

Heroines of Faith Psalm 30 (CEB)

By definition, a fearless person is strong when it comes to facing hard situations. They are confident in who they are and what they believe, and in their example of fearlessness, they encourage others to be courageous and make a difference. While many think of men first when it comes to these strong figures, there are also a number of important women in the Bible who inspire, not only because of how they lived but also because of their rock-solid faith, even in some of the toughest of circumstances.

This morning we are going to hear about some of these women used by God in roles of leadership in both Old and New Testament. They were an integral part of God's plan to restore humankind to relationship with their creator. We will also learn about commitment and devotion; women who were willing to take incredible risks out of obedience to God. Their willingness to take chances regardless of the possible outcome for them personally is a powerful example for everyone. On this day where we commemorate the women in our lives, the following are indeed heroines of the faith and history of the church.

Esther

Esther is one of the bravest characters in the pages of the Bible. She lived during a time when women had no standing and were considered the property of their husbands, fathers, brothers and even sons. She was a Hebrew woman living under Persian control. As a member of an oppressed race, she had fewer rights than even the average Persian woman, and Persian women were told to be grateful if their husbands had them leave the room before raping the servant girls.

Esther married into a household where Queen Vashti had been dismissed after refusing to risk her safety among drunken men, who were, in all likelihood, already abusing the servant girls. Esther was constantly in danger of abuse and death, yet when her people needed her, she did not hesitate to step up. She knew that failure could mean worse than death for her, but she still spoke up when her people needed her. She showed the sort of courage that is always needed in the world. Had she stayed silent, she herself would likely have been safe, but she could not bring herself to turn a blind eye to others' suffering simply because it would not touch her.

In the narrative, King Xerxes is drunk at a festival and orders his queen, Vashti, to appear before him and his guests, to display her beauty. When she refuses to come, he deposes her and seeks a new queen through a sort of beauty pageant. Esther, an orphan daughter of a Jewish man from the tribe of Benjamin and under the protection of her cousin Mordecai, who are members of the Jewish exile community in Persia, is chosen.

Later, Mordecai, who will only bow before God, refuses to bow to Haman who was recently made Xerxes' highest advisor. Haman requests and is given permission to order all the Jews in Persia to be killed. When Esther learns of this, Mordecai tells her to reveal to the king that she is Jewish and to ask him to repeal the order. Esther hesitates, saying that she could be put to death if she goes to the king without being summoned and the king does not want to see her; Mordecai urges her to try. She goes to the king, and the king welcomes her, and says he will give her anything she wants. Instead of

asking directly about the order, she invites the king and Haman to a banquet the next day. During the banquet, the king again asked Esther if there is anything she wants, and this time she asks the king to spare her life and that of all of the Jews. The king asks who was threatening them, and she names Haman. Haman throws himself at her feet; the king thinks that Haman is attacking her and orders him to be put to death and gives all of Haman's possessions to Esther.

Esther tells the king about Mordecai's role in her life, and the king makes Mordecai his highest advisor. Esther then asks the king to revoke the order and the king allows Esther and Mordecai to do so, however they wish. They send out an order in the king's name that Jews can assemble and defend themselves, and can kill anyone who threatens them, and their families, and take their goods. On the day Haman had appointed the Jews to be killed, the Jews were able to defend themselves, due to Esther. Long live Queen Esther.

RAHAB

Rahab tends to be one of those biblical characters who is either reviled or adored. In reality, she was a much more complicated person. As a prostitute, she was a sinner, but she was also a believer in God and His works as shown by her knowledgeable discussion with the Israelite spies who saw to it that she survived. When Rahab hid the spies, however, she had no way of knowing if they would spare her family or simply murder her in advance of the invasion to keep her quiet. Despite that, she hid them anyway. She is a reminder that even in times of turmoil and terror, there is a need for kindness. It was not Rahab's knowledge that ended up saving her life. Instead, it was her kindness that spared her.

