motherhood.

Messy life.

Since the birth of my daughter in May of 2018, I've struggled to feel like I have my shit together. I feel perpetually disorganized. Most days and weeks I feel like I'm just barely holding it together, barely hanging on. We are one spilled milk (or coffee) away from tears and one head cold away from upsetting the whole apple cart. Or maybe it's the camel's back? Either way, it's not a comfortable place for me as someone who values having my apples, camels and ducks in order. I hold myself to high, impossibly high, standards that are no longer attainable in this current season of life. All around me I see other moms (who have put their professional goals on hold) planning playdates, making crafts, and seemingly thriving in parenthood. I see church planters and pastors (mostly men) who have creative ideas, bustling, thriving congregations and ample budgets. All around me I see others who appear to have their shit together while I'm lucky to be showered and have a plan for Sunday. (Thank goodness it's Dinner Church Sunday this week!)

One afternoon at the recent Clergy Women's retreat, facilitator Mandy Smith, invited us to use oil pastels to color as a meditative and reflective practice. We used sharpie to draw lines, random, wavy lines. Then used oil pastels to fill in the space between the lines and allow an image to emerge. I haven't used pastels since elementary school art class. I forgot how smeary, smooth and smudgy they are. I tried to stay in the lines, I tried not to get messy. By the end I was embracing the mess, the way the colors blended together, and my hands were covered in smeared color. Art imitates life.

My therapist recently challenged me to redefine success. Her invitation is to let go of expectations, our own and others, to allow ourselves to live, lead, thrive, preach, parent in my own way. It isn't a revolutionary idea. Others have shared and received the same advice before. There are entire books written about how to let go of our perfectionist tendencies. Our stories of faith aren't stories of perfection, so why should our lives be? More than that, there are gifts and blessings in the messy. Mandy Smith encouraged the room of 60 faith leaders to embrace what makes them unique. Our

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culture, particularly the cultural expectations of clergy, are rooted in male-ness. As clergywomen we are set up for failure if maleness is the benchmark of success.

The Holy shows up in the messy, in the midnight feedings and milk-soaked shirts. (Mandy asked who had preached while milk leaked through her shirt and I felt so seen!) God spills out of coffee cups and bowls of cheerios, She is in the tantrum and the deep-breaths. She is in the outbursts of joy and the pits of emptiness. The messy is holy. Our experiences in the messy inform, impact, and fill our leadership with a unique insight that our church and world desperately need. It's time to show up, as our whole messy selves. Milk-stained, coffee-fueled, over-extended, whole and Holy.

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## Toddlers, Cacti, Community, and Unexpected Healing

By Jennifer Hosler

Rest can allow you to look at yourself and your life with a different lens. Beyond just the benefits of rest in a beautiful, contemplative setting, the 2020 Clergywomen's Retreat provided me with rest, a community of support, as well as thoughtful facilitation on vulnerability and pain. I came away with ways to move forward through some painful burdens that were weighing on my life and ministry.

This outcome took me by surprise. I had thought the Retreat would be beneficial, but it served me in an unexpected way. The 2014 Clergywomen's Retreat had been a helpful time of discernment for me: I asked God to be released from an existing ministry opportunity and to open the door to a new phase, so that I could grow in my gifts (a PhD program). This year, I am on the cusp of graduation, so I assumed that the 2020 Clergywomen's Retreat would be a time for discerning new opportunities and how to blend my present pastorate with my community psychology work. Instead of the expected discernment outcome I was hoping for, something else happened. The keynote speaker and small group questions, the silence, the beautiful setting, the cacti, the vigorous mountain hike, the sessions with child care provided, the caring sisters/siblings\* in Jesus who shared love with me—these all created space to reveal how a

painful relationship with my mother was leaving me too wounded to minister well.

