



**Do You See
This Woman?**

**Undoing Patriarchy and Moving
toward Right Relationships**

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**Mennonite
Church
USA**

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Do You See This Woman?: Undoing Patriarchy and Moving toward Right Relationships

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Introduction

Do You See This Woman? is a set of resources for worship that seeks to accompany small groups and congregations along the journey of acknowledging the influence of patriarchy in our lives and nurturing right relationships among people of all genders in the church. Patriarchy is the specific social system that reinforces social privilege for men and the oppression of women.

While a great deal has been done to develop more equitable relationships between women and men, patriarchy is a major force that continues to shape societies in North America and throughout much of the world. It is the social system responsible for the way that women's bodies are regularly regarded as sex objects in North American society and media. It is the system that allows for women to be paid less than men for doing the same work. And it is the system that encourages an association between "feminine" and "weak," "masculine" and "strong."

While Christians strive to resist the powers and principalities of the world, we are not immune to them. Patriarchy has had a strong hand in shaping many areas of church life and practice since the beginning of Christianity. Worship that gives voice to any group that has, at times, been left out or devalued is worship that offers the whole church an opportunity to experience God in a fuller and deeper way. Thus, this series is designed to minister to both women and men.

Each of the five services in this series focuses on stories of biblical women in ways that give voice to the dynamics of patriarchy today. Worshipers are led to lament the harm that accompanies women's experiences of patriarchy and are guided in a process toward community-wide justice and healing.

Do You See This Woman? was commissioned by the Empowering Resources focus group of Mennonite Church USA's Women in Leadership Project. In 2009, staff at Mennonite Women USA observed that the number of women in leadership in Mennonite churches in the United States was declining. Concerned by this observation and seeking to understand its cause, Mennonite Church USA commissioned an audit that would paint an accurate picture of how women's participation in the leadership of the Mennonite church was changing over time. Thus, the Women in Leadership Project began.

The findings of the audit both quantitatively and qualitatively pointed to a need for adjustments to be made across the church to both remove structural obstacles still preventing women from participation in church leadership and to encourage and empower women who are called to leadership roles. The Women in Leadership Project organized spaces at regional and national gatherings for Mennonite women to talk together about what steps were necessary for these needed adjustments to become reality. In each setting, women emphatically articulated a need for worship resources that are intentionally mindful of women's stories, experiences, formation, and spiritual needs. This resource was inspired and created in response.

The title for this set of resources comes from Luke 7:44. A Pharisee named Simon had just judged a woman to be unworthy of touching Jesus, yet Jesus instructs Simon to look beyond society's standards for evaluating her. Jesus calls attention to Simon's impaired vision, saying to him, "Do you see this woman?" Jesus guides Simon in learning to see the woman for the valuable creation that she is. Just as Simon's vision was in need of correction, the lens through which we see women and men is also blurred by the influence of patriarchy. This set of worship resources seeks to aid in restoring right vision.

A CHRISTIAN ATTITUDE TOWARD PATRIARCHY

Following God and modeling our lives after Jesus requires that women and men reject patriarchy in all forms. This becomes self-evident as we reflect on the nature of God, on the overarching themes of the Bible, and on the life and teachings of Jesus.

Christians believe that God exists in the form of the trinity. Divine, Human, and Spirit, God is all three, and all three are one. The great significance of a trinitarian God is that God's identity exists in the relationship between these three integral parts. By nature, God *is* relationship. Followers are to model with others the kind of relationship that exists between the three aspects of God. Thus, our relationships with one another, with all of creation, and relationships specifically between women and men are to be built on foundations such as mutuality, equity, love, health, respect, and justice. There is no place in God's vision of this world for relationships that are shaped by oppressive power dynamics. The Creator, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit look upon each other in love, and we are to do the same.

The Bible has been used as a tool to enforce the patriarchal oppression of women. While there is no belittling the pain this has caused, we claim that this is a severe misuse of our sacred texts. While much of the biblical narrative reflects the ills of patriarchal society, certain sections offer great foundations for valuing women and claiming an ethic of mutuality between women and men.

Each major section of the Bible calls the people of God to maintain right and just relationships. To be in right relationship with God, the people are to act toward one another in ways that are just. The privileged are told not to take advantage of the oppressed. Cultural practices that would normally keep the oppressed and the poor underfoot are limited so that even the most disadvantaged have a chance to thrive. In Exodus 22:22-23 God tells the people, "You must not exploit widows or orphans; if you do so in any way and they cry out to me for my help I will surely give it."

Likewise, Jesus challenged cultural practices that devalued women. He engaged women in theological discourse, regarded women as friends and partners in the work of God's kingdom, and honored the ways that women expressed themselves. In the same way, when women cry out to God for healing, the church is called to participate with God in undoing the oppressive system of patriarchy.

As the story continues, we see that people in the Bible often fall short of fulfilling their commitment to maintain right relationships, and so do we who are a part of the church today. Rather than receive this news as a reason to feel heavy or discouraged, we find comfort in knowing that all human beings are imperfect. This knowledge allows us to approach the

work of undoing the oppression of women without feeling immobilized by guilt or fear. Instead, we women and men who desire to be people of God approach this work with open hearts and light spirits, confident that anything we do to move ourselves into right relationship with one another is also a step toward being in right relationship with God.

While the Bible does not offer a uniform message regarding the role of women in church and society, it is clear that God loves women. God created female in God's own image and has raised up women throughout history to be great leaders. Women have always been an integral part of God's dream for the world, and they continue to be today. Undoing patriarchy, which forms communities to distrust women as leaders, is important work of the church.

As people of God we are called to transformation. We are called to recognize the existence of patriarchy in our communities, in our congregations, and in our own selves. We are called to confess our own cooperation with the continued oppression of women, and we are called to live and worship in ways that insist on gender equity as an expression of God's love for us all.

WHAT DOES WORSHIP HAVE TO DO WITH IT?

Throughout history, the church has tended to design worship around the experiences and needs of certain groups while excluding or remaining ignorant of others. While it is impossible to be aware of the differing experiences and needs of each individual gathered for worship, it is important that worship be led with mindfulness of each social group present. Due to the influence of patriarchy, one of the groups whose needs and experiences have not traditionally been accounted for well in worship is women.

Individual women certainly have differing needs when it comes to worship, but there are helpful observations to keep in mind when preparing services in which women will participate. For example, emphasizing theological themes such as submission and servanthood without also emphasizing the importance of self-actualization can lock women into a socially prescribed role of inferiority. Emphasizing the need to love enemies without balancing that message with the need to love oneself can form women to be vulnerable to abuse and believe they must endure violence rather

than seek safety. The arrangement of the worship space, the style of the preaching, the genders of those who lead worship, the images used, the degree to which worship engages the senses and the body—these are some of the many elements of worship which have the capacity to communicate a message that either reinforces patriarchy or dismantles it.

Another significant element to consider is the language used to describe God. When communities are willing to refer to God with male language and not with female language, worshipers learn subconsciously that whatever is distinctive about male identity is compatible with God's identity, while that which defines female identity is not. Women and men alike are formed to perceive a link between maleness and godliness and formed to see femaleness as having nothing particularly in common with God. Or worse, some may be formed to feel that femaleness is specifically counter to godliness. As is usually the case with matters of formation, we are shaped and affected whether or not we choose to be and whether or not we have awareness of the process. Opposition to exclusively male language for God in no way means that male qualities or identities must be devalued. The way to address this problem is not to reinterpret God as female instead of male. Rather, we will be better formed communities of faith when we are able to refer to God in female terms, male terms, both, and neither interchangeably.

In addition to the use of male language for God, it has been the general habit of the church to focus more on the stories of male characters of the Bible than on female characters. When stories of women are told, there is a tendency to choose stories of those women who exemplify patriarchal notions of what it means to be a woman, namely women who model humility, meekness, and servanthood. It is the stories of biblical women who defy patriarchal notions of what it means to be a woman that are known the least.

When the stories of biblical women are not told as regularly or passionately as the stories of biblical men, our communities of faith become grounded only in a partial history of God's people, the history of God's relationship with men. Men become seen as integral to God's work on earth, and women become easily regarded as peripheral. In failing to emphasize stories of biblical women in worship, we run the risk of forming women to feel that they have no purpose in God's plan for reconciliation, while

men are formed to feel that they must be leaders. Furthermore, we lose the power and wisdom that is revealed in the biblical stories of women.

We must also tell these stories for another reason: the stories of biblical women often reveal deep truths about the pain of the patriarchal system that oppresses women. Tamar is raped by her brother. A daughter is killed by her father, Jephthah, who claims to love her. In Judges 19, an unnamed woman is brutally gang-raped and then murdered and dismembered upon returning home. These are stories of terror and anguish, and today women continue to experience horrifying pain and violence as a result of patriarchy in both church and society.

When women are silenced and their stories go untold, patterns of oppression continue. But, when we gather up courage to speak the stories that haunt our communities, they lose their power to threaten us. It is difficult for violent patterns to repeat themselves when they have been brought into the light, and we can see them in our midst plainly. When we come face-to-face with the suffering that women experience, we are compelled to act. Telling the stories of biblical women who suffered as a result of patriarchy is vital if we hope to become communities of faith that oppose patriarchy and embrace God's longing for there to be joyful and equitable relationships between women and men today.

If the influence of patriarchy in worship is confused for the preferences of God, both women and men are prevented from knowing and experiencing God fully. Men are formed to be unaware of their societal privilege and, in some cases, to believe that devaluing women is divinely sanctioned. Women are generally formed to perceive themselves as less valuable than men and to associate God and the church with their own oppression. Undoing patriarchy in worship means becoming aware of the spirit from which each element of worship is formed and choosing elements that consistently resist patriarchy.