According to the book of Joshua, when the Hebrews were encamped in the Jordan valley opposite Jericho, ready to cross the river, Joshua, as a final preparation, sent out two spies to investigate the military strength of Jericho. The spies stayed in Rahab's house, which was built into the city wall. The soldiers sent to capture the spies asked Rahab to bring out the spies. Instead, she hid them under bundles of flax on the roof. It was the time of the barley harvest, and flax and barley are ripe at the same time in the Jordan valley, so that "the bundles of flax stalks might have been expected to be drying just then".

Rahab told the spies: I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that dread of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. As soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The LORD your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below. Now then, since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me by the LORD that you in turn will deal kindly with my family. Give me a sign of good faith that you will spare my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death. (*Joshua 2:9-13, NRSV*) After escaping, the spies promised to spare Rahab and her family after taking the city, even if there should be a massacre, if she would mark her house by hanging a red cord out the window. When the city of Jericho fell, Rahab and her whole family were preserved according to the promise of the spies and were incorporated among the Jewish people.

Probably the most notable fact about Rahab is that she is included in the genealogy of Jesus. Matthew 1:1-17, verse 5 states, "Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse. Debbie will now share the story of Ruth.

RUTH

Ruth's story captivates and significantly challenges many. She's a widow from an enemy nation with no prospects. Yet, God moves so mightily in her story and uses it to encourage millions. At the beginning of the book, Ruth is living in her home in Moab; a place and people that the Israelites frowned upon. On top of that, she had lost her husband and was living with her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi and sister-in-law, Orpah. Ruth had not had a child before her husband died, which left, some believing she may have been barren. The pain Ruth must have been in was immense, but she didn't allow her past to hold her back. Ruth showed remarkable faith for such a young believer. She had the faith to believe that God was who He said He was and faith to believe that God would provide for her and Naomi. Her bravery, faith and obedience can encourage us to be better followers of Christ. Ruth was able to overcome her past by giving her life over to the living God. By turning from her idolatrous way of life she was able to be used mightily of the Lord as the great grandmother of King David.

About ten years after the death of her two sons, Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem. She told her daughters-in-law to return to their own mothers and remarry. Orpah reluctantly left; however, Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the Lord do to me if anything but death parts me from you." (Ruth 1:16–17 NJPS).

The two women returned to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest, and in order to support her mother-in-law and herself, Ruth went to the fields to glean. As it happened, the field she went to belonged to a man named Boaz, who was kind to her because he had heard of her loyalty to her mother-in-law. Ruth told Naomi of Boaz's kindness, and she gleaned in his field through the remainder of barley and wheat harvest.

Boaz was a close relative of Naomi's husband's family. He was therefore obliged by the Levirate law to marry Mahlon's widow, Ruth, in order to carry on his family's inheritance. Naomi sent Ruth to the threshing floor at night and told her to go where he slept, and "uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what you are to do." (3:4). Ruth did so. Boaz asked her who she was, and she replied: "I am your handmaid Ruth. Spread your robe over your handmaid, for you are a redeeming kinsman" (3:9 NJPS). Boaz blessed her and agreed to do all that is required, and he noted that, "all the elders of my town know what a fine woman you are" (3:11 NJPS). He then acknowledged that he was a close relative, but that there was one who was closer, and she remained in submission at his feet until she returned into the city in the morning.

Early that day, Boaz went to the city gate to meet with the other male relative before the town elders. The relative is not named. The unnamed relative is unwilling to jeopardize the inheritance of his own estate by marrying Ruth, and so relinquished his right of redemption, thus allowing Boaz to marry Ruth. They transferred the property and redeemed it, ratified by the nearer kinsman taking off his shoe and handing it over to Boaz.

Boaz and Ruth were then married and have a son. The women of the city celebrate Naomi's joy, for Naomi found a redeemer for her family name, and Naomi takes the child and places it in her bosom.

