

Misfits, Leaders, Disciples, and Prophets: 12 Amazing Women of the Bible

Part 1: Misfits

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Each of our major rooms at Countryside are named after twelve important women of the Bible. These women served prophetic roles, leadership and teaching roles, or were considered misfits through whom God worked powerfully for the benefit of the world. By naming these spaces after important, yet often forgotten, women of the Bible we not only honor these strong and powerful women, but seek to inspire the women and girls among us to listen for, and speak, God's word to us today.

This morning, we focus on the misfits.

Do you feel like a misfit in today's society, at least sometimes? Whether we're consciously aware of it or not, the choices we make about the clothes we wear, the kind of car we drive, the house or apartment and neighborhood we live in, and even our vocational path, is likely motivated at least partly by our perceptions of how they help us fit in with a particular group.

This group may represent a particular social status, economic class, ideology, faith tradition, or all of these. Sometimes the group we seek to associate with is not one that we currently fit in to. The group may be aspirational. In this case, we pay even closer attention to the kinds of cues that associate us with the group.

But what if we don't fit in? What if our beliefs or values, or our level of economic prosperity, or something intrinsic to us like gender or sexual orientation prevent us from ever being part of the group we aspire to? The stories we hear today offer insight into how four women in the Hebrew scriptures negotiated the rough terrain of being labeled a "misfit" in their community – and how our Christian tradition embraced them.

Of the four women who fall into the category of "misfits" in our series, all of them are singled out in Matthew's Gospel as being part of Jesus's family tree. Including women in a biblical genealogy is highly unusual given the common Hebrew practice of listing only males. These women are: Rahab (a prostitute), Ruth (a widow, and foreigner, after whom the Book of Ruth is named), Tamar (who disguised herself as a prostitute to correct a series of gross injustices committed against her by her father-in-law Judah), and Bathsheba (presumed to be an "adulteress," who married King David and gave birth to Solomon). The deliberate mention of these four women in Jesus's genealogy underscores one of the central messages of Jesus's life and ministry: that God not only loves all of us, but invites us – whoever we are or what our path has been – to be citizens of God's Realm and emissaries of God's grace.

What follows are scripts that were read by four actors in worship to introduce the congregation to these four women. Roles were played by France Blanchard, Jessica Johnson, Dinah Gomez, and Marguerite Bennett.

TAMAR

(Read Tamar's story in Genesis 38)

Good morning, friends! My name is Tamar, which means “palm tree” in Hebrew. I feel so happy, and honored, to be able to count Jesus as one of my descendants. I'm sure there are a lot of folks today who aren't so happy about me being an ancestor of Jesus – especially those who harp constantly about biblical authority and “family values.” Considering the kind of “family values” that the Bible portrays, I often find myself wondering if they ever *read* their Bibles, or do they just thump people over the head with them?

Do you remember the name of the Israelite tribe that Jesus came from? It was the tribe of Judah. Judah was one of the twelve sons of Jacob, each of whom became the father of an Israelite tribe. Isn't it strange how each of these tribes are named after only the father? If you're not paying close attention, you might think there were no mothers involved!

The Tribe of Judah could just as easily be called the Tribe of Tamar, because he and I had two sons together, one of whom became the great grandfather of King David himself.

Oh no, we weren't married. I had actually been married to Judah's firstborn son, named Er. But Er died before we had children. So Judah wanted me to sleep with his second son, named Onan, in order to produce an offspring for the family.

Let's just say that Onan “pulled out” of the situation and made God mad, so Onan died, too. Finally, Judah promised me his last son, Shelah, but Judah kept putting off the marriage because he was afraid that *I* was the problem, and Shelah might die because I was cursed or something.

That put me in a real bind. A single woman couldn't survive on her own in Israelite society. Yet I wasn't allowed to marry anyone since I was officially betrothed to Shelah. When it became clear that this situation was never going to change and I would die a penniless widow, I took matters into my own hands.

After Judah's wife died, I disguised myself as a prostitute and sat beside the road when he passed by. He found me attractive and offered me money to sleep with him, which I did. Then I shed my prostitute's clothes and went on with my life. A few months later, it was reported to Judah that I was pregnant and, since I was still betrothed to Shelah, he called me a whore and commanded that I be burned alive. Imagine Judah's surprise when I produced absolute proof that the twin children in my belly were his! (And this is before DNA tests!) Judah changed his tune after that. He even admitted publicly that I was more righteous than he was. That's another reason why the tribe might better be called the Tribe of Tamar than of Judah!

That's biblical “family values” for you. And that's Jesus's family Tree.

RAHAB

(Read Rahab's story in Joshua 2 and 5)

Tamar was a righteous woman who pretended to be a prostitute, but I was a righteous woman who was actually a prostitute! I'm guessing that the words “righteous” and “prostitute” don't normally go together in your vocabulary. If not, then you should read

the Book of Joshua, or even the Book of James in your New Testament, where I am called both a prostitute and a righteous woman. Again, biblical “family values” are a little complicated ...

My name is Rahab. Do you remember my story?

You probably remember the story of Joshua and the Battle of Jericho, where the “walls came a-tumblin’ down.” Before the battle, Joshua sent spies to Jericho to scope it out. When the king of Jericho got wind of their presence, he ordered his soldiers to search for the spies and kill them. But I hid the spies in my home. And I made a deal with them.

Our deal was that if I kept the spies alive, they would keep me and my family alive when they invaded. I kept my end of the bargain, and so did they. I even sent the soldiers off in the wrong direction so they’d have a clear shot back to camp.

My courage and cunning bought me my life that day, and that of my family. Eventually, I settled among the Israelites and married a man from the Tribe of Judah. Those Judahites apparently had a thing for prostitutes, whether fake or real! We had a son named Boaz – the great, great grandfather of King David. That makes me a direct descendant of the Lord Jesus.