HOW TO USE THESE RESOURCES

In each of the five services in *Do You See This Woman?* you will find the basic elements of a worship service and a set of daily devotions. While the services are appropriate for congregational use, they are also adaptable for use by small groups. As you use these resources, customize the elements so

that they are meaningful and appropriate for your community. Elements provided in each service include a statement that describes the focus of the service, the biblical text(s) that the service is built on, song suggestions, visual suggestions, a call to worship, confession and assurance, a reflection on the text and its relevance, a suggestion for collective response to the text, a closing blessing, and seven devotions.

The **Focus statement** is meant to assist the leader in framing the service. From the **Call to worship** to the **Sending blessing**, the elements are listed in the order they might appear in a service. While the **confession** might be read by a leader or by those gathered, the **assurance** is meant to be spoken by a leader. The reflection on the text is found under the heading **Studying the Word & sharing our stories**. This section is designed to be most useful as inspiration for a sermon or meditation. It may also be read to the group as a reflection, in place of a sermon. Or, it can be used as a conversation starter for small groups. The suggestions for collective response are found under the heading **Reflecting & responding**. This section assumes that there has been some form of reflection, meditation, or conversation during the service and provides a way for participants to respond to the material by engaging it actively. The **Devotions** are meant to be offered to participants in the week before or after each service.

Service 1

Vulnerability and Strength

FOCUS STATEMENT

In the *Magnificat*, we find that one of the oldest Christian hymns is placed on the lips of a young, pregnant virgin. Mary's courageous words put the rulers and the rich in their place and reveal the strength of a woman who trusts in God. Likewise, the recognition of her "humble state" points to a vulnerability that confides in God to sustain her strength. Mary's hymn challenges all followers of Christ to consider what it means to embody both strength and vulnerability in living out God's call.

GATHERING

Call to worship

Leader: We are human creatures, given shape by God's hands and given life by God's breath. In our humanness, we are strong. In our humanness, we are vulnerable.

People: Strength and vulnerability are gifts from God.

Leader: Some of us might be filled to the brim with conceit, power, or wealth. Some of us might be overwhelmed by shame, oppression, or economic struggle.

People: Together, we long for liberation.

Leader: With strength and vulnerability, Mary sings of a time when those

with too much will be relieved of the burden of excess and those with too little will be given their fair share.

All: May it be so among us. Let God's mercy come.

Consider also:

Hymnal: A Worship Book #683

Hymnal: A Worship Book #715

Sing the Journey #123

Sing the Story #132

CONFESSION & ASSURANCE

God of grace, we open our spirits before you.

We who are comfortable exhibiting strength are often afraid of allowing ourselves to become vulnerable.

We who are comfortable exhibiting vulnerability are often terrified of asserting our strength.

The fear in us is what keeps us from you and from one another.

We long to be secure in the knowledge that we are loved and worthwhile.

Come, and take away our fear.

Come, and assure us that we are full of worth and deserving of love.

Come, teach us to be comfortable in strength, comfortable in vulnerability, comfortable in the full range of expression that you wove into human life.

(Pause.)

Know that you are God's beloved creation. Be assured that whatever may come, this will never change. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:41-55: Consider sharing the Scripture in a mini-drama of two women (Elizabeth preferably older and Mary younger—possibly showing Elizabeth's pregnancy) in order to emphasize the way Elizabeth's blessing and Mary's song take place as a sort of dialogue between the two women.

STUDYING THE WORD & SHARING OUR STORIES

Mary's song in Luke 1 (often called the *Magnificat* after the line "My soul magnifies the Lord" in Latin) introduces us to a young woman of surprising courage, one who "said yes" to God and, in doing so, partnered in bringing forth the greatest miracle since the creation of the world.

In seeking to rediscover Mary's story today, we face challenges: the virgin of Nazareth is among the most debated figures in Christian history. It is tempting to over-emphasize Mary's strength—her almost abstract holiness—and lose sight of her status as a human like us. It is also tempting to over-emphasize Mary's vulnerability, her everyday humanness, and lose sight of her special role in God's interaction with the world.

This two-sided challenge also relates to Mary *as a woman*. On the one hand, the *Magnificat* is a genderless song that could be sung by a man or a woman. It is rich with allusions to Hebrew Scripture (see, for instance, Ex 20:6; Pss 138, 71, 111, 107; 1 Sam 2:1-10). It also manifests the Beatitudes her son would go on to proclaim, in line with the prophetic vision of God as a champion of the *anawim*, the poor and the oppressed. Indeed, it is not a stretch to imagine that Jesus' reading of the scroll in Luke 4:18-19 and his preaching about the poor and the wealthy in Luke 6:20-26 have their roots in his mother's teaching and example, highlighted for us by Luke's account of her song only chapters before.

For this reason, the *Magnificat* has been a powerful force in activist movements like Latin American liberation theology. Mary's song is a spiritual and political inspiration and challenge for *all of us*. This perspective is buoyed up by the recent archaeological research confirming that Nazareth was a poor town, with absolutely no material evidence of wealth or power. Its inhabitants, including Mary, were impoverished peasants whose labor went to support the wealthy few of the Roman Empire and Jewish aristocracy. Residents of Nazareth would have seen their attempts at resistance cut down with harsh violence. When Mary sings of God scattering the proud, bringing down rulers, and sending the rich away empty, she does so "from below," making provocative claims about the Holy One's outlook on society—then and now.

On the other hand, when we focus exclusively on the general spiritual or political implications of Mary's song, we may forget its profound

significance as the song of a woman. Mary was a vulnerable peasant Jew living under Roman occupation, but she was also vulnerable because of her gender. She lived in a time when it was growing increasingly common for Jewish men to thank God each day for not being born a slave, Gentile, or woman. The fact that God chose to work with a woman, to bring reconciliation to the world *through her body*, to become incarnate *within her womb*, to enter the world *through her birth canal*, to rely on nourishment *from her breasts* is a fact that we should not overlook.

Elizabeth, too, highlights Mary's gender: "Blessed are you *among women*," she cries. And before turning to the broader social implications of God's work in the world in verses 50-55, Mary begins her song with a much more personal recognition of God's unique work in her own life (vv. 46-49). The humility (as a peasant in occupied territory, but also as a *woman*) from which the Savior has lifted Mary up is a vivid parallel to the more general humble positions God recognizes and honors. In other words, Mary boldly draws larger implications for the world from her own experience—and that is the experience of a woman undergoing the surprises of an unexpected pregnancy.

Mary of Nazareth was not alone in experiencing a particular sort humble state: throughout the millennia of church history, women's bodies have been viewed with suspicion, women's experiences held in low regard. (Consider second-century Tertullian's claim that women are "the Devil's gateway," Augustine's fifth-century speculation that women's embodiment means they are not image-bearers of God, John Knox's sixteenth-century tract against the "Monstrous Regiment of Women," or even very recent claims that women may teach men theology only when their womanliness remains inconspicuous and unthreatening.) It is not accidental that the courageous and humble words of the *Magnificat* are voiced not just by *any* person but by a woman who menstruated (and then didn't), who perhaps felt morning sickness and round ligament pain, was perhaps stigmatized for an unexpected pregnancy, and who went on to wipe children's noses and bottoms—including the nose and bottom of the Son of God.

Luke 1:41-55 reminds us that women's particular stories (including those of pregnancy and childbirth) are a worthy source of theological reflection; the passage also reminds us that brave sharing often occurs within dialogues, as Elizabeth's Spirit-inspired blessing calls forth Mary's

bold song. This lesson in dialogue and particularity is important as we approach Mary's story, which at points has been used to define womanhood in terms of mothering and submission in ways that limit and harm. Rather than *the* story of what it means to be an embodied woman, Mary reminds us that our myriad experiences offer opportunities to learn both courage and trust as we follow God together.

Mary's song—and the often-untold stories of pregnancy, pregnancy loss, childbirth and child-rearing, chosen and unchosen childlessness, celibate and more expressive sexuality—reminds us, again and again, of the strength and vulnerability present in women as well as men. Created in God's image, women—embodied women, with varying degrees of curves and swells and hormones—have profound lessons to teach the church, not in spite of our particular capacity or incapacity to bear life, but at times because of it. Our various stories are a layered harmony, our creativity a many-versed hymn. Mary's song is both the song of a young, pregnant, peasant virgin and also a song for the lips of all who seek to embody the creative courage and trust of a pilgrim people.

REFLECTING & RESPONDING

Large or small group: Before the service, hand out printouts of the Scripture passage, printed with space between each line of the *Magnificat*. In a time of silence or with music in the background, encourage participants to respond to the message by adding their own words of song between the lines of Mary's song. For example, ask participants to describe personal experiences of the manifestation of God's activities that Mary names.

Small group: Divide into groups or pairs to consider some or all of the following questions.

- How have Mary's story and song been a part of your faith journey in the past? What factors have influenced your appreciation for Mary's example?
- How does the *Magnificat* highlight the dynamic relationship between vulnerability and strength in our discipleship of Christ?

- Who comes to mind as a contemporary example of Mary's trust and courage?
- If you feel comfortable, share your own stories of lessons learned from pregnancy, infertility, childbirth, parenting, loss, other forms of creativity and nurturing, or even social stigmatization. How does your story resonate with Mary's?

SENDING BLESSING

As you go from here, may you be filled with song. May you be vulnerable enough to listen closely and discern its words. May you be strong enough to sing them loudly.

