

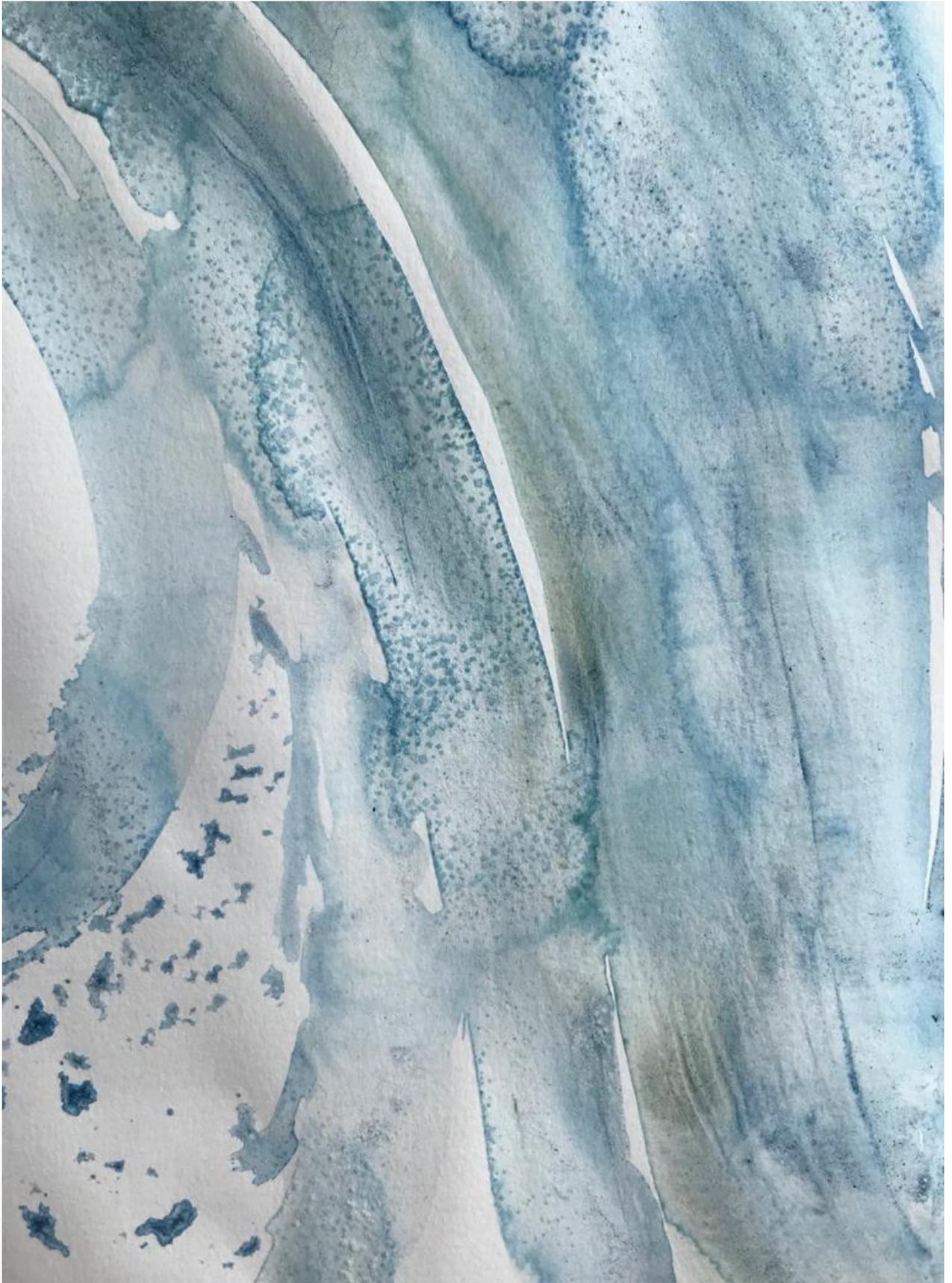


Seed of Sequoia

A study and prayer for faith communities exploring gender based violence

corrymeela 

Sir Halley
Stewart | Trust





Journeying through this resource.