Little has changed in that difficult relationship, but the ways that I look at myself and God have shifted. The sessions and conversations reminded me that I needed to reclaim the fact that *I am a beloved child of God*. My toxic relationship had been making me feel worthless—not the kind of well-being that keeps you ready to minister well. Through my conversations with others about gender and theology (not new thoughts, but continued processing), I recognized that I need to claim the image of God as Mother. God as a good mother. Confronting gaping wounds of loss, I began centering on the fact that

*God is the Mother that I need.* Loss and pain still exist, for certain, but I feel like they have less opportunity to derail me, emotionally and spiritually. I can use these two spiritual facts (I am a beloved child of God; God is the Mother that I need) to re-center and anchor myself amidst all the unexpected painful moments that may come.



Jennifer Hosler and toddler

Looking back, I needed the space created by the retreat in order to find this unexpected healing. In order to serve my congregation (and even figure out what my next steps look like post-graduation), I need to be anchored in self-worth, in the innate worth that God had given me. I need to look to God as the wholeness and strength that can sustain me. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to attend and to Women's Caucus for financial support to attend the Clergywomen's Retreat, through the Mary Blocher Smeltzer Fund. The Mid-Atlantic District and the Office of Ministry also helped with costs.

# “Emmanuel, God with Us” A sermon on Matthew 1:18-25

Preached by Rev. Dr. Bobbi Dykema at First CoB, Springfield, Illinois, December 21, 2019, Fourth Sunday in Advent

One year at the American Academy of Religion annual conference, I attended a panel on interfaith education. Of the four or five speakers presenting, the one I remember most vividly is Rabbi Nancy Fuchs Kreimer, who directs the Multifaith Studies Department at Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in the Philadelphia area. One of the courses offered by Rabbi Nancy's department is called “Praying with Your Feet”, and it includes guest speakers and field trips to ministries of various faiths that are putting the teachings to love God and serve neighbor into concrete action.

Rabbi Nancy described the first time she took a group of students to a Christian ministry located in the slums of Philadelphia – I believe it was a Dorothy Day House, but I'm not sure any longer. At any rate, the workers living in the house of ministry talked about their work with homeless persons, addicts, and previously incarcerated folks, in a neighborhood with a high crime rate. One of the students asked, “Aren't you afraid, living here?” And the worker answered, “Well, this is what Jesus did. He moved into the neighborhood.”

Rabbi Nancy said that that moment was when she felt she really understood the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation.

Today is the fourth Sunday in Advent, and the theme for this Sunday is love. We've made our way through hope, joy, and peace, exploring what the Incarnation of Jesus means and brings into our lives. Our scriptures for today, both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, speak of a Promised One whose name is to be called Emmanuel, meaning in Hebrew “God with us” – or, as the Dorothy Day House worker in Philadelphia put it, “God moving into the neighborhood”.

Recall of course that the prophecies in the Hebrew scriptures aren't exclusively or even primarily about Jesus: they were spoken by the prophets as a word to their people in their own time, and the gospel writers, hundreds of years later, found that they had significant things to say about Jesus, as well. The great thing about the Hebrew poetry written and spoken by the prophets is that it can mean both these things! And we see the hand of God working through God's people, and sometimes even religious strangers, all throughout human history, everywhere on Earth.

In fact, the name “Emmanuel” is first mentioned in scripture in the prophetic words we heard this morning from Isaiah. The backstory here is that King Ahaz has acceded to the throne of Judah, after the northern and southern kingdoms had split under Rehoboam about 200 years prior. The northern kingdom, under their king Pekah, is at the very moment that Ahaz takes the throne forming a coalition with the kingdom of Damascus, under their king Rezaiah. Isaiah speaks to King Ahaz and advises him to trust in God rather than foreign allies, and to ask God for a sign.

Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign, and Isaiah says he'll get one anyway: that a young woman will conceive and bear a son and name him Emmanuel, God with us. I want to note also that the Hebrew word here for “young woman,” *almah*, really does mean just that – young woman – and has no connotations of the young woman's sexual experience or lack thereof. But the Septuagint Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures that Matthew was referencing translates *almah* as *parthenos*, which does specifically mean

“virgin.” And part of Matthew's goal as an evangelist was helping his readers understand that Jesus the Christ was of God, the God who is greater than all other gods, many of whom had also been said to have been born miraculously, like Horus, Mithras, and so on.