SONG SUGGESTIONS

Here in this place (*Hymnal: A Worship Book* #6)

My soul proclaims with wonder (*Hymnal: A Worship Book* #181)

My soul is filled with joy (*Sing the Journey* #13)

God is our refuge and strength (*Sing the Journey* #26)

Like a mother who has borne us (*Sing the Journey* #91)

Magnificat (*Sing the Story* #12)

Sing us a song of high revolt (*Sing the Story* #13)

My soul cries out (*Sing the Story* #124)

VISUAL SUGGESTIONS

Collect photographs and pieces of art that depict women. These can be women from your congregation, women from around the world, artful representations of women, or a combination. Be sure to choose images that display a diverse range of identities (age, race and ethnicity, body shape, etc.) and expressions (contemplative, active, peaceful, fierce, calm, energetic, etc.). It is best if at least several images are large enough to be seen clearly by those who will be seated farthest away. Put these images together as a large collage that will serve as the center visual for the service. Consider an arrangement of candles near the collage to symbolize the life and vitality represented by those depicted.

Devotions

Day One: Dialogue

Elizabeth and Mary's exchange is a vivid picture of how the Spirit can work in our dialogues: Hearing Mary's voice, Elizabeth speaks a prophetic and affirming word into Mary's life, which sets the stage for Mary's response in her vibrant hymn of praise. Think of other examples in which Spirit-filled boldness brings out more boldness and praise. What testifying might this story call forth from your own experiences? How might you open yourself to speak in a way that invites other voices to be raised?

God, awaken me to your Spirit. Move me to faithful boldness.

Day Two: Embodiment

Catholic bishops meeting in Puebla, Mexico, in 1979 called Mary "woman of the incarnation," noting the way her body was the channel through which God entered the world, not as an abstract idea but as a living, breathing person. Read Luke 1:39-45 and consider the powerful image of two pregnant women rejoicing over the way God's mysterious work in their own bodies extends to bless the people. Prayerfully consider what it means that Jesus entered human history through this "woman of the incarnation." What difference does it make?

God, I am grateful for the gift of human bodies and thank you for the miracle of life you draw forth from them.

Day Three: Trusting God's mercy

Mary's exchange with Elizabeth is rich with references to God's promises and mercy, or loyal love (Luke 1:45, 50, 54, 55). In Luke's account, it is clear that these two women are rooted in a tradition: their words echo phrases from the Law and Prophets, and they interpret their own surprising experiences in light of God's character. How might remembering stories like Mary's help ground us in a faith that will help us to trust God's mercy in unexpected circumstances of our own?

God, give me a faith with deep roots so that when life takes unexpected turns I might continue forward without fear.

Day Four: Scripture (looking back)

The Scriptures are full of stories of women who go from longing for children to mothering important figures in history after divine intervention. Against this backdrop, Mary's story is all the more striking: she is not a married woman judged for childlessness but rather a betrothed virgin judged for her pregnancy! She does not beg God for a child but rather agrees to accept and trust the angel's incredible news (Luke 1:26-38). Yet Mary's song has particular resonance with the song of another mother, prayed 10 centuries earlier. Read 1 Samuel 1:1-2:11. What characteristics do Hannah and Mary share? What do we learn from them together?

God, there is wisdom in the stories of your people. Give me eyes to see.

Day Five: Courage and humility

Mary's song has often been taught as a prayer of feminine submission, but it is also a courageous speaking of truth to power. In what ways does Mary show vulnerability in her song and in her life? In what ways does she show strength? You might wish to consider not only Luke 1 but also Luke 2; 8:19-21; 11:27-28; and Acts 1:12-14. How is Mary's combined humility and courage an example of the life to which Jesus calls all believers?

God, let me learn the way of faith that weaves courage and vulnerability together to make one garment.

Day Six: Scripture (looking forward)

Luke's gospel is full of contrasts between the mighty and the lowly, the hungry and the rich. The *Magnificat* stands strongly within that socio-economic perspective alongside passages like Jesus' teaching in Luke 6:20-26. Yet these verses have often been interpreted in strictly immaterial terms, sometimes allowing us to justify the status quo. Reading Jesus' teaching and his mother's prayer in both political and spiritual terms, which claims do you find the most challenging? Do you find yourself with Mary on the side of the humble, or do you recognize elements of power in your life?

Prayerfully consider how you might invite and trust God to turn your world upside down.

God, make me a part of the justice you are bringing to all the world.

Day Seven: Lectio Divina

Having spent the week contemplating the details, resonances, and implications of Luke 1:41-55, return on this seventh day to the passage as a whole. Quietly, slowly, even restfully read the passage again, giving yourself time to sit in silence and listen to the Spirit's teaching. Seek to treasure this story of the first Christian believer in your heart, pondering it as you go.

Silence.

Service 2

Acknowledging Our Pain

FOCUS STATEMENT

The story of Tamar is a painful and realistic telling of violence that women faced during biblical times. Since violence against women remains a taboo subject today, listening to this story provides us with an opportunity to pause and lament over the continued oppression of and violence against women. Tamar's story calls us to listen and lament with ears that hear, eyes that see, and hearts that know compassion.

GATHERING

Call to worship

Many times when we come to worship we come to express gratitude, joy, and praise. Today we set aside this time for sacred lament. We are here to lament violence and oppression that target women and oppose God's vision of justice, wholeness, and reconciliation for all. In the words of the psalmist we pray,

Rescue us from our enemies, O God.

Protect us from those who attack.

*Rescue us from the ones who love violence
and save us from the powers of evil.*

—Inspired by Psalm 59:1-2

Come near as we move into a space of vulnerability. Whether we have experienced violence or oppression, perpetrated violence or oppression, or are just beginning to learn of its pain, hold us fast and keep us safe. In you, we put our trust. Amen.

CONFESSION & ASSURANCE

Designate one person to begin this segment by beating a drum, or ringing tones on a bell or chimes, one beat per second. Do this for one minute.

Listen to the sound of the drum (or bell).

Let the rhythm of the drum echo the beating of your heart, the beating of our hearts.

Let the rhythm of the drum connect us to our Creator, our Mother, our Father.

Let the rhythm of the drum connect us to each other, gathered here today.

Let the rhythm of the drum connect us to sisters around the world.

As we gather in strength, we acknowledge brokenness.

We bring our wholeness to this circle.

We bring our brokenness and the brokenness of this world.

For all is not well.

All are not whole.

(Pause.)

Today we remember Tamar, a violated woman.

We hold her story.

We hold our own.

We hold each other. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

Second Samuel 13:1-20: Before the Scripture is read, ask those gathered to consider the following questions. If possible, gather responses.

- What does it mean to hold a story?
- What stories do we have permission to tell?
- What stories are we most likely to tell?

Explain that the text for today follows the story of David and Bathsheba: After noticing and desiring the beautiful Bathsheba, David summons her and she becomes pregnant. David orders the husband of Bathsheba to the front lines of battle, where he is killed, and David marries Bathsheba. Their son is born, but dies soon after birth. After mourning their son, David

and Bathsheba have other children—Solomon (who eventually succeeds David’s throne), Absalom, and Tamar. Amnon is David’s son from another wife, thus a half-sibling of Tamar.

Choose two or three people to read the biblical text as described. Allow for moments of silence as indicated:

- Verses 1-3
- *Silence*
- Verses 4-6
- *Silence*
- Verses 7-9
- *Silence*
- Verses 10-11
- *Silence*
- Verses 12-14
- *Silence*
- Verses 15-17
- *Silence*
- Verses 18-20
- *Silence*

STUDYING THE WORD & SHARING OUR STORIES

Every two minutes, a woman or girl in the U.S. is sexually assaulted. Nearly half of the victims are under age of 18, and over half of these assaults are never reported. Most of the assaults are committed by someone who is known by, and is close to, the victim.

For one week during each school year, clotheslines festooned with colorful T-shirts are displayed on college campuses around the country as part of a national movement called The Clothesline Project. From a distance the shirts—colorful and bright—look celebratory. The shirts wave in the air like flags announcing a festival. Upon closer inspection, these shirts tell

a different story. They are the narratives of women who have been sexually assaulted. The T-shirts are emblazoned with words, quotes, and images from survivors of violence. Some shirts bear the words of friends, partners, and allies who tell the story for those who cannot speak, or those who did not survive. “I was just a little girl.” “No means No!” “You were supposed to protect her.” “I am strong and beautiful. I am a survivor.”

In today’s text, Tamar is introduced as Absalom’s beautiful sister. Hebrew narrative is characteristically very sparing. No detail is meant to go unnoticed, and so it seems significant that she is described, from the moment we meet her, as beautiful. She is also a virgin. Her beauty “tormented” her brother Amnon. Amnon’s friend Jonadab helps Amnon hatch a plan to help trick Tamar into his bedroom.

Tamar’s story is not far-fetched at all. For many women, it is perilously close to their own experiences. Women and girls are socialized to believe that physical beauty is our most important attribute. When a woman is assaulted, she bears the risk of being blamed for the assault because of how she was dressed, because she “came on” to the assailant, or because she had a relationship with him before. The myth of being raped by the stranger in the bushes is just that—a myth. Women and children who experience sexual assault and rape are far more likely to be victimized by someone they know well—a trusted family friend, a teacher or counselor, a relative. When the assault is at the hands of someone known to and trusted by the victim and her friends or family, it makes it that much harder for the victim to tell—and to be believed.

In Tamar’s case, she is believed, but she is not immediately vindicated. King David does not punish Amnon because “he loved him, for he was his firstborn.” Amnon’s privilege as a male, and as a son of the king, allows him to do whatever he wants, even rape his sister.

For more on the reality of sexualized violence in the lives of Mennonites in particular, visit *Our Stories Untold* at OurStoriesUntold.com.

