

Priest The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew.
People **Glory be to thee, O Lord.**

Jesus said to the disciples, “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Most High God. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Woman. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Woman. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Redeemer is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Woman is coming at an unexpected hour.”

Priest The Gospel of the Lord.
People **Praise be to thee, O Christ.**

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Translation: Wilda C. Gafney. *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church, Year A*. New York, NY: Church Publishing, Inc. (2021), 2.

The First Sunday of Advent – Matthew 24:36-44
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Sedona Arizona

*“Keep awake therefore,
for you do not know on what day your Redeemer is coming.”¹*

As we begin a new liturgical year, the lectionary readings can sound rather unsettling because apocalyptic language is used to warn of transformative events that will indicate the end of an age, or the end of all time – the eschaton or Judgment Day. Wake up! Be alert! Get your house in order. Be prepared. For you do not know the day or hour when the end will come. And you do not know whether you will be saved by divine intervention or left behind in an evil world.

During the early Roman era, apocalyptic thought was an extremely dualistic religious perspective with clear distinctions between good and evil, and was often used to prophesy about a time of major transition that revealed God's divine plan for humanity. The apocalyptic genre is often used today to instill fear in people so that they may become faithful servants of God in particular ways. But often those ways have resulted in the marginalization or exclusion of people who do not believe exactly as they are told, and do not live according to certain precepts based on literal translations of scripture. Scripture has become weaponized as a tool of oppression by those with religious and political power, authority, and agency.

Such interpretations of scripture have often targeted women, non-binary people, and people of color to control their bodies and lives, whether through misogyny, ostracism, imprisonment, slavery, or death. However, using apocalyptic language to keep certain people in their place is less reveling about God than about

¹ Translation: Wilda C. Gafney. *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church, Year A*. New York, NY: Church Publishing, Inc. (2021), 2.

patriarchal societies that maintain systems of domination and exclusion. Both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures often exclude the names of women and their important contributions to the community because their cultural practices are androcentric.

It is no wonder then, that Matthew begins his gospel with a long patrilineal genealogy of Jesus, totally ignoring the role of women in procreation and in shaping the moral practices and religious beliefs of their culture. Ironically, these were the same cultures that honored women for their fertility and for giving birth to the next generation – especially if those women were married and gave birth to sons. This patriarchal practice focused on the role of fathers and sons, and to left women and girls in the shadows. In Christian Scripture, Jesus is referred to as Son of God and Son of Man always in reference to his relationship with the Father. Despite being born of a woman, there has yet to be any reference to Jesus as Woman-Born or Son of Woman, until now.

Female and non-binary theologians are now offering gender-expansive translations of the biblical texts, that we might hear the Good News with fresh ears and open hearts. Hebrew biblical scholar and Episcopal priest, Wilda Gafney, recently published a new lectionary that challenges the dominant androcentric interpretations of scripture and invites us to be spiritually nurtured by a fuller sense of God's love and nourished by the gracious presence of the feminine Divine.

Blessed Mary is often referred to as *theotokos*, or the God bearer. The Holy Mother of God endured pregnancy, then gave birth to a human child, and raised him as the holy child of God. And yet, Jesus was also *her* son. By the power of God's Holy Spirit, Jesus was born of a woman. God became enfleshed as a human being.

The Incarnation is, of course, what we are anticipating during Advent. God so loved the world that the Divine One became human. Jesus takes on the suffering and pain of the world alongside us and seeks to transform our hearts *with* love and *for* love that we may live in unity with the Source of Love now and for ever.

Referring to God as the Source of Love has only become more accepted in the recent history of Christian theological interpretation. While praying with the Elizabethan language of today's Rite I eucharistic service, we are keenly aware that the scriptures and the liturgy are "an androcentric collection of documents steeped in patriarchy,"² and ardently upheld by an Episcopal tradition that for centuries considered the ministry of women and girls to be subordinate to that of men and boys. Dr. Gafney points out that "the overwhelming majority of Christians – 1.4 billion persons – receive their scripture mediated through a lectionary"³ with scriptural translations that use "exclusively masculine language constructs and reinforce the notion that men are the proper image of God and women are secondary and distant...[Sadly] many, if not most, women and girls have not heard themselves identified by their gender as and with the divine."⁴

Language matters and gender matters. Male pronouns are just one way to think about, imagine, glimpse, and worship the Divine. And yet, by default, we have succumbed to define God from androcentric perspectives immersed in patriarchal contexts. The persistent message for people of all genders is that androcentric language, translations, and interpretations accurately reflect the image and will of God. By accepting this default interpretation, we have allowed ourselves to become

² Gafney, xxii.

³ Gafney, xxi

⁴ Gafney, xxix.

complacent and complicit in narrowly defining who God is by assigning Godself a male gender. Contrary to current discussions about God being gender-fluid, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby contends that “God is neither male nor female. God is not definable...All human language about God is inadequate and to some degree metaphorical.”⁵ But given the limitations of the spoken and written word, how can we authentically open ourselves to imagine the expansiveness of God, who is beyond all definitions? Isn’t our hope as a people of faith to be in deeper relationship with God through all the ways that God has created us to express ourselves? Gender representation -- in language and in our lived experiences in the church and in the world -- is important to the ongoing formation of our spiritual relationship with the Divine. Our celebration of God’s diverse creation through many languages -- including art, music, and dance -- helps us to appreciate the life we share with God, and influences how we see and reflect the Divine in one another and all creation.

I’d like to invite you to pause for a moment to ponder a few questions. Maybe even close your eyes and take a few deep breaths...What did you think when I proclaimed the Gospel with the words, “Son of Woman?” . . . How did your body feel? . . . What emotions stirred in your heart and soul? . . . For many white women who identify as feminist and many women of color who identify as womanist, these words reveal a fuller truth about who God is, not just for women, but for all of God’s people. Dr. Gafney recognizes that “inevitably [her lectionaries will] seem strange to some hearers and readers. Some will find it welcome and a signifier of inclusion. [But for those who find it discordant she invites] us to think deeply about what that

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/22/god-gender-fluid-justin-welby-archbishop-canterbury>

discomfiture signifies.”⁶ For where there is discomfort, there is an opportunity for growth, transformation, and renewal of life.

Several years ago, during a liturgical music course in seminary, my classmates and I had an extended conversation about our discomfort with male pronouns permeating traditional hymn texts and even contemporary anthems. A cisgender female seminarian asked if we could sing one of the hymns with female pronouns, but our gay instructor resisted. I imagine that he might have been concerned about his professional reputation being challenged in the seminary, and in all the faith communities that he served. And he probably didn’t want to do anything that might impede our pathways toward ordination. Eventually, he allowed us to voice a feminist interpretation of the text, but only once. It was a deeply moving experience for the women in our class to hear their gender acknowledged as important to God’s revelation through words and music. And it was even more poignant because one of our classmates was transgender and transitioning from male to female. All of us sang, heard, and experienced the change in language in a different way, sparking our imaginations to ponder how we might renew our relationship with God through and beyond the spoken or sung word. In that unexpected hour, we glimpsed a new revelation of the Incarnate One - Son of God and Son of Woman.

As we begin this holy season of Advent, I invite you to ponder, as Mary did, her role as *theotokos* – the God-bearer. How are you preparing to receive the One who became Human that we may more fully embody God’s Love? In waiting with hope and patience, how might we worship a God who transcends yet celebrates all

⁶ Gafney, xxiii.

genders? How might we be more alert to the language we choose, the words we use, and the people we include as worthy of God's embrace? And in our Advent longing for redemption, how will we participate in the ongoing re-birth of Divine Love in our hearts and in the world?

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