At any rate, Ahaz went ahead and allied with the Assyrians against the combined forces of Israel and Damascus anyway, disregarding Isaiah's word, and although the Assyrians defeated the coalition forces, Judah became a suzerainty under Assyria, which may have been what Isaiah was trying to warn Ahaz about in the first place. In other words, maybe Ahaz should have trusted that God would be with him and his tiny beleaguered nation, and they may have been able to remain independent – who knows? And we don't hear any more about this young woman and her son Emmanuel, either.

The word “Emmanuel” only appears in three places in the Bible: in the Isaiah 7 prophecy for Ahaz, and again in poetic form in Isaiah 8, and then in our gospel lesson for today from Matthew 1.

The lectionary doesn't ever include the first part of Matthew 1, the genealogy of Jesus, which makes me a little sad. I know that might come as a surprise, since genealogical listings of names of people you've never heard of and can't pronounce don't really sound like riveting reading, but stay with me here. There are only four women mentioned or referred to in the 42 generations listed from Abraham to Jesus, divided into 14 from Abraham to David, 14 from David to the Babylonian Exile, and 14 from the Exile to Jesus. Nice and tidy. And many of the fathers listed are barely mentioned – some not at all – in the Hebrew scriptures.

So who are these four women, and why only these four? Because obviously there were 42 mothers as well as 42 fathers. Who were these illustrious ladies, and why did they make the cut?

The first is a woman named Tamar. Poor Tamar. She was married to Judah's son Er, making her one of Jacob's twelve daughters-in-law, and Er died before the couple had produced any children. So according to Jewish levirate marriage practice, Tamar was then married to Er's younger brother Onan, to raise up children in Er's name. But Onan didn't want his kids to be legally his dead brother's, so he refused to try and get Tamar pregnant, and went childless to an early grave also.

By this point old Judah is beginning to wonder what's up with Tamar. So rather than marry her to his youngest son, Shelah, he argues that Shelah's not old enough to get married, and Tamar should go back and live with her parents until Shelah comes of age. Time passes, Judah's wife Shua dies, and Tamar realizes that Judah's stalling tactic was really a stopping tactic, and he has no intention of letting her marry Shelah, ever. So Tamar makes a clever but risky move.

She veils herself and goes out to the crossroads on a day when she knows that Judah is bringing sheep to market. Judah sees her and assumes she's a prostitute, and being a lonely widower, decides to purchase her services. He hasn't brought any money though, so Tamar says she'll take his ring and his staff in pledge. The next day, Judah sends a messenger to pay the



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unknown prostitute – unknown to him anyway – and get Judah's belongings back. But no one in the area knows of any such woman.

Well, in the course of events, Tamar turns up pregnant, and Judah asserts that she has committed adultery and needs to be put to death. So Tamar pulls out the ring and staff and says, "Well, the father of my child is the owner of these items," and Judah realizes that Tamar has outsmarted him, and that she has assured herself the protection and care of sons in her widowhood and eventual old age, as God intended through establishing the practice of levirate marriage. "She is more righteous than I," Judah exclaims.

Kind of a creepy story – yet it puts Tamar's name on the genealogy of Jesus.

The second mother in Jesus's line who is named in Matthew 1 is Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho who hides the Hebrew spies who are scoping out the land of Canaan. She believes that the god of these spies is the one true God, and for that faith she is rescued along with her family out of the destruction of Jericho, and they are grafted into the nation-family of Israel. Rahab marries Salmon, and they have a son named Boaz.

Boaz's wife, too, is one of the four women named in Jesus's genealogy. She has a whole book of the Bible to tell her story. A Moabite woman named Ruth, who marries an Israelite man whose family has fled a famine in Bethlehem. But Ruth's first husband dies, and so does his brother and his dad, Elimelech, leaving Elimelech's wife Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, widowed and childless. Naomi decides to go back to Bethlehem, and Orpah and Ruth walk along the road with her a ways, until Naomi tells the younger women they should go home and find new husbands. Orpah does, but Ruth refuses, asserting that wherever Naomi goes, she will go too.