REFLECTING & RESPONDING

Large or small group: Gather slips of colored paper, several pens, a basket, pins, and a piece of cloth, approximately 2 x 3 ft. Have “Tamar’s robe” written on the cloth. Have the cloth draped on a table. If possible, arrange

your worship space in a circle, and put the cloth and table in the middle. Or, arrange the cloth and table at the front your worship space.

Invite participants to take a pen and several slips of colored paper as they enter the worship space at the beginning of the service and then share in the following litany and exercise as a response to the message.

Leader: Naming is important. To be named is to be known and identified, to take one's place. To be named is to have dignity. By naming women past, present, and future, we invite women and their stories into this space. By writing these names we honor all women's stories, their joys as well as their pains.

On your papers, write the names of women: biblical women, women you know, women you know of, or women you don't know. In a moment you will be invited to pin these names onto this cloth, which represents Tamar's robe.

(Explain that these names don't necessarily have to be women whose stories of abuse and violence we know. The name of any woman is welcome, regardless of that woman's particular story. The goal is simply to acknowledge the stories of the women who are named, whatever those stories may be.)

In silence, write names.

Leader: We acknowledge that too often women's pain is buried, denied, and hidden. This pain becomes a source of shame. By writing these names, we acknowledge pain. We do this not to glorify pain and brokenness, but to honor it. We name our pain and the pain of our sisters as a step toward ending violence against women and girls.

Today we remember, honor, and name the mothers, sisters, daughters, and friends who have experienced sexual assault and domestic violence. We also name and honor those who have not experienced this particular pain but carry the stories of others. We name and stand with all women, knowing that one in four will experience violence at some point in their lives. As we speak names, if you are more comfortable holding the name of a woman in silence, you are welcome to do that.

Let us name women and give voice to their stories. Now is the time to call the names of the women who came before us, our ancestors.

People: We call your names, and we hold your stories, all of them.

Allow space for names to be called out.

Leader: Now is the time to call the names of the women who are with us: our mothers, sisters, cousins, friends, daughters.

People: We call your names, and we hold your stories, all of them.

Allow space for names to be called out.

Leader: Now is the time to call the names of the women who will follow us: our daughters, granddaughters, students, friends.

People: We call your names, and we hold your stories, all of them.

Allow space for names to be called out; invite participants to come forward and pin the names on the fabric.

Leader: As we gather before these names, hear the words of the prophet:

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;
break forth, O mountains, into singing!
For the Creator has comforted her people,
and will have compassion on her suffering ones.
We have said, "The Creator has forsaken me,
the Holy One has forgotten me."
Can a woman forget her nursing child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.
See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are continually before me.
—*Inspired by Isaiah 49:13-16*

SENDING BLESSING

May you feel the weight of Tamar's story. May you not be crushed under its burden. May you be filled with righteous indignation at powers of violence and oppression that target women today. May you accept God's invitation to support justice, healing, and reconciliation for women and for all people.

SONG SUGGESTIONS

By the waters (*Hymnal: A Worship Book* #148)

Kyrie (*Hymnal: A Worship Book* #152)

When from the darkness (*Sing the Journey* #102)

Don't be afraid (*Sing the Journey* #105)

There is more love somewhere (*Sing the Journey* #109)

Nothing is lost on the breath of God (*Sing the Story* #121)

VISUAL SUGGESTIONS

Set up the table and cloth from the Reflecting & responding section as the visual for this service. Consider draping the cloth over a cinderblock or a stack of books to give it some height. Tear the cloth as if it was torn by Tamar in lament. Add to the table a vase with a single white rose or lily to symbolize remembrance. If possible, consider dimming the lights during the service. If the space allows, surround the area where worshipers will be seated (or standing) with a ring of candles to communicate that the group is being held safely in the arms of God.

Devotions

Day One: Holding a story of trauma

Reading the story of Tamar is an invitation to hold a story of trauma. Consider what it means to hold such a story. Perhaps it is your own story, perhaps it is the story of someone you know and love. Or it could be the story of someone you have never met. Who are the Tamars in your world? Who are the girls and women who have been betrayed by a trusted relative or friend? Light a candle in remembrance of this sister.

Lord, I light this candle in remembrance of _____ who has suffered. May she know that she no longer suffers alone. May she know that I have heard her story and I am holding her hand.

Day Two: Radical self-care

Biblical narratives invite us to reflect upon our own lives and situations. Tamar's story may remind us of our own stories. Take the opportunity to think of your own experiences. If you are a survivor of violence and abuse, take a step on a journey of radical self-care. The word *radical* means going to the root or origin. Believe that the origin of your existence is rooted in God's creative love, and that the intent of all creation is shalom—God's vision for holistic (mind, body, spirit) peace.

Creator God, you loved me into being. I commit myself to loving me.

Day Three: Supporting survivors

Do a bit of research to find what resources are available to women who have been abused in your town. Resources include shelters and transitional housing, legal resources, counseling, affordable child care, and job training. How can these services be supported? Shelters often need toiletries, sanitary items, books and games for children. Today, make a care package for a woman and her family who live in a shelter. As you pack the items, offer prayer for the women and their children and the families they may be estranged from.

Mothering God, may the woman who receives this care package know that she is worth loving. May these few resources be multiplied in your generous economy.

Day Four: Engaging culture

Television and other media glamorize violence, including sexualized violence. These pervasive images and messages serve to normalize gender roles and relationships where women are supposed to be submissive and men are supposed to be aggressive. Crime procedural dramas especially do this. Take an action today to support images of women and men in relationships that are not hierarchical and where violence is not portrayed as normal, inevitable, and sexy. Write a letter to advertisers and television executives.

God of justice, your kin-dom is evident when mutuality and equality are demonstrated, and where marginalized people are lifted up. Today I will raise my voice to support your justice.

Day Five: It's a human issue

Violence against women is not a women's issue—it is a human issue. Men can and do take steps to stop violence against women and girls. Today, take a moment to express gratitude to the men and boys in your life that interrupt the cycle of violence. Consider ways to support education, dialogue, and action among men. Since all forms of oppression are connected, conversations between and across genders can also support actions that work against racism and classism.

Creator God, help me as part of your human family to realize how beautifully and wonderfully we are made in our difference. May our diversity fuel creative energy to end violence and oppression.

Day Six: Formation

Children learn unspoken lessons about gender by watching adults around them. Both men and women can model strength and appropriate use of power, gentleness, and compassion to boys and girls. Today, make an effort to refrain from praising girls only for their looks and boys only for their strength. Read Tamar's story with the people in your life: children, teens

and young adults, and older persons. Ask them about their perception of gender roles and the connection to violence.

God of our youth and old age, thank you for the ability to grow in knowledge and truth through relationships. May I find joy in each of the stages of my life, and may I honor the stages of life I witness around me.

Day Seven: Interrupting the cycle of violence

Tamar's story is sobering and all too real. Like other women's stories in the Bible, it may leave too many unresolved questions for the reader. The last we read of Tamar, she "remained, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom's house." Eventually, Absalom avenges his sister by killing Amnon. Violence breeds more violence, and we do not know what becomes of Tamar. As we leave this text, reread the account of Tamar. Write a letter to Tamar, noting what questions you are left with. What are you hopeful for? How might this narrative propel you to further study and action?

Loving God, thank you for the stories of women in the Bible, even the painful ones. May I wear Tamar's story in my heart. May it propel me to seek peace for all people.

Service 3

Finding Our Way toward Healing

FOCUS STATEMENT

In the midst of lament, it can be difficult for us to believe that healing is possible. This story about a bleeding woman and a sick girl moves from lament toward healing, revealing that God hears our cries, cares deeply for our pain, and offers the possibility for new life. This is a story of hope and assurance. The bleeding woman makes a bold move of faith in order to be healed. She reaches up and takes the healing she needs from Jesus without explicit permission. Surrounding the woman's action is the story of a young girl also in need of physical restoration. In this story, Jesus takes full initiative to heal the girl. Like the woman who sought Jesus' touch, we too are active agents in our own healing. Like the girl Jesus healed, we remember that healing is a gift from God.

GATHERING

Call to Worship

Loving God, we are told that you are a healer.

*We are told that you comfort those who mourn
and bring justice to the oppressed.*

The oppressed are here among us.

In one way or another we are a people in pain.

Open our eyes to your way of healing.

Teach us to believe in the possibility of new life.

Give us hope.

Give us energy.

Give us strength.

Fill our lungs with new breath so that we are rested, renewed, and ready to stand and claim your healing power for our own lives and for the liberation of the world. Amen.

Consider also:

Hymnal: A Worship Book #732

Hymnal: A Worship Book #801

Sing the Journey #120

Sing the Journey #130

CONFESSION & ASSURANCE

God in whose image we are formed,

numerous are the ways we've learned to cope with the hurt we feel.

We distract ourselves with work or play.

We direct our attention toward the needs of others rather than acknowledging our own.

We self-medicate, hoping that indulgence will dress our wounds.

We lash out, wanting the responsibility for our healing to land on someone else's shoulders.

The hardest thing to do is to be still and let our pain be what it is.

We are afraid that in doing this our feelings may swallow us.

We are afraid that they may never give way to peace.

We are afraid that if we allow ourselves to give voice to our fear and sadness, we may find out that we are vulnerable and alone.

God of grace, forgive us for finding it difficult to trust in the possibility of healing.

Calm our fears, take us by the hand, and lead us to peace.

(Pause.)

Be assured that no matter the force of the pain you carry, healing is possible. There are sisters and brothers here willing to support you in your journey. Our loving God will guide and protect your path. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

Mark 5:21-43: Consider sharing the following monologue based on this text. The reflection in Studying the Word & sharing our stories is based on this monologue.