One in four women experience domestic and sexual violence in Ireland, north and south of the border. So the chances of knowing someone who has been affected are high. This resource has been designed to be trauma sensitive, with the hope that everyone who wishes to engage with the text and materials can do so with comfort.

To keep ourselves safe, it is useful to be aware of what is happening in our bodies as we move through this journey, with particular focus on the nervous system. If we are activated by the sensitive content of the topics and materials, we may be experiencing discomfort from an unresolved trauma, suppressed memory or previous painful encounter.

We may feel subconsciously threatened, which can cause the heart rate to quicken and blood pressure to increase. Our muscles may tense; temperature may rise (causing us to feel flushed) or drop (leaving us shaky and cold). We may also experience unexplained emotions of sadness, anger or frustration, becoming disconnected from both ourselves and others.

Having insight and awareness in advance can help us to manage any such reactions or discomfort, and more often than not, the discomfort will pass. We encourage you to pay attention to your breath. Breathe from your belly: in through the nose and out through the mouth. Be aware of tension in your muscles: you might need to consciously drop your shoulders, or move around to release some of the tension. Focus on one of the visual images; these beautiful art pieces have been designed to calm and comfort whilst exploring more challenging issues.

If needs be, do seek out a trusted person to talk with. These materials have been written to create spaces for discussion, conversation and reflection, to promote inclusion and make communities of faith safer places for everyone.

Addressing domestic and sexual abuse through theology

Corrymeela is passionate about the use of bible stories to reflect upon issues of contemporary concern. We believe that asking questions of the biblical text can lead us to a greater understanding of ourselves, each other, and the world. Questions such as: what might the book of Ruth have to tell us about issues of borders and belonging? How might examination of the story of Joshua and the Wall of Jericho deepen discussion of our own divided communities? How can the Psalms speak to us as we reimagine the practice of faith in the context of pandemic? What does the story of the prodigal son have to offer us about the nature of family relationships and the cost of reconciliation? Such questions are the work of Public Theology, and we believe that applying these 'thematic lenses' to the text can start (rather than end) conversations which inform, enrich, and inspire us.