As widows in Bethlehem, Naomi and Ruth have a hard road ahead of them with no breadwinner in the house. Ruth goes out to glean grain, so they'll have something to eat, and meets Boaz, who is tremendously caring and generous toward her. When she tells her mother-in-law whose field she's been working in, Naomi says, "Oh, that is good! He actually is a *go'el* for our family – he has the right to redeem our property." That night, Naomi sends Ruth down to the threshing floor to, basically, proposition Boaz. Boaz responds exactly as Naomi had hoped, and promises to marry Ruth.

Ruth becomes the grandmother of a boy named David, who eventually becomes king of Israel. And one day David, from his palace balcony, spies a woman next door bathing and decides he wants her – and as king, all he has to do is send a messenger over to the lady's house, and she doesn't really have the option to refuse, not the king. So poor Bathsheba, who is the wife of Uriah the Hittite, is basically a victim of royal rape, but of course in a patriarchal society she has mostly been portrayed over the centuries as a wicked seductress.

Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba. What do these four beleaguered ladies have in common? They're all foreigners – not part of the tribes of Israel – and they all come to be mothers via some scandalous means.

That's a pretty good setup for Jesus, because he comes to be born through scandalous means, also. Mary and Joseph are betrothed, but not living together, when Mary turns up pregnant. In Jewish practice, a betrothal involves signing the marriage contract,

which can happen as much as a year before the actual wedding. It is legally binding. So Mary and Joseph and their families have signed their contract, but Mary and Joseph aren't sharing a bed yet, which means that Mary being pregnant and Joseph not having had anything to do with it is a big red flag.

God moved into the neighborhood. Not the good neighborhood, not the squeaky clean neighborhood, not the respectable neighborhood of middle-class folks where every child was born at least ten months after their parents were legally married. God moved into the neighborhood where things are messy, where the adults and children who live in a house might all have different last names, where there's been breakups and abuse and sin and divorce and pain.

God moved into the human neighborhood. Our neighborhood.

Why are these scandalous stories the backstory of the Incarnation of Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God? What does it mean that this God who comes to us in human form through scandalous means, is with us?

Just as the stories of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba are a pretty good setup for the story of Mary, these stories are all a pretty good setup for the story of Jesus, too. Because once Jesus was grown, he

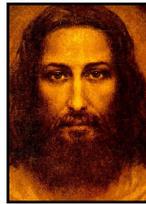
demonstrated what it meant to be Emmanuel – God with us – in pretty scandalous ways, being present to those considered the last and the least, the foreigners and prostitutes and sinners and widows and orphans and slaves. That's who our God is and how our God works – because these are the folks who most need to understand that God is with them, because ain't nobody else with them – not the kings or princes or temple officials or bishops or priests or legislators or mayors or aldermen or judges or cops. But God is.

There's a story in the gospel of Mark, chapter 5, that for me really exemplifies what it means to say that Jesus is God with us. An important temple official named Jairus comes to Jesus because his daughter is really sick and he wants Jesus to heal her. So Jesus, surrounded not only by his disciples but by the large crowds of people who have come to hear him, starts heading toward Jairus's house. And as they're walking, a woman whose menstrual flow has been ongoing, nonstop, for twelve years, reaches down and touches the hem of Jesus's robe, knowing that this is all she needs for her terrible ailment to be healed. And she's right.

But Jesus isn't content to just anonymously heal someone. He feels the power go out from him, and asks, "Who touched me?" The disciples are incredulous. There's people touching you on every side, what's your deal?" they ask. And the woman comes forward – and in the gospel of Mark, what happens next is that "she tells all her truth."

At Brethren National Youth Conference last year, Duke Divinity School professor Christena Cleveland preached on this passage, and she unpacked what it may have looked like for this woman to tell all her truth. She's been ritually unclean for twelve years, so anything she touches or sits on or lies down on, that someone else then touches, would make that person ritually unclean. So she's probably homeless, because who would want to live like that? And she hasn't been able to go to the temple in all that time. She is unclean, unwanted, to the minds of most of the people of Jerusalem a nobody.