I am a woman and, praise God, my spirit has been restored. As a little girl, my spirit was strong. It rushed and played and reached and loved and was at rest in the arms of God. As a little girl my spirit was created beautifully, tenderly, abundantly, strong—until it wasn't.

Like a disease that takes life from the body, my spirit was stolen from me. And it wasn't my fault. I was just a little girl. Helpless like those who lie sick in bed my little girl eyes watched as the spirit of life in me was swept away. I panicked. I cried out for help. Those who loved me cried out to Jesus for help on my behalf, and Jesus, this grand and glorious Jesus, turned toward me, set his gaze upon me, and decided to come to my aid.

I know he really wanted to help, but it was too late. I was just a little girl. My spirit was stolen from me, as if by a disease. No fault of my own. And I died.

Years went by, one year after the next. The pain of death stayed with me, but life goes on. People have to eat and sleep and clean and work, and that's what I did. You would be surprised at how easy it is to ignore death—except, when it's not.

I carried death's pain with me, and I tried to hide it, but it's as if the experience left gaping wounds on my body. No matter how much I wanted to deny it, I was wounded and bleeding perpetually. That's not really . . . hide-able. Maybe people around me didn't know exactly what was wrong, but they certainly knew something wasn't right, and it made me strange, broken. It made me less on every account. Not only to others, but I believed it too. But it wasn't my fault. My spirit was stolen from me! I died, and I had only been a little girl.

I had no life to start with, and the pain of constant bleeding from my soul drove me to desperation. I tried everything and spent my last dime in the process. I tried every remedy recommended and then every remedy not-so-recommended, too. Nothing helped. No one helped. I had nothing left, and I so desperately wanted my life back.

People do questionable things when they have nothing left to lose. One day, I saw Jesus. I remembered that this person who claimed to

have healing power had turned toward me when I was in such trouble as a little girl. He had cared about me then. I can't really explain why, but I knew that there was something about this person that offered hope. If I could just get close to him . . .

Important people huddled all around Jesus: people who were respectable, people who deserved to spend time with him, people who hadn't tried all of those not-so-recommended remedies. But I just didn't care. For the first time in a very long time I dared to believe that my needs mattered: to him, to myself, and most importantly, to God. So I just did it! I walked up behind Jesus, and I touched him. I took what I needed to be well.

You know what it's like to touch someone. It's sacred. That thing in us that makes us created in God's image moves through us through touch. When I gave myself the gifts of love and respect by daring to touch Jesus without permission, chains I didn't even know I had broke and fell to the floor. The life that had been bleeding out of me for so many years . . . stopped. My shame and my guilt left me. Those voices screaming, "You're not good enough," "You are sick!" "You don't matter," fell silent. I closed my eyes and breathed in my first full breath of life since I was that little girl.

Jesus knew someone had touched him. He had felt me take healing power from him. The others were all standoffish about the whole matter, but I heard Jesus calling for me, and I came forward. Yes, I was trembling but not out of fear! Like a prisoner released from behind the bars of a life sentence, I was trembling because I was finally and unexpectedly free. I was alive. I had survived. And I told everyone. Jesus smiled and congratulated me, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."

So many years ago, when Jesus turned toward me as I lay there dying, I thought he had been too late. My spirit was stolen from me, and Jesus did not prevent me from dying. But I can see now that, as I bled in my life of death for so many years, Jesus never stopped walking toward me. And that day he had finally reached my side. Or perhaps that was the day that I finally noticed him next to me.

I was healed. I had been just a little girl; it wasn't my fault. My spirit was stolen from me, and I laid down and died. But Jesus walked to where I lay, stood next to me, and said, "Child, get up!" He didn't pick me up. He knew that to truly live I had to decide to stand. I had to reach out and touch him on my own, take my life back for myself. And yet, it was Jesus who showed me I could choose to save myself. At

those words, “Child, get up,” I walked forward, I touched him, took the healing I needed, and my spirit returned.

I am a woman, praise God; my spirit has been restored.

STUDYING THE WORD & SHARING OUR STORIES

This text is rich and multivalent, with a number of acceptable and helpful interpretations. Some have noticed that Christian survivors of sexualized violence, particularly women, can often connect with this biblical story in a powerful way. More than that, it is a story that leads to meaningful insight about what a process of healing from systemic patriarchy might look like. The creative interpretation of the text in this resource demonstrates how the story can be read as a tool for healing. This interpretation is designed as a monologue, spoken from the perspective of both the woman and the girl of the text. You will notice that in this monologue the woman and the girl are the same person.

In this interpretation of the text, healing begins when the bleeding woman, “dare[s] to believe that [her] needs mattered: to [Jesus], to [herself], and most importantly to God.” Patriarchy sends women the message that they are fundamentally flawed or inferior. Finding the courage to silence those messages and give oneself the “gift of love and respect” is an essential first step toward healing because the reach of injustice goes beyond what happens to outer, material things like bodies, land, and belongings. Injustice has the power to take possession of and injure a person’s inward faculties—the psychological self, the emotional self, the spiritual self.

The second step toward healing is taking for oneself what is needed for healing and justice. As soon as the woman dares to believe that she matters, she walks up behind Jesus, touches his clothes, and takes some kind of power from him. She must have pushed her way through the crowds surrounding Jesus, many of whom likely desired some kind of healing from him as well. She doesn’t wait in line but asserts her own needs even as the needs of others were evident. Note also that the woman takes this power from Jesus before he even knows what happens. The woman does not have his explicit permission, and the fact that she was ill with perpetual bleeding meant that touching Jesus would cause him to become ritually unclean. She does it anyway. And it is this behavior, this self-interested, bold action in

which the woman of the text takes what she needs without permission, that brings about her immediate healing. Her bleeding stops. Jesus congratulates her, affirms her audacious behavior, and gives her credit for her healing, saying, “Daughter, your faith has made you well.”

Taking is not always helpful. We don’t want to affirm the kind of taking that perpetuates violence and oppression, and yet there is clearly something about taking in this context that is good, helpful, and just. Why is taking significant? A common dynamic in oppression, injustice, and sexualized violence is that control is exercised over the oppressed, who are denied the right or ability to determine their own futures. A significant amount of the trauma caused by this kind of injustice is directly related to the experience of being denied a say in the path one’s own life will take or the way one’s own body is used. This means that justice and healing are also intimately related to (but not dependent on) one’s ability to regain a healthy degree of control over self. In the writer’s interpretation, taking power from Jesus represents the woman’s resistance to the notion that others should be able to determine whether or not she has access to healing and justice. She asserts her inherent worth as a created being in radical protest against the systems of oppression that insist she is worthless. Bold, brash, self-interested taking can be an important and faithful step toward justice.

A third element that encourages healing is the description of the woman’s relationship with Jesus as a partnership. They each play a different role but work together toward the same goal. The woman’s final step toward healing is her realization that justice and healing are what Jesus wanted for her all along. The effects of the first two ways she experiences healing are deepened and made secure by the assurance that her worth is also affirmed and protected by God.

REFLECTING & RESPONDING

Large or small group: Invite participants into a time of anointing. Consider using these words in your invitation:

In the ancient world, oil was considered a necessity of daily life. It was an aid in the preparation of nourishing food. It was used as fuel for lamps that provided light in the darkness. And, it was known to have healing properties that could soothe the distressed and cure the sick. In our service today,

this oil is a sign of God's care for you and God's intention to walk with you toward healing. May it give you strength.

Make a smudge with oil on the forehead of each who comes forward, and speak these words:

I/We anoint you with healing oil. May you be granted peace.

For smaller groups: Consider inviting participants to anoint one another rather than designating one or two people to provide anointing for the whole group.

SENDING BLESSING

Go from here ready to extend your hand. May you have the boldness to believe that healing is within reach.

SONG SUGGESTIONS

O healing river (*Hymnal: A Worship Book* #372)

Heal us, Immanuel, here we are (*Hymnal: A Worship Book* #375)

Healer of our every ill (*Hymnal: A Worship Book* #377)

You are all we have (*Sing the Journey* #29)

As tranquil streams (*Sing the Journey* #51)

Alleluia, the great storm is over (*Sing the Journey* #71)

What does the Lord require of you? (*Sing the Story* #54)

VISUAL SUGGESTIONS

The visual for this service is related to the reading of the monologue and the act of anointing. If you are not planning to include either of these elements, adapt the visual accordingly.

On a table in the center of the worship space or at the front of the room, place a vase of wilted flowers. Around the vase, arrange several lit candles and dishes of oil for anointing. At the end of the monologue, replace the vase of wilted flowers with a vase of vibrant, living flowers to communicate transformation and healing. Use the dishes of oil for anointing.

Devotions

Day One: Responding to suffering

Mark 5:21-43 features several people who are suffering. One woman suffers from chronic bleeding. Presumably others in the crowd suffer from ailments they hope Jesus will heal. Jairus's daughter suffers from illness that takes her life, and her parents and others of their household suffer the loss of the child. Do you see any other examples of suffering in this text? Think about how you might interact with these characters if you were written into the story. What is your reaction to witnessing their suffering? What is a response to suffering that encourages health for both those offering support and those who are in pain?

Compassionate God, let me be mindful today of those who are suffering. Show me how to care for them without neglecting the need to care for myself.

Day Two: Suffering transformed

Humans have a desire to make sense of unjust suffering. A tempting but harmful way to do this is to claim that suffering is justified if it brings about a greater good. For example, one might be tempted to say it is okay that the girl in the text died, because her death allowed her whole family to experience a miracle of God. Or, some claim that a woman's experience of abuse is worthwhile if it allows her to create greater awareness in her community around the problem of violence against women. By definition, injustice cannot be justified. Statements like these are both inappropriate and damaging. While suffering can be transformed, it is important to distinguish gratitude for transformation from gratitude for the original cause of suffering. The original suffering that came from injustice can never be justified. It is by the great grace of God that those who experience injustice find healing and new life.