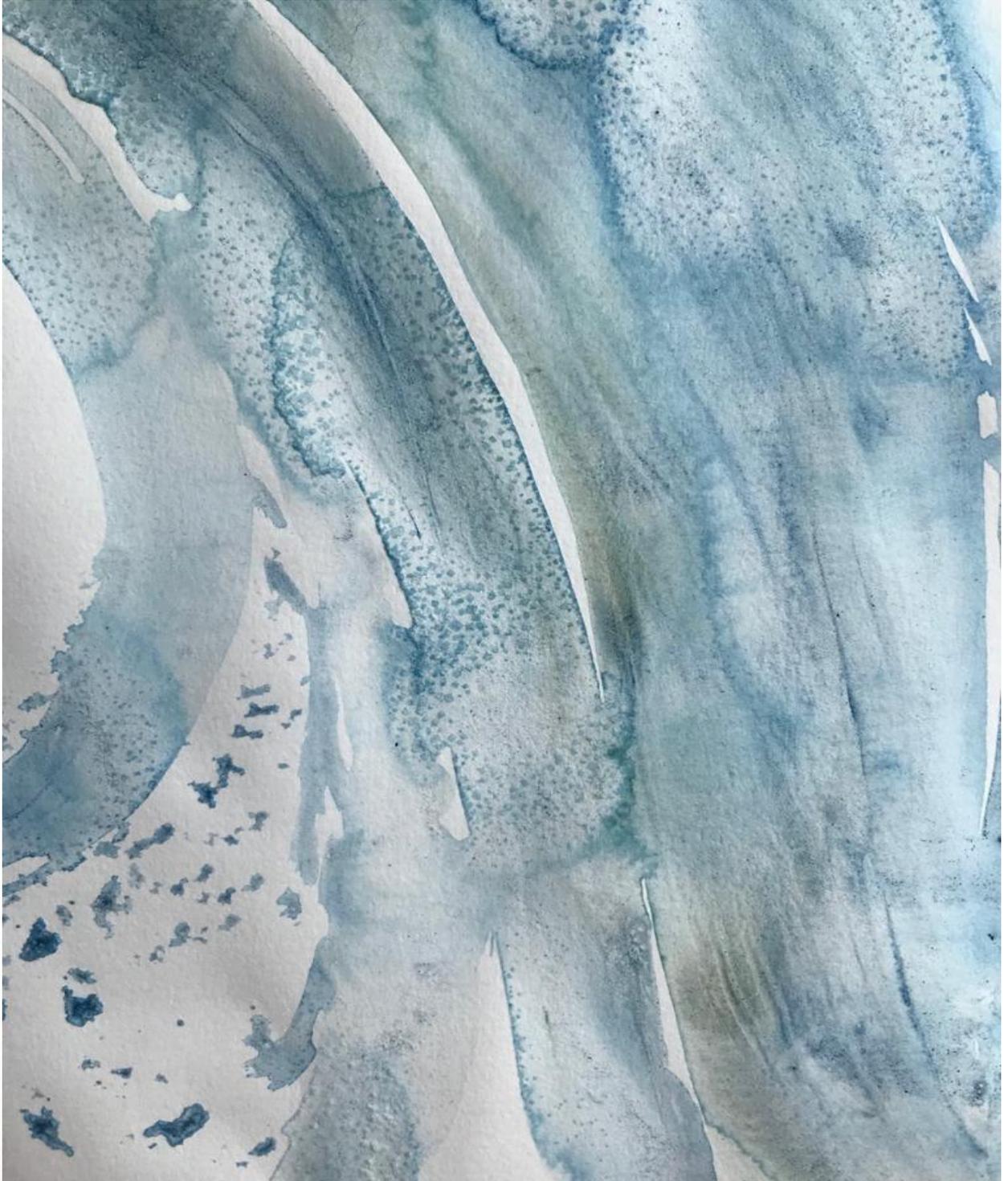
The hope of this resource is to support faith communities to make churches better, safer places for women and children, and to work towards a society free from domestic violence and abuse. As such, the thematic lens we are applying to the selected texts is Domestic and Sexual Violence. What might these stories have to tell us about the impact on women and children of violence and abuse? And what might we learn about the role of men in either preventing or perpetuating a culture in which women are sidelined, disparaged, or mistreated?

Much can also be learned from examining our own initial responses to a text. Which details of the story are we curious about? What assumptions do we bring with us when we read? And what might they suggest about the assumptions we bring with us when we are confronted by contemporary examples of abuse?

At the heart of Public Theology is dialogue, and a firm belief that by hearing the stories and perspectives of those around us, we can experience and learn from the sacred text in new and powerful ways. These studies are not intended to be the final word. Our intention is not to end the conversation, but to enable and expand it. The many questions included in these studies are designed to aid group discussion as well as personal reflection.

Whilst the writers of this study take a particular view on the question of women in church leadership (and recognise that you are likely to have your own opinion), a discussion of that issue is not the purpose or intent of this resource. Instead, its aim is to draw attention to subtle and insidious forms of discrimination; to structural inequality, and to the creation of cultures in which women can be demeaned, overlooked, or abused.

This discussion is for everyone. It is not intended to affect shame, guilt, or accusation, but to open a space for conversation and reflection. Ultimately, this resource aims to contribute towards faith communities that ensure safety, promote inclusion, and affirm the equal dignity of women.



A prayer for faith communities entering into these conversations

*God of those gathered,
in bringing ourselves before you now
to hear stories familiar and new,
we bring trust and curiosity.*