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## Womaen's Caucus Needs Your Financial Support to Continue

With your continued support Womaen's Caucus can do so much to help further our mission of decreasing prejudice within the Church, empowering women and advocating for people on the margins. This year we have put focused energy into growing our steering committee and commitments. We continue to find tangible ways to live out our mission and build community.

*Options:* complete the form below, visit our website at [www.womaenscaucus.org](http://www.womaenscaucus.org) and use the donate button, and/or select Womaen's Caucus to receive 0.5% of your purchases at [smile.amazon.com](http://smile.amazon.com).

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*Cut & mail to:* Womaen's Caucus, 818 SW 3rd Ave., #E1299, Portland, OR 97204

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Address _____	<input type="checkbox"/> \$100	<input type="checkbox"/> I am already a member
_____	<input type="checkbox"/> \$75	<input type="checkbox"/> Membership — \$25/yr
_____	<input type="checkbox"/> \$50	<input type="checkbox"/> Student member — \$15/yr
Email _____	<input type="checkbox"/> \$25	<b>Femailings</b>
Phone _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Other	<input type="checkbox"/> Already receiving
District/Home Church (if applicable) _____		<input type="checkbox"/> Send by mail
_____		<input type="checkbox"/> Send by email

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And Jesus is on his way to the home of an important temple official. But he stops. He sees the woman, in a way she probably hasn't been truly seen in twelve years. As somebody. Somebody whose story needs to be told, and more importantly, heard. And so he stops dead in his tracks and gives this woman the mic, the stage, the spotlight, to tell all her truth. He prioritizes her above the important temple official, this homeless unclean nobody of a person, and compels the temple official and everyone else present to listen to this woman's story.

After twelve years on the street she probably wasn't super coherent; it probably wasn't a nice tidy narrative. She rambled. She ranted. She talked in circles. And Jesus listened, and so did everyone else. For however long it took her to tell all her truth, Jairus and his sick daughter had to wait. The temple official had to give up his place in line to an unclean ranting homeless woman who hadn't been to church in twelve years.

That's what God with us looks like. It looks like showing up, and seeing, and listening, and stopping what we're doing, whatever we think is more important, to be present to the people our society has the least time for.

And if we want to be followers of Jesus and continue his work peacefully, simply, together, that's what we have got to do, too. We have to show up. Listen. See. Even if other people find it scandalous.

There's a story about a man, married man with children, who would go out every night after work and drink himself into a stupor. He was a weepy drunk, so after a certain number of beers he'd protest vociferously to the bartender and anyone else who'd

listen, how much he loved his wife and children.

But did he? Or were those empty words without his taking the time to be present, to see and hear and know the people he claimed to love?

What about us? If we're willing to give money to Church World Service and the Nigeria Crisis Fund, and buy hats and scarves and mittens for kids at Harvard Park School, but we never take the time to just listen to and be present to somebody who needs it, can we really say that we are loving and serving our neighbors? St. Paul had some words to say about that: "if I speak with the tongues of humans and angels – if I understand all prophecy and all knowledge – if I give away all my possessions and even donate my body to medical research, but I don't get out and meet people and love them, I have completely wasted my time."

Who is God calling you to show up for and listen to this season? Maybe a family member who has some different political positions than ourselves and is loud about it and hard to be around. Maybe a person who's asked for help eleventy hundred times and never seems to reciprocate or pay us back. Maybe someone who's got a difficult story to tell and is afraid of what will happen, of who will no longer love her or esteem her once she tells it. Maybe a child or a teenager or an elderly or disabled person who's been overlooked by everyone else around them. Maybe someone who is sick or grieving or depressed or lonely. Who in our community needs to know that God is with them, that one of us here this morning could be the messenger of that good news?

Brothers and sisters, God is with us – God has moved into our neighborhood. And that is mighty good news that the rest of the world needs to hear. Amen.