God of justice, I lament that injustice causes suffering in this world, and I am grateful that you do not allow the power of injustice to have the final say. End injustice so that no more wounds will be made, and continue to transform the world's deepest pain into opportunities for new life.

Day Three: Intentionally aware

Both Jairus and the bleeding woman were confident that Jesus was needed for the healing they desired. Sometimes, one step on the journey toward healing is becoming aware of what in particular is needed. Spend time reflecting on a situation in need of healing. What might provide relief?

God, open my eyes to your path of healing. Guide me toward transformation that brings life.

Day Four: Agents in our own healing

What does Jesus mean when he says to the woman, “Daughter, your faith has made you well”? His words suggest that the woman is, at least in some way, responsible for her own healing. What is the role that she plays in her healing? What is the role that we each play in our own healing?

Empowering God, give me faith in my ability to contribute to my own healing. Give me the kind of faith that brings about healing.

Day Five: Recipients of grace

Jairus’s daughter does not reach out to Jesus for healing. She is unable to ask for help on her own. It is Jairus who goes to Jesus on her behalf, and Jesus goes out of his way to come to her aid. What is this girl’s role in her healing? Does she have one? What can we learn about God’s role in healing and transformation from her story?

Loving God, show me what it means to depend on you. Give me faith in your desire and your ability to restore my spirit so that I might feel safe allowing myself to depend on you.

Day Six: Community healing

In addition to healing for individuals, our world needs corporate healing. Our nations and communities groan over injustice created by fear, greed, and systemic oppression. Think of your own community. Which relationships are strained? What are the dynamics that need attention? Think specifically about whether there may be pain in your community related to dynamics of race or gender. How might you create space for healing?

Reconciling God, hold the world in your hands. Hold my community in your hands. Give me hands that are gentle and strong so that I might hold it with you.

Day Seven: Supporting one another, together

Read Mark 5:21-43 again. What is the role of community in individual and collective healing? In what ways does the community get in the way of healing? What are the ways that the community participates in making healing possible? What is the role of your community in making healing possible for those in your midst who are hurting?

God, through one and through many you make mountains move. Join the hands and feet of those in my community so that we might work together to establish peace.

Service 4

Righting Relationships, Becoming Ourselves

FOCUS STATEMENT

Miriam and Deborah are strong women leaders and prophets of the Old Testament. Both have authority to speak to God's people with conviction, and Jael plays a prominent role in carrying out Deborah's prophetic word. These women represent the kinds of full participation possible for women in the church when individuals and communities move toward right relationships. The stories of Miriam, Deborah, and Jael help illustrate challenges we face when responding to God's call to become leaders.

SCRIPTURE

Exodus 15:19-21
Judges 4:1-24

GATHERING

Call to Worship

We have before us three candles of contrasting colors, shapes, and sizes. Though each stands on its own, they fit together. The unique qualities of one enhance the beauty of the others. These candles represent three different faces of God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. They also represent the ways that each of us is different from one another. Today, we acknowledge and celebrate our differences. We will allow ourselves to be who we are created to be, to let go of inclinations that tell us we should be otherwise.

*God, when your healing comes we are freed.
We are freed from the powers that hold us down.
We are freed from the powers that drive us to hold down others.
When your healing comes we see ourselves and each other as you see us: as beautiful creations, different from one another, riddled with imperfection, and valuable beyond measure.
Come near to us now and make this a space of freedom. Amen.*

CONFESSION & ASSURANCE

*God of grace, you made us so that we could be community to one another.
Sometimes we love each other well.
Sometimes rather than acting as partners together in your service we compete against each other for power.
Some of us are taught to take more than our fair share.
Others of us are taught to settle for far too little.
Show us what it means to be in right relationship with one another.
For it is the way we regard one another that reveals our love for you.
(Pause.)*

Be assured that you are released from the weight of having managed your relationships with yourself, God, and others imperfectly. Know that you are free to make amends. Amen.

STUDYING THE WORD & SHARING OUR STORIES

Miriam and Deborah are named as prophets of Israel, spiritual leaders called to speak to the people on behalf of God. Women and men alike were to heed their words. Miriam led women in triumphant dance, and Deborah led men into a war for the liberation of her people.

Before Israel became a monarchy, the people were governed by judges instead of kings. In addition to her role as prophet, Deborah was the judge of Israel, making her Israel's recognized leader. She is one of the few who is depicted as a wholly just and good leader. In ancient Israel, a just judge was one who honored God, administered justice among the people, cared for the marginalized and oppressed, protected Israel from harm, and did not abuse the power of leadership for personal gain. While other leaders in the book of

Judges (and elsewhere in the biblical record of Israel's history) fail to meet the expectations of this role, Deborah preforms them all. In the book of Judges, she is lifted up as a model example of a righteous and faithful leader.

In some areas of church and society today, women are welcomed into positions of leadership. In others, certain leadership roles are reserved for men only. But a community must do more than take stock of the gender identities of those in leadership in order to determine whether it is participating in the systemic oppression of women or making headway toward undoing patriarchy and facilitating community-wide justice and healing. (For explanations of patriarchy and systemic oppression, see the introduction to *Do You See This Woman?*) The subliminal dynamics that shape relationships between members and guide a community's system of values and beliefs play a hidden but powerful role in revealing a community's level of commitment to creating places of faith that are just, safe, and healthy for both women and men.

Society is full of patriarchal messages that teach us to stereotype gender roles. Women are told they must be kind, warm, accommodating, sexy helpers. Men are told they must be strong, decisive, brave, independent providers. If a man exhibits qualities that are traditionally ascribed to women, he is called weak. If a woman exhibits qualities that are reserved for men, she is called unfeminine. While all patriarchal stereotyping is built on the implicit claim that women are inferior to men, the pressure for men and women to fit into stereotyped gender roles is harmful and restricting to all.

The relationship between Deborah and Israel's military commander, Barak, shows what is possible when we commit ourselves to God's vision of all things reconciled and let go of the pressure to fit socially prescribed standards for male and female identity.

Traditional gender role stereotyping prescribes that military responsibility should fall on the shoulders of men. Historically, and even sometimes today, it was considered inappropriate for women to participate in the military at all, much less serve in its leadership. But in Judges 4 it is Deborah's responsibility to protect Israel from its oppressors. She is the one who makes the decision to send Israel's soldiers into battle and gives orders to Israel's military commander, Barak.

Being under the authority of a woman might have been challenging for Barak if he was raised in a culture that taught that men were supposed to

be in control, especially of the military. Responding to societal pressure to demonstrate his masculinity, it is conceivable that he might have resisted Deborah's orders and attempted to subvert her authority. But Barak doesn't show any sign of discomfort with her leadership. He doesn't seem to feel that being under the authority of a woman poses any threat to his identity as a man of God. To the contrary, he responds by saying that he will accept Deborah's instruction as long as she accompanies him into battle.

His request vulnerably reveals his belief that his chances of winning are better if he has Deborah's guidance during battle. He is so convinced of the value of her leadership that he is willing to give up the honor he might have received for Israel's victory had he led the soldiers into battle on his own. Since Barak chose not to lead alone, Deborah lets him know that Israel's victory will be won by a woman. Again, Barak shows no sign of offense. There is no reason to believe that Deborah's prophecy is intended or received as an insult. Rather, it is welcome assurance that Israel will, indeed, be victorious. The liberation of the people of Israel from their oppressors is what is important. The gender identities of those responsible for achieving liberation are not.

The point of examining the relationship between Deborah and Barak is not to conclude that women must be leaders and that men must follow. Rather, it is a relationship that demonstrates that among God's people gender is not a determining factor in whether one will be called to lead or follow. Both roles can be filled by women or men. Both roles have value, because both are necessary for the work of God to be carried out. In a world where society teaches women and men from a young age that they may only act in ways that fit within the boundaries of their stereotyped gender roles, it is important that communities of faith intentionally dismantle patriarchal messages so that we are not restricted in our ability to discern the direction of God's leading for each uniquely gifted member.

The story of Deborah and Barak cannot be completed without mentioning Jael. She is the one who fulfilled Deborah's prophecy that Israel's victory would be secured by a woman. Jael won liberation for Israel when she killed the leader of the Canaanite army by driving a tent stake through his head while he was sleeping. The violent nature of this act can tempt readers to gloss over Jael's part in the story without recognizing her heroism. In fact, readers may find themselves uncomfortable calling Miriam and Deborah

model leaders due to their participation in violent acts. Especially for Christians whose faith results in a commitment to nonviolence, it can feel uncomfortable to hold up women who participate in violence as models of faith.

This is discomfort that is important to acknowledge and wrestle with. At the same time, the dilemma is one that applies to most all of Israel's leaders. In the Old Testament, many of those who are called people of great faith are involved in violent acts. Abraham was presumably willing to kill his son at God's command. Moses murdered an Egyptian and directed the Hebrew people into battle against foreign nations. David killed Goliath, went on to command Israel's military, took sexual advantage of Bathsheba, and had her husband killed. While the violence in the stories of Miriam, Deborah, and Jael may make a more striking impression on readers since patriarchal societal messages claim it is more natural for men to be violent than for women, there is no reason to question a female figure's relationship to violence with a vigor greater than that which we apply to male figures of the Bible.

Lastly, putting the stories of Miriam, Deborah, and Jael in conversation with one another provides an opportunity to see women as dynamic individuals rather than as a group of one mind.

