



WOMEN'S DAY
(March is Women's History Month)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, March 3, 2013

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Lection – Genesis 2:18, 22-23 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 18) Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.”

(v. 22) And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. (v. 23) Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The inaugural **social** celebration of Women's Day in the United States was observed in 1909. This celebration was held in honor of the 1908 garment workers strike in New York, where women protested against working conditions. On March 8, 1908, 15,000 female garment workers, including many who were immigrants, marched through New York City's Lower East

Side to rally at Union Square to demand economic and political rights, including shorter work hours, better pay, voting rights, and an end to child labor.

This march spawned an international recognition of women who were fighting for justice all over the world and in time led to an international adoption of Women's Day. In 1910, German Socialist Clara Zetkin proposed designating International Women's Day at an International Socialist Congress in Copenhagen, and women delegates from 17 countries unanimously concurred. Since that time, women all over the world have celebrated a day in the calendar year to stand in solidarity on a range of social issues including war, poverty, exploitation, racism, and all forms of oppression and inequality.

Around the same time as the inception of the social celebration of Women's Day, Ms. Nannie Burroughs submitted a proposal to the Women's Auxiliary of the National Baptist Convention to designate the fourth Sunday in July as National Women's Day. "The purpose of that day was to interest women of the local churches in raising money for Foreign Missions." The proposal was accepted and the first observation was held in 1907. The purpose of Women's Day has evolved since its inception, and many local churches across denominations have celebrated Women's Day in many creative ways and on different Sundays throughout the year.

Women's Day—socially and spiritually—is a remarkable opportunity to celebrate the contributions of women past and present, as well as inspire women to continue to make a difference in the church and in the local, national, and international community.¹

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Genesis 2:18, 22-23

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Psalms 90:17 states: "And let the favor of the LORD our God be upon us: and prosper for us the work of our hands—O prosper the work of our hands!" This is a prayer that God would give enduring value to the work of the community. I am a witness to the answering of this prayer as seen in the lives of the women in my life. From my mother to my grandmothers to my undergraduate college campus minister to my graduate school mentor and fellow female laborers in the gospel preaching ministry, the influence of passionate female servants of the Most High has been abundant in my life.

Since I was a little girl, I have seen the favor of the Lord rest upon women who have prayed, sang, taught, disciplined, nurtured, and counseled me and others as they worked to do all that they knew to do to live out their call to serve. And while my personal journey in ministry has afforded me opportunities beyond the walls of the church and denomination of my birth, the seeds that were sown into my life by their work prosper in my continuing to grow as I, too, serve to expand the Kingdom of God and sow seeds into the lives of my peers and young girls.

Yes, I grew up anticipating Women's Day, the day when women would lead in all aspects of the worship service. I now know that every day is Women's Day in the church and community, where women are leading and speaking, writing and mentoring for justice and righteousness,

hope, and healing. Since this is the case, every day we are able to see the favor of the Lord our God upon women all over this world and right next door.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Women's Day is inherently an invitation to reconsider our perspective on the role of women in Scripture, and beginning with the first book of the Bible is an appropriate place to focus our conversation. The key verses of the lection have been interpreted and reinterpreted in ways that have celebrated and separated God's creation. All Bible scholars concede that the story of Creation was conceived by an ancient people, to whom great truths about the spiritual universe in which they lived were becoming known.² Thus, it is the task of this commentary to re-present the central question of the role of women as helpers and as partners with the understanding that this role is not limited to the confines of homes, churches, or places of employment. This year, on Women's Day, we celebrate men and women as partners on God's earth. As such, *both* are to work cooperatively for the benefit of each other, and most importantly, for the glorification of our Creator.

Genesis 2:18a: *Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone..."*

Yahweh Elohim, the personal name by which God can be known, forms the first human being and plants for him a garden in Eden in the east. But neither birds nor animals provide the companionship man needs, and he is not made for solitary, self-sufficient life.³

There are two accounts in Genesis of the creation of man and woman. The first, Genesis 1:26-30 is a general account. The second, Genesis 2:7-25 is a more detailed account of the creation of men and women. Some have seen a conflict between these two accounts. The first account occurs within the passage that is describing the broad sweep of creation, so the writer does not pause to describe the detail of what happened. The second account is much more detailed, describing Adam's creation and his need for a partner.

Genesis 2:18b: *"I will make him a helper as his partner."*

The key word here is partnership.⁴ God creates not a servant, but a partner. Many people have seen and continue to see Eve as subservient to Adam because she was created after Adam. Jewish and Christian traditions postdating the Hebrew Bible and a long history of Western scholarship have viewed woman's creation in Genesis 2 as secondary and derivative as evidence of her lower status. One might equally argue that she was an improved version. Everything is a matter of one's perspective. The subordination of woman to man is effected by the frustration of the divine intention of equality, wrought by human sin.⁵ But the truth is, she was meant to be a partner. The divine purpose relative to woman is found in the first part of the first story of the Creation: *"So God created humankind in His image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."* Both man and woman are created in the image of God, who is beyond gender or comprises both. And the end of the chapter 2 indicates that this partnership was part of the natural order of man and a woman, joining together to become like one being.