The fact that Jesus’s own brother, James, who wrote the Book of James in the New Testament, calls me “righteous” really rankles some Bible-believing Christians. It’s not just because I was a prostitute. It’s also because they think that only Christians go to heaven and all others go to hell. So either they have to claim that God would damn someone who Jesus’s own brother declared “righteous,” or they have to admit that right actions speak louder than right beliefs, at least to God.

I think Matthew included me in his genealogy to remind Jesus’s followers not to place themselves above others, who are also God’s children. A prostitute can even be in Jesus’s family tree! And in God’s realm, it’s not just what you believe that God cares about, but what you do to make a difference.

RUTH

(Read Ruth’s story in the Book of Ruth – it’s short!)

Hi, my name is Ruth. The Book of Ruth is named after me. One reason why I am in Jesus’s family tree is because Boaz, the son of the “righteous” prostitute, Rahab – became my husband. I think there’s another reason I’m named in the genealogy, but I’ll get to that in a moment.

You may remember me from a famous vow I made – a vow that people like to recite in weddings. You know, the one where I say, “Where you go, I will go, where you stay, I will stay; your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.” I always think that’s a funny vow for a bride to make at a wedding. Besides being a bit “old fashioned” by today’s standards,

it's a vow I made to my *mother-in-law*, not my husband! I wonder how many brides want to make vows like this to their mothers-in-law

My mother-in-law was Naomi, whose hometown was Bethlehem. The word "Bethlehem" means "House of Bread" in Hebrew. Naomi and her husband left Bethlehem and immigrated to the land of Moab when there was a famine in the land. In other words, there was no bread to be found in the House of Bread. This was a time when countries didn't build walls to keep out starving people, or send them to detention centers. Even a country that had been an enemy of Israel, who didn't even worship Israel's God, welcomed struggling refugees because they knew it was the right thing to do.

In any case, they came to Moab with their two starving sons. My sister and I married their sons. Then tragedy struck. Naomi's husband died. Then her sons – our husbands – died. Eventually, Naomi heard that the famine in Israel was over, so she returned to Bethlehem.

Even though Naomi tried to convince me not to, I followed her there. That's where that famous vow comes from – "where you go, I will go," and so on.

Happy for me, Israel considered it among their highest moral obligations to welcome the stranger and the struggling. I was both. So they welcomed me. I guess something changed when Jesus came. At least his followers nowadays seem to be quite convinced that God wants to keep struggling refugees out.

I was not only welcomed in Israel, but a relative of Naomi's named Boaz – one of the most prominent men in the town – fell in love with me and we got married. The son we bore, named Obed, became the grandfather of King David.

As I said a moment ago, I think there's a reason why Matthew included me in Jesus's genealogy besides because of who I was married to. If Matthew followed normal convention, he need only have mentioned Boaz and left me out entirely. I think he included me specifically because I was a foreigner. A misfit. Even though Israel welcomed the stranger, it would have been utterly shocking to hear that a foreigner was listed in the line of God's *Israelite* Messiah. Apparently, Matthew felt that God not only welcomes the stranger and the struggling, but also considers them as equals among God's "chosen."

BATHSHEBA

(Read Bathsheba's story in 2 Samuel 11)

Hello, my name is Bathsheba, which means "daughter of the oath" in Hebrew. Mine is a rather ironic name, given that I'm probably known best to you for *breaking* my oath – my marital oath, that is. You know that story, right? How I was bathing in my courtyard and King David spotted me from his roof? He was thunderstruck the moment he laid eyes on me and sent his servants immediately to have me over for wine and dinner. How could I refuse? And when he offered me ... uh ... "dessert" afterwards, how could I refuse, even though I was a married woman whose husband was off to war?

As a result of our, uh, “dessert,” a child was born. Must have been the cheesecake ... That threw us both into a panic. Without my knowing it, David arranged to have my husband killed on the battlefield. When I found out about his death, I cried for days and weeks. Then, David asked me to marry him. How could I refuse? How could I refuse ...?

Most of you probably think I’m a promiscuous woman. I’ve seen the look on your face when you pass by the room named after me. “A room named after an adulterer?” you say.

I may technically have committed adultery, but I would hope that, in light of current events, you might see another possibility in my story.

Yes, I could have been a promiscuous, lustful woman who wanted nothing more than to get rid of my husband and sleep with the king of Israel. And if I am that kind woman, you need to be careful about how swift you are to condemn people like me. You have to explain why Matthew intentionally highlighted me as being a relative of Jesus in his Gospel. Is it because of judgmental people like you?

But maybe you’ve not been so judgmental. Maybe you see another story here: One where a man of considerable wealth and power casts a lustful eye on a woman with no real power to resist his advances.

I was bathing in the privacy of my courtyard – as all other women did – when David peered down at me in secret. My husband was off fighting the king’s battles. Do you really think I had the power to resist the advances of my king?

In addition, can you find any evidence that I didn’t love my husband with all my heart, or that I wanted him *killed*? Can you find any evidence that I was *happy* when I heard news of my husband’s death? No, the Bible says that I “made lamentation” when I heard the news – which means I cried my heart out, and then cried some more.

When David sent for me to be his wife, after proving that he would murder anyone who got in the way of what he wanted, do you really think that I was in a position to refuse *anything* he wanted from me?

If you think something seems a bit unfair and unholy about me being considered a lustful adulteress for all of history, all I can say is, #METOO! You see, the #METOO movement isn’t so new, nor is it just about being *politically correct*. It’s about being *biblically correct*. And it’s at least as old as Matthew’s Gospel.