

Introduction: Together with Certain Women

Years ago, I was chaplain at outdoor adventure camp. That first year wasn't particularly adventuresome: we stayed in the air-conditioned cabins and learned to tie knots. In later years, we set up tents in the woods, made our own food, chopped our own wood, and brushed our teeth over an open pit. It being a Christian summer camp, we led spiritual exercises based on God's fingerprints on the natural world. We trekked through the woods, our skin coated with a constant slime of bug spray, and talked about exodus and foraging and God's provision of manna in the desert. We lay in the grass and speculated about how we're made of dirt and how, in a pervasive and self-hating way, we think we're dirty. We wrote down our sins and buried them in the dirt, and then the counselors and I planted daisies on top of each of burial plot for the campers to find in the morning. It's summer camp; it's kind of required to do cheesy-but-meaningful activities. Don't judge.

The last year I worked outdoor adventure, I was enormously pregnant with my daughter—like, so pregnant that when people walking behind me saw me turn around, they gasped and said, “Whoa.” I was not about to subject my lumbering self to a dubious air mattress, so I stayed just over the hill in the retreat center. Air-conditioning and a real bed: sign me up. One afternoon, I was down at the camp, sitting in one of those folding camp chairs, which are meant to be comfortable but really, really aren't. As I sat there, I watched campers and counselors chopping wood. It's hard work, chopping wood. Even watching it made me tired. I said to the counselor nearby, “You know, in American pioneer days, pregnant women had to chop the wood, start the fires, cook the food, wash the clothes, fight off scavengers, and care for the other children. And I can barely stand up to get a cookie from the storage bins over there. Those pioneer women were damned fierce. And probably exhausted.” She felt my logic was sound, and we decided to form

the Women's Pioneer League; the only requirement for membership was a deep awe for the women who'd gone before us and all they'd accomplished, pregnant or not.

I've been in awe of the women who have gone before me ever since I could comprehend their stories. My great-aunts—there were six of them—lived in a house that used to be a speakeasy. For years after they moved in, men would come to the back door, asking for bathtub liquor. My great-aunts worked during World War II in a factory that made sanitary napkins. And that's all I know about them. They didn't think their stories were worth retelling, so we don't know them.

My daughter—the one who filled my belly that summer at camp—is now seven and is a fierce little girl. She throws tantrums when she's interrupted and protects her little brother from real and imagined threats. She knows that anyone can love anyone and verbally pushes back when her friends say otherwise. She wants to be a school principal, a sign-language interpreter, and an artist when she grows up. She rolls her eyes when I talk to her about our trans friends and not assuming anything about other people's gender. “*I know, Mama,*” she says. With her daddy, she created a digital comic about a warrior princess who was raised by unicorns in a post-apocalyptic world, defeats bad guys, and helps turn the electricity back on (shameless plug: electricteamcomic.com).

I worry that she will grow up never having really heard about all the fierce women in her life and in the Bible. Because we adult women have a hard time telling our own stories and articulating what we've learned from them about God and transcendence. Because we don't read or talk about women in the Bible much in church, and the Bible itself tends to skate right over them anyway. When women do show up, they seem to be players in a man's story. Or they're victims of violence whose victimhood teaches the nation a lesson. Or the church offers their stories as morality tales about how to be better wives and mothers. Already a hundred books about women

in the Bible are trying to teach us just that, and bless their hearts, so many of them are condescending or even downright offensive. Look, I'm a wife and a mother, and I can always try to be better at both of them. I'm the world's okayest mom—I've got a mug and everything. But I'm not just a mother and a wife; I'm also a fiber artist and an Enneagram enthusiast and a science-fiction reader and a gardener and a citizen of democracy and a neighbor and a friend and a daughter of aging parents.

I am also a priest and the daughter of a priest, so I'm an insider to the church. I can define realized eschatology, and I know how to properly use an aspergillum. I know my privileges of whiteness, middle-classness, educatedness, and presumed straightness. But I've always felt like an outsider. There were the consistently good grades when it was the height of uncool to be a smart chick. And the feeling of superiority I wrapped around myself as protection against anti-intellectual teasing. There was the grunge era, when my high school had not yet discovered Nirvana, so my flea market combat boots and fishnet stockings were laughed at. There was the time in junior high school when I was walking home from school and a boy walking by thought it'd be fine to pinch my ass. There was the advocating for gay rights with my conservative, southern high school peers. And then there's the feeling of alienation from the scripture of my own church.