Genesis 2:22: *And the **rib** that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.*

The Creation account reaches its climax in the creation of woman as a helping counterpart to the man. So, out of man's own rib, God forms woman. The making of woman from the man's rib suggests their equality and kinship, not her subordination.⁶ The symbolism of the rib is that it was taken from the place nearest to man's heart, thus indicating the close relationship of man and woman.⁷ God creates a woman who shares man's own nature. Here is the ideal partner, who is also made in the image of God.⁸ The image of God in us is the spirit, the inborn dignity and sacredness of each individual. Woman arises out of the rib of man beautiful of form and figure and with Paradise as her birthplace.⁹

Genesis 2:23: *Then **the man said**, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken."*

Here we find the first lines of poetry in the Bible expressing man's delight in God's creation of woman. These two are literally made for one another. They are totally naked, totally open to one another, and therefore, they are not all that God intended them to be until they are together.¹⁰ These lines comment positively on the closeness of the conjugal bond. Man and woman are parts of a whole, anticipating the genealogical patterning of Genesis. This couple is the foundation of social and cultural relationships for the writers of Genesis.¹¹

Celebration

As a result of this passage, we celebrate the creativity of God to distinctly create man and woman. We celebrate the wisdom of God to know that men and women need each other to fulfill God's purpose in the earth. We celebrate the grace of God to gift men and women in very unique ways. We celebrate the liberty of God that allows men and women to lead and to follow each other. We celebrate the righteousness of God that is available to men and to women. We celebrate the love of God that is extended to all of creation—plants, animals, and humankind.

As a result of this passage, we celebrate that women are God's response to a void in the earth. We celebrate that God's movement in the earth is not without women in mind. We celebrate the flexibility of women to emerge out of tight spaces ready to answer God's call to enhance the earth. We celebrate that God continues to present and re-present women to those who would deny their viability and victories in the plan of God. We celebrate that one day all women, everywhere, will be honored as one with God and equal with man.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The voice of God; sounds of Creation—animals [birds chirping, lions roaring, wolves howling, cows mooing, dogs barking, etc.]; rustling of leaves; water and waves crashing or

waterfalls; sleep—snoring, grunting; voice of a man [words of surprise, gratitude, naming animals, etc.];

Sights: Animals of all shape and sizes, colors, and textures; plants of all kinds—trees, flowers, buds, lots of colors, and plush vegetation; places to sleep [bed of leaves, under a tree or in a cave or by the river]; a sky that is bright then dark while man is sleeping, then bright again when woman is presented to man;

Smells: The air is clear and fresh—no smoke or fog or pollution; the fresh smell of unlimited flowers overwhelms the faint odor of animal or human waste;

Tastes: The taste of fresh fruit and vegetables for nourishment produced by nature; and

Textures: The textures are soft, furry, prickly, smooth, wet, rugged, delicate, and slimy because of the variety of textures in nature – plants, animals, and man and woman.

III. Other Sermonic Comments or Suggestions

- **Through a Women’s Day Facebook Group, create an intergenerational opportunity for women to connect and share ideas** about how they plan to celebrate Women’s Day in their church or community—socially and/or spiritually.
- **Establish a mentoring program** that connects women of all ages with other women who are working or volunteering in their area of interest. This program will challenge mentors to share their knowledge with those who need help in navigating their path and will inspire mentees to pursue their own goals and dreams because someone that they know is already doing so.
- **Sponsor classes in the community** to educate and create opportunities for women to fight for justice. This class can expose them to opportunities in their local community as well as around the world. Teach young women and girls to help poor women in other countries. Let them do things such as raise money, send letters, do petitions, work with aid-groups to get packages to poor women and girls, etc.
- **Form small groups for teenage mothers** to come together to encourage one another and hold each other accountable for raising their children in healthy and productive ways.

Notes

1. See Durkin, Kathy. “A Rich Tradition: International Women’s Day.” Online location: www.workers.org; Gant, Alice. “Women’s Day.” Online location: www.nccusa.org/nmu/mce/womens_day.pdf; “History of International Women’s Day.” Online location: <http://www.un.org>.

2. Deen, Edith. All of the Women of the Bible. (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 1955), 3–7.

3. Butterworth, G. Mike. Zondervan Handbook to the Bible. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 116.
4. Page, Nick. The MAP: Making the Bible Meaningful—Accessible—Practical. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 32.
5. Mays, James, ed. Harper Collins Bible Commentary. (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), 86.
6. Meeks, Wayne. The Harper Collins Study Bible. (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993).
7. All the Women of the Bible, 3–7.
8. Zondervan Handbook to the Bible, 116.
9. All the Women of the Bible, 3–7.
10. Zondervan Handbook to the Bible, 116.
11. Newsom, Carol and Sharon Ringe, eds. Women’s Bible Commentary. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 16.