The child is named Obed, who we discover is "the father of Jesse, the father of David" (Ruth 4:13–17), that is, the grandfather of King David.

SAMARITAN WOMAN AT THE WELL

Jesus loved women and treated them with great respect and dignity. This can be seen throughout the New Testament. The value of women that permeates the New Testament isn't found in the cultures of some societies. For example, Jewish women were barred from public speaking. The oral law prohibited women from reading the Torah out loud. Synagogue worship was segregated, with women never allowed to be heard. Jesus' treatment of women was very different. One great example is Jesus' conversation with a Samaritan woman, in public referenced in John 4. The rabbinic oral law was explicit: "He who talks with a woman [in public] brings evil upon himself." Another rabbinic teaching prominent in Jesus' day taught, "One is not so much as to greet a woman." From this, we can understand why His disciples were amazed to find Him talking to a woman in public. And imagine how stunned this woman was that the Messiah was trying to reach out to her and offer her living water for her thirst soul. The woman at the well became one of the first mass evangelists for Jesus Christ. She was able to confront her past truthfully and transform into a motivating mouthpiece for the Lord.

The story of the nameless Samaritan woman at the well, recorded only in the Gospel of John, is a revealing one, full of many truths and powerful lessons for us today. The story follows on the heels of the account of Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and prominent member of the Jewish Sanhedrin (John 3:1–21). In John 4 we read about Jesus' conversation with a lone Samaritan woman who had come to get water from a well (known as Jacob's well) located about a half mile from the city of Sychar in Samaria. This was an extraordinary woman. She was a Samaritan, a race of people that the Jews utterly despised as having no claim on their God, and she was an outcast and looked down upon by her own people. This is evidenced by the fact that she came alone to draw water from the community well when, during biblical times, drawing water and chatting at the well was the social highpoint of a woman's day. However, this woman was ostracized and marked as immoral, an unmarried woman living openly with the sixth in a series of men.

The story of the woman at the well teaches us that God loves us in spite of our bankrupt lives. God values us enough to actively seek us, to welcome us to intimacy, and to rejoice in our worship. As a result of Jesus' conversation, only a person like the Samaritan woman, an outcast from her own people, could understand what this means. To be wanted, to be cared for when no one, not even herself, could see anything of value in her – this is grace indeed.

MARY MAGDALENE

Mary Magdalene was delivered from a life of demonic oppression and experienced the resurrected power of Christ. As a result she was one of the first to announce the risen Christ. Many popular depictions of Mary Magdalene don't do her story justice or speak her truth as a true disciple of Christ. Though she has been reinterpreted over and over again, she remains a potent and mysterious figure. When Mary and the other women, along with the twelve joined Jesus, they were taking a serious risk. Jesus was spurred into action after the arrest of John the Baptist. Much of John the Baptist's ministry took place on the east bank of the Jordan in Herod's territory. When John was

imprisoned, Jesus took up his ministry in Herod's territory of Galilee which was viewed by Herod, not only as a challenge but also a threat. Despite the risk, Mary Magdalene was committed to Jesus' ministry.

The Gospel of Luke 8:2–3 lists Mary as one of the women who traveled with Jesus and helped support his ministry "out of their resources", indicating that she was probably relatively wealthy. The same passage also states that seven demons had been driven out of her. In all gospels, she is a witness to the crucifixion of Jesus and, in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), she is also present at his burial.

All four gospels identify her, either alone or as a member of a larger group of women, as the first witness to the empty tomb, and the first to testify to Jesus's resurrection. For these reasons, she is known in many Christian traditions as the "apostle to the apostles".

During the Middle Ages, the account of Mary Magdalene was mixed together in western tradition with Mary of Bethany and the unnamed "sinful woman" who anoints Jesus's feet in Luke 7:36–50, resulting in a widespread but inaccurate belief that she was a repentant prostitute or promiscuous woman. This identification of Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany and the unnamed "sinful woman" was a major controversy in the years leading up to the Reformation and some Protestant leaders rejected it. In 1969, the identification of Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany and the "sinful woman" was removed from the General Roman Calendar, but the view of her as a former prostitute has persisted in popular culture. Mary Magdalene is considered to be a saint by the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran churches—with a feast day of July 22. Other Protestant churches honor her as a heroine of the faith.