Jael was not from the Hebrew lineage. She came from a Midianite clan called the Kenites. Her people were dark-skinned, seminomadic, and originated from Kush—a region which today covers parts of Ethiopia and Sudan. The Kenites joined the Hebrew people during the exodus from Egypt led by Moses, albeit not without experiencing opposition. When Moses announced his intention to marry a Midianite woman, Miriam disapproved based on the woman's ethnicity and tribal affiliation. Jael and her people were aligned with the Israelites, but she was not officially one of them. Leaders like Miriam contributed to her marginalization. And yet, it was Jael who fulfilled Deborah's prophecy and secured liberation for the Israelites.

Today, similarly complicated dynamics between women exist. Some women carry more systemic power than others. Women with more power sometimes use that power to oppress women who have less. In the United States, there is a history of white women attempting to separate concern for undoing patriarchy from concern for undoing racism, therefore contributing to the oppression of women of color. By learning to acknowledge the differences, tensions, and conflicts that exist between respected women

leaders of the Bible, like Miriam and Jael, we can learn to acknowledge the differences and tensions that exist between women today. Only when women are respected as leaders, allowed to be different from one another, and held accountable when they perpetuate injustice will we find ourselves in right relationship with one another.

REFLECTING & RESPONDING

Large or small group: As a way to embody movement toward right relationships, invite those gathered to turn toward one another and pass the peace of Christ, using this modified greeting:

Person 1: For either of us to be well, we both must be well.

Person 2: Truly. The peace of Christ be with you.

Person 1: And also with you.

SENDING BLESSING

Go from here freed from any limitation that keeps you from being who you are called by God to be. Go remembering to love and encourage one another.

MUSIC SUGGESTIONS

Here I am, Lord (*Hymnal: A Worship Book* #395)

This little light of mine (*Hymnal: A Worship Book* #401)

We are people of God's peace (*Hymnal: A Worship Book* #407)

Wade in the water (*Hymnal: A Worship Book* #446)

If you believe and I believe (*Sing the Journey* #32)

Loving Spirit (*Sing the Journey* #34)

Arise, your light is come! (*Sing the Story* #30)

VISUAL SUGGESTIONS

On a table in the center of the worship space or at the front of the room, arrange three large candles of contrasting colors, shapes, and sizes. This visual is referenced and explained in the call to worship.

Devotionals

This set of devotions is a compilation of reflections offered by women leaders from Mennonite churches in New York City. Each woman is responding to the question: In what way are you inspired by the biblical figures Miriam, Deborah, or Jael?

Day One: Sandra Perez

While women are often taught to be pleasant and submissive, Deborah is inspiring because she was bold. Deborah was a judge and prophet. She was influential, capable, and held in high regard. Deborah had great influence, and she was a woman of action. The commander of the military, Barak, followed her leading, and her leading alone. In my ministry, it helps me to lean on the example set by Deborah. Sometimes, though, I am viewed as not feminine enough because I am outspoken.

O God, continue to call into leadership strong women who encourage others with words like Deborah's: "Go forward, God goes with you!"

Day Two: Addie Banks

I see some of my own story in Miriam's. At a young age, she experienced a call from God. Miriam held God's vision, was committed to it, and eventually played an important role in its realization. As a child, I heard Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preach about the Beloved Community, a place where all people can share justly in the riches of creation. I see myself as a herald of this community.

Nurturing God, you call girls and women to great visions and great deeds. Let those you call trust in the direction of your leading. Let all of your people trust in the leadership of those you call.

Day Three: Vonetta Storbakken

Jael's faith inspires me because she was wholly devoted to helping God's promise of liberation unfold in the lives of an oppressed people. Jael

fulfilled Deborah's prophecy that Israel's oppressors would fall, and her actions moved the people to rise up and claim the promise God had for them.

God of the oppressed, make us bold enough to work for liberation even when it is uncomfortable or inconvenient. Give us strength to stand up for ourselves, for the oppressed in our midst, and for your vision of all things reconciled.

Day Four: Tania Melendez Guzman

I find Debora's spirit of loyalty and her willingness to be faithful in the midst of intense conflict inspiring. We know that God continues to call women and men to serve as leaders today. It is a blessing when the church is also able to recognize that women today, like Deborah, are called to exhibit strength, passion, and authority, in addition to compassion.

God, continue to bless women with gifts for leadership and guide the whole church in embracing the many styles of leadership you call forth among women and men.

Day Five: Ruth Yoder Wenger

I am inspired by Miriam's song because I, too, am a song leader. The resounding message of Miriam's song is liberation. The horse and rider who threaten the people of Israel are thrown into the sea. Miriam and the women with her dance and sing for joy as their people are given the gift of safety.

Liberating God, when we are faced with danger send us sisters who dance the struggle with us, give us brave songs of freedom, and fill us with the power to sing out loud.

Day Six: Ana Damaso

I appreciate Deborah as a strong woman. I hope that her example urges other women not to allow anything to keep them from participating in the ministry to which God has called them. I hope that her example will give women and men in the church motivation to challenge those who do not believe women are called by God into leadership.

God of love, lead us past all obstacles that would keep women from living out your call for their lives. Let our communities of faith welcome the gifts of women, and in turn, welcome you.

Day Seven: Sonni Carrion

I see Miriam as the kind of leader who is, at the same time, a faithful supporter to her family and community. She participated in God's plan to free her people from slavery, and she helped her people express themselves in praising God.

God of community, teach us to be gracious leaders committed to supporting one another. When we need support, send us caring companions.

Service 5

Listening for the Voice of Wisdom

FOCUS STATEMENT

The female figure of Wisdom—*Sophia*—describes a facet of God. In Proverbs 8, we read that Wisdom existed before the beginning of the world, working alongside God in the act of creation. In this last service, we take the time to heed her words, “And now, my children, listen to me” (Prov 8:32). With Sophia, we reflect on the role of Wisdom in our lives and in the life of the church.

GATHERING

Call to Worship

Leader: We are here to dwell in the company of the one who calls herself Wisdom.

We are here to witness the creativity of the skilled artisan who stood with God during the creation of the universe.

We are here to listen for the voice that offers understanding.

People: Wisdom calls out to us from the hills and from the cities. She opens the way to clarity of mind and spirit. She points to the way of justice.

Leader: Wisdom calls out to all humanity. She invites us to eat of the feast she has prepared. Let us open ourselves to her guidance and find the courage to be moved.

Consider also:

Sing the Journey #119

CONFESSION & ASSURANCE

Loving God, your Wisdom fills the air we breathe and calls out to us from all around.

There are times when we hear it clearly and find our way to the path of your leading.

There are other times when hearing is difficult:

when we are distracted by other voices competing loudly for our attention;

when we are unable to discern which of the voices is yours;

when we are afraid that listening to the voice of Wisdom may call us to make significant changes in our ways of living, thinking, or relating;

when we aren't sure that we are strong or worthy enough to move in the direction we are being called;

when we are tired and lack the energy it takes to listen.

We acknowledge that in these times we struggle to hear and value the voice of Wisdom.

And yet, she persists. Your Wisdom never stops calling.

Give us hearts that yearn for understanding.

Make her voice strong and clear.

Take care of us as we search for sure footing along Wisdom's path.

(Pause.)

Be assured that missed opportunities to respond to Wisdom's call are not held against you. Our God is a God of grace, whose invitation does not expire.

Amen.

SCRIPTURE

Proverbs 8:1–9:6

STUDYING THE WORD & SHARING OUR STORIES

Wisdom calls: “Women and men, people everywhere, I’m calling out to you! I cry out to all humankind!” Just what or who is this Wisdom who calls to us in Proverbs and other places in the Old Testament? And who is “Sophia,” a name we often hear associated with the figure of Wisdom?

Wisdom is a facet, or characteristic, of God that appears in both the Old and New Testaments, particularly in the so-called “Wisdom literature”—Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs. Wisdom is described as sound judgment, common sense, good counsel, understanding, and the upright way. Wisdom in the Bible (with a capital *W*) has deeper significance than the wisdom (lowercase *w*) in our general vocabulary. Wisdom in the Bible is more than making smart decisions, more than astuteness gained with age, and more than sophistication in scholarship and philosophical reflection. Biblical Wisdom is an animating quality of God that people have access to through God’s grace and love. If we are open to it, Wisdom can inhabit us and transform our hearts and minds.

Proverbs 8:12 speaks of Wisdom as a *habitat*, particularly the habitat of sound judgment. People today are increasingly learning about the importance of the environment for health and wholeness. The quality of the air we breathe is in direct relationship with one’s likelihood for illness. Similarly, Wisdom as an element of our inner environment is equally important. It is the element that allows for healthy thought, reflection, and decision making. Engaging more than just our minds, biblical Wisdom is an inner habitat that allows our minds to become integrated with our hearts, spirits, and bodies so that our thoughts, reflections, decisions, and actions are grounded in the many ways God might choose to communicate with us.

What about Sophia? Usually, the Bible is translated into English using ancient manuscripts written in either biblical Greek or biblical Hebrew. *Sophia* (σοφία) is the Greek word for wisdom, and *hok-ma* (הכמה) is the Hebrew word for wisdom. Unlike English, nouns have gender in Greek and Hebrew. In both Greek and Hebrew the words for wisdom are feminine, and the biblical text uses the pronoun *she* when referring to God’s Wisdom. Because Wisdom is personified in the biblical text, named as a part of God’s own being, and has a deeper and fuller meaning than the

notion of wisdom in common speech, many translators of the Bible prefer to capitalize biblical Wisdom. Others forego translating the Greek word σοφία altogether and instead spell its pronunciation in English: Sophia. The hope is that these choices will help communicate that God's Wisdom is a character of profound significance.