I loved the church. I grew up in the Episcopal Church and loved the pomp and circumstance of weekly worship. I loved singing hymns in four-part harmony in the church choir (and being the only teenager in a group of retirees). I loved arguing theology with my father at the dinner table. I loved knowing the order of the books of the Bible. But at the same time, I never knew what to do with the women in that Bible. They were problems. And *I* was a problem. One Sunday when I mentioned in the choir room that I thought we ought to be praying for the young man who'd

been in the news for killing his wife, one of the older men angrily shut me down, saying that such a person wasn't worth praying for. It felt like he was saying there was something wrong with me for wanting to. But didn't Jesus say to pray for our enemies? Aren't the least and smallest and youngest supposed to be the ones God chooses? Did I get it wrong? Is there something wrong with *me*? I didn't know what to do with my *self*.

The story I've heard about women in the Bible, whether accidentally or on purpose, is about victims and tempters and silence. Sometimes we read between the lines to understand a story better, but much of the time, it's all right there, and we just forgot.

Just as you and I are not two-dimensional, so the women in the Bible aren't either. There are many ways to hear and connect with their stories. There are multiple right answers to the questions they ask of us. I try to see their stories through lenses of slavery, poverty, disaster, sexual minority, and disability, as well as discovery, connection, and joy. Anything I come away from them with is only a partial truth. Yet for thousands of years, we have *heard* only partial truths about them.

There's so much more.

In the beginning of the book of Acts, after Judas's suicide and Jesus' inexplicable floating off into the clouds, the disciples were lost. The surviving male disciples, "together with certain women," went to an upstairs room to pray. Who were these certain women implied to be in the inner circle of grief and new purpose? Who else was there and helped choose a new disciple to take Judas's place? Mary of Magdala, Mary Jesus' mom, the Other Mary (it was a popular name)? And Certain Women are peppered throughout scripture, present at key moments, saying

the things the men couldn't or wouldn't, doing things that earned men praise but women dismissal.

What happened to these stories? What happened to these women with their stories of neglect or celebration, anger or mercy? What, for that matter, has happened to the stories of our own mothers and grandmothers and great-grandmothers? We are all part of the story that God is telling. We all—regardless of gender identity—can be as fierce as our great-grandmothers and Tamar and all the Marys. Sometimes our ferocity is almost invisible, but it is not extinguished. When we read their stories, we can see not only their particular, fearsome lives but also our own. It's not just women who need to rediscover our stories. There's a pervasive misunderstanding, on the Internet at least, that stories about women are just for women, but that stories about men are for all people—are universal. Feminism gets derided as a two-dimensional, categorical rejection of men. Perhaps out of an understandable fear of change, feminism isn't allowed to be multifaceted or to encourage all people to find their voices and use them. In reality, it's about recognizing our common humanity—men, women, transpeople, everyone—and not just allowing but delighting in stories where women do awesome things (I'm looking at you, *Mad Max: Fury Road*). It's not about taking anything away from men.

When we talk about feminism in the church, in the workplace, and in our families, these conversations are all about power: who has it, who doesn't have it, what it's used for. These are good questions to ask, don't get me wrong. But as Christians, we are called to something else. The God we worship, the God made human, seems to be all about the *powerless*, the outsider, whatever that means in a given story. And so often in our scripture, God calls us not to success but to faithfulness. God calls us not to power but to presence.

So here's the plan: Each chapter in this book is a retelling of a woman's story recorded in the Jewish or Christian Bible (that means the Old and New Testaments). The stories are told in different ways as they inspired me. They're meant to be a bit complex, maybe a bit ambiguous, and to spark some memory of your own. How are you like Susanna or Asherah or Phoebe? The chapters are grouped into three sections. The first, titled "The Only Four (plus Mary)," is about the four women listed in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew's gospel (plus Mary who isn't technically related to any of them). "Hebrew Women" is about women in the Old Testament; "Christian Women" is about women in the New Testament. At the end of the book, you'll find a list of Bible references for each chapter so you can read these stories yourself, followed by a short list of resources for further reading. There are probably twenty-seven thousand other books and articles you could read about any of these women, so I listed ones I found particularly intriguing or challenging.

Additionally, at fierceasswomen.com, you can find questions to help you go deeper in your exploration of these our foremothers, as well as Pinterest boards, a forum to share your stories, and other resources.

The stories present in our Bible are messy and challenging and beautiful. This book is meant, honestly, to provoke you, to open up possibilities for you, to invite you to imagine the inner lives of other women, and even to offend at times, as the prophets did. It's meant to help you see how similar you are to these women who are so far from us in years and so close to us in their desires and abilities. It is meant for women and men and teenagers and retirees and anyone ready to argue with scripture, as the woman at the well argued with Jesus. The truths I offer in this book are not the whole truth, but they'll help us in our wrestling.