These five women are only a small portion of the women mentioned in the Bible. Sources list more than 170 women in the Old and New Testaments, many who were strong leaders – a clear indication that women have had important roles since the dawn of creation.

The social condition of women in the first century had been radically altered from that of their Old Testament sisters. In earlier times women participated in every aspect of community life except the Temple priesthood. Women freely engaged in commerce and real estate (Prov. 31), as well as in manual labor (Ex. 35:25; Ruth 2:7; 1 Sam. 8:13). They were not excluded from Temple worship. Women played music in the sanctuary (Ps. 68:25), prayed there (1 Sam 1:12), sang and danced with men in religious processions (2 Sam 6:19, 22) and participated in music and festivities at weddings (Song of Songs 2:7, 3:11).

Women were included when God instituted the Mosaic covenant (Deut. 29:11) and were present when Joshua read the Torah to Israel. Their presence was not just an option; they were required to be present for the public reading of the Scriptures on the Feast of Tabernacles (Deut. 31:12).

Nor were women limited to private roles back then. Several exercised leadership roles over Israel. Miriam led the women of Israel in worship (Ex. 15:20-21); Deborah was a judge and a prophetess (Judges 4:4); and Huldah also was a prophetess, whom King Josiah consulted instead of Jeremiah, her contemporary (2 Kings 22:14-20).

Women were held in high regard in Old Testament times. In Gen. 21:12 we read that God told Abraham to listen to his wife. Proverbs 18:22 tells us that he who finds a wife finds a good thing and

Proverbs 19:14 says that an intelligent wife is a gift from God. Wise women also found their way into the pages of the Bible: Abigail's wisdom and valor so touched King David that she became his wife (1 Sam. 25:23-42); and the wise woman of Tekoa was sent to persuade David to lift the ban on his son Absalom (2 Sam. 14).

By the time of Christ, however, the role of women had drastically changed for the worse. One Talmudic passage perhaps best sums up the situation of women at the time of Christ: "(They are) swathed like a mourner (referring to the face and hair coverings) isolated from people and shut up in prison."

What brought about this drastic change from the esteem women had in Biblical times to their near exclusion from society by the first century? Very likely this degraded view of a woman's role was imported from Greek thought.

The similarities between the Hellenistic and Talmudic views of women are remarkable! Through the influence of their heathen neighbors the rabbis slowly relegated women to their first-century seclusion.

Jesus shattered this darkness by offering his teachings freely to anyone who would listen—whether they were women or men! We see him directly talking with women on numerous occasions. Time after time in the Gospels, we see Jesus offering his teachings, healing and forgiveness to women as well as men. Often it was the women who were the most appreciative of his ministry. Indeed, the first proclaimer of Jesus to the Jewish people was a woman – Anna in the Temple (Lk. 2:36-38). A woman washed the Savior's feet (Lk. 7:37-38) and anointed him for his burial (Mk. 14:3). It was women who were with him at the cross until the end (Mk. 15:47), and women who were the first to come to the tomb (Jn. 20:1) and proclaim his resurrection (Mt. 28:8).

Jesus' New Testament followers continued to follow in his footsteps, including women in their gatherings (Acts 1:14) and counting them as co-laborers for Christ (Rom. 16:3). This was only fitting, for Jesus the Messiah, in his love, shattered the restricted status of women in the rabbinic times in which he lived. Because of him, all individuals, Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, can be one in Christ and enjoy unequalled freedom as children of God! (Jews for Jesus newsletter)

It is truly amazing how far society has come with regards to the status of women, not only in the church, but in the secular world as well. Indeed, these words are worth pondering on this day all women are celebrated!