Since it is common in the church and in many cultures of North America for characteristics of God to be described using predominately male language, it can be both challenging and liberating to embrace the biblical account of Wisdom as a boldly feminine facet of God. She was with God before creation began. She calls humanity to her side with authority. She is to be revered as a teacher to all, men and women alike. It is from her that rulers gain the power to govern justly. She offers a feast with bread and wine to anyone willing to sit at her table. Those who find her find life.

These descriptions of Wisdom in Proverbs have a relationship to certain descriptions of Christ in the New Testament. Consider Colossians 1:15-20, in which Christ is also said to have existed "before anything was created." Or, think of Gospel accounts of the Last Supper, in which Christ offers the disciples bread and wine at his table. Scattered throughout the New Testament are claims that those who follow Christ will find life. Perhaps even more interesting is the gospel of John's use of the term *the Word* in referring to Christ. In the gospel writer's culture, wisdom was commonly described as a "Word from God." While there is no way to know for sure, it is possible that using the term *Word* was the writer's way of describing the concept of biblical Wisdom. By placing Word, and thus Wisdom, squarely in context with God in Christ, the gospel of John asserts that all true Wisdom comes from and resides in God in Christ.

Proverbs 8 tells us that above the clamor of all that competes for our attention day by day, biblical Wisdom calls out to humanity, inviting each of us to pause, turn toward her, and listen. To those who hear her, she offers understanding. Better than silver and gold, the wealth she gives is that of truth, justice, clarity of mind and spirit. The power she gives does not perpetuate abuse, coercion, manipulation, or oppression. Wisdom offers her followers the kind of power that participates in God's mission of reconciliation for all of creation. It is the power of divine liberation.

May we be guided by the quest to hear the voice of God's Wisdom. Let us seek out her table, where she has prepared food and drink. Let us

respond to her invitation to come eat her bread, drink her wine, and live, walking in the path of understanding. For those who find Wisdom find life and earn the favor of God.

REFLECTING & RESPONDING

Large or small group:

Option 1: During the service, create a space for participants to reflect on the various ways that Wisdom manifests in daily living. Ask all who are gathered to call out the names of people, communities, or other aspects of God's creation (crashing waves, a sunrise, the playfulness of animals) that have revealed to them some aspect of God's Wisdom.

Option 2: Prior to the service, ask participants to bring to the service items that represent some aspect of God's Wisdom. As a visual, set up a table in the center or front of the worship space. Place food and drink (perhaps bread or fruit or cheese and a goblet filled with juice) in the center of the table with empty space around it. As a response activity, invite participants to bring forward their items and decorate the table. Conclude with the following prayer:

God, you saturate our lives with opportunities to hear the voice of Wisdom. In bringing these reminders of Wisdom forward we acknowledge and celebrate the many gifts she offers. Give us ears that listen to her voice and hearts that seek her table, a table filled with good gifts, with food and drink, with understanding and life. Amen.

Option 3: Set up a table in the center or front of the worship space and fill it with food and drink (perhaps juice and bread, crackers, cheese, fruit, or candy). Provide utensils for serving and eating. As a response activity, invite participants forward to partake of the feast set at Wisdom's table. Consider using these words as an invitation to the feast:

Leader: Doesn't Wisdom call?

Doesn't Understanding raise her voice?

On the hills and throughout the cities, she cries out:

Women and men, people everywhere, I'm calling out to you!

I cry out to all of humanity!

Whoever wants enlightenment, step this way! Abandon your foolishness that you may live and walk the path of understanding. You who find me find life and earn the favor of God.

Wisdom has prepared her food, decanted her wine, and set her table, inviting anyone who yearns for life to come eat her bread and drink her wine.

You are invited to come now, to eat and drink at Wisdom's table.

—*Inspired by excerpts from Proverbs 8:1–9:6*

SENDING BLESSING

Go from here, and remember to listen for the voice of Wisdom calling. She who existed with God from the beginning of time wants nothing more than to draw you near. May you find and be comforted in her embrace.

SONG SUGGESTIONS

I cannot dance, O Love (*Hymnal: A Worship Book* #45)

I long for your commandments (*Hymnal: A Worship Book* #543)

O God, great womb (*Hymnal: A Worship Book* #155)

Like a mother who has borne us (*Sing the Journey* #91)

Long before my journey's start (*Sing the Journey* #36)

Love the Lord your God (*Sing the Story* #55)

Comme un souffle fragile / Like a tender breath, stirring (*Sing the Story* #106)

VISUAL SUGGESTIONS

Place a table in the center or front of the worship space. Depending on which reflecting and responding activity you chose, fill the table with either a symbolic or actual feast. Add colorful cloth, candles, or flowers. Wisdom's table is one of abundance, warmth, and welcome.

Devotions

Day One: Wisdom calls out

At the heart of Christian faith is the idea that humans are invited to be in relationship with God. Relationships are built on trust, communication, and mutual respect. Both people and God desire to be heard by one another. It is fairly easy to imagine people calling out to God, asking for God's attention and love. In our own lives and throughout the Bible we find countless examples. Certainly, there are other places in the Bible where it is God who calls out to the people, but it is more difficult to imagine what this experience might be like for God. Imagine God as one who yearns for the attention and love of human beings. Imagine God striving to cry loudly enough that people will listen. Imagine God calling out the same message, time and again, wondering how long it will be before the people hear and respond. Proverbs 8 is an example of God's call to us. Wisdom cries out and beckons all of humanity to follow her path toward understanding.

God, you desire a relationship built on trust, communication, and respect. In the same way that I want you to listen to me, I am willing to listen to you. Quiet my spirit today so that I might hear your voice.

Day Two: Longing for truth

Proverbs 8:6-7a reads, "Hear, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right; for my mouth will utter truth." In a polarized political environment where those with conflicting ideologies routinely tear each other down, discerning true words of hope and wisdom can seem like a daunting task. Find comfort in the assurance that Wisdom is never silent. She has promised to speak, to cry out, even!

God, keep your promise to continue speaking. Raise Wisdom's voice so that we might hear her and not become lost.

Day Three: Wisdom in discipleship

In the Gospels, Jesus gives attention to the poor and the marginalized, lifting up those who are not valued by society. Jesus listens to those who are silenced, and he challenges the social, political, and religious systems that ignore or oppress marginalized people. Historically and today, women are among the marginalized. In Proverbs, Wisdom is said to be the source of justice on earth. Following Jesus and walking the path of Wisdom are one in the same. Who are the people in your life, congregation, or community who carry stories that need to be heard? What are the stories from your life that have not yet been told? Consider making or renewing a commitment to listen compassionately to those who have been silenced.

God, give me the courage to quiet the chatter of my mind and listen. Let me listen to the stirrings of my own heart. Let me listen to the whispers you send. Let me listen to those around me who are seldom heard.

Day Four: Wisdom in Christ

First Corinthians 1:24 tells us that Christ is the “Wisdom of God.” Compare Proverbs 8:22-23; John 1:1-3; and Colossians 1:15-20. What do you notice about the relationship between Jesus and Wisdom suggested by these texts? Some say that the Wisdom of God in Proverbs is the Holy Spirit. Others have identified Wisdom as a pre-configuration of Jesus before he took human form. Whether or not the Wisdom of God can be associated with a specific aspect of the Trinity, it is significant that both God’s Wisdom and the Word have existed from the beginning of time and continue to play an important part in sustaining the life of the world.

God, let me learn of your Wisdom from Christ. Open my eyes to that I might see the many creative ways your Wisdom is manifest.

Day Five: Considering gender

In the Bible, God is described in both female and male terms. God is described as Father and King of Kings as well as a mother holding a child at her breast (Isa 49:15). Even so, metaphors that describe God in male terms are more commonly used in most Christian communities today. Wisdom is a facet of God that is consistently described with female language in

the Bible. Consider what it would feel like to welcome and use female descriptions of God in your own life and faith. Would it be challenging? Healing? In Proverbs, Wisdom is also given attributes that patriarchal society typically associates only with men. She is said to be a teacher, a leader, a provider, and a just judge. All people, male and female, are to follow her ways. Think of assumptions that are made about gender roles in your community. Consider what these assumptions offer your community as well as ways that they might be harmful to both women and men.

God, you created female and male, and you called all of your creation “good.” Let us come to know the breadth of who you are. Let us value all you have made us to be.

Day Six: Wisdom in creation

Evidence of God’s Wisdom is woven throughout creation. Giving attention to the natural world can be a helpful way to listen for Wisdom’s voice and learn about the nature of resilience, diversity, interdependence, and sustainability. Jesus often prayed from secluded, natural places. In the Sermon on the Mount he encourages followers to learn from the Wisdom sewn into creation, saying, “Why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will God not much more clothe you—you of little faith?” (Matt 6:28-20). Spend time in creation and consider how Wisdom might be speaking to you from the wild.

God, all that you created is infused with your Spirit. The falling rain, the growing grass, the animals that work and play: let these be my teacher today.

Day Seven: Wisdom’s feast

Read Proverbs 9:1-6 and Isaiah 55:1-5. Both passages are invitations to a feast, each full of rich food and drink, each open to anyone who wants a seat at the table. Women, men, young, old, wealthy, poor, and people of all nations are invited to feast together with the host. This is a table of diverse company. It is a table that provides nourishment for people who are, in

many ways, different from one another. Contemplate what nourishes you. Visualize yourself receiving nourishment from Wisdom's table. Consider how you might also be aware of that which provides nourishment for people who are different from you.

God, that which nourishes my soul is the food you set before me at Wisdom's feast. Let me learn to accept your hospitality. Let me learn also to accept the hospitality you also offer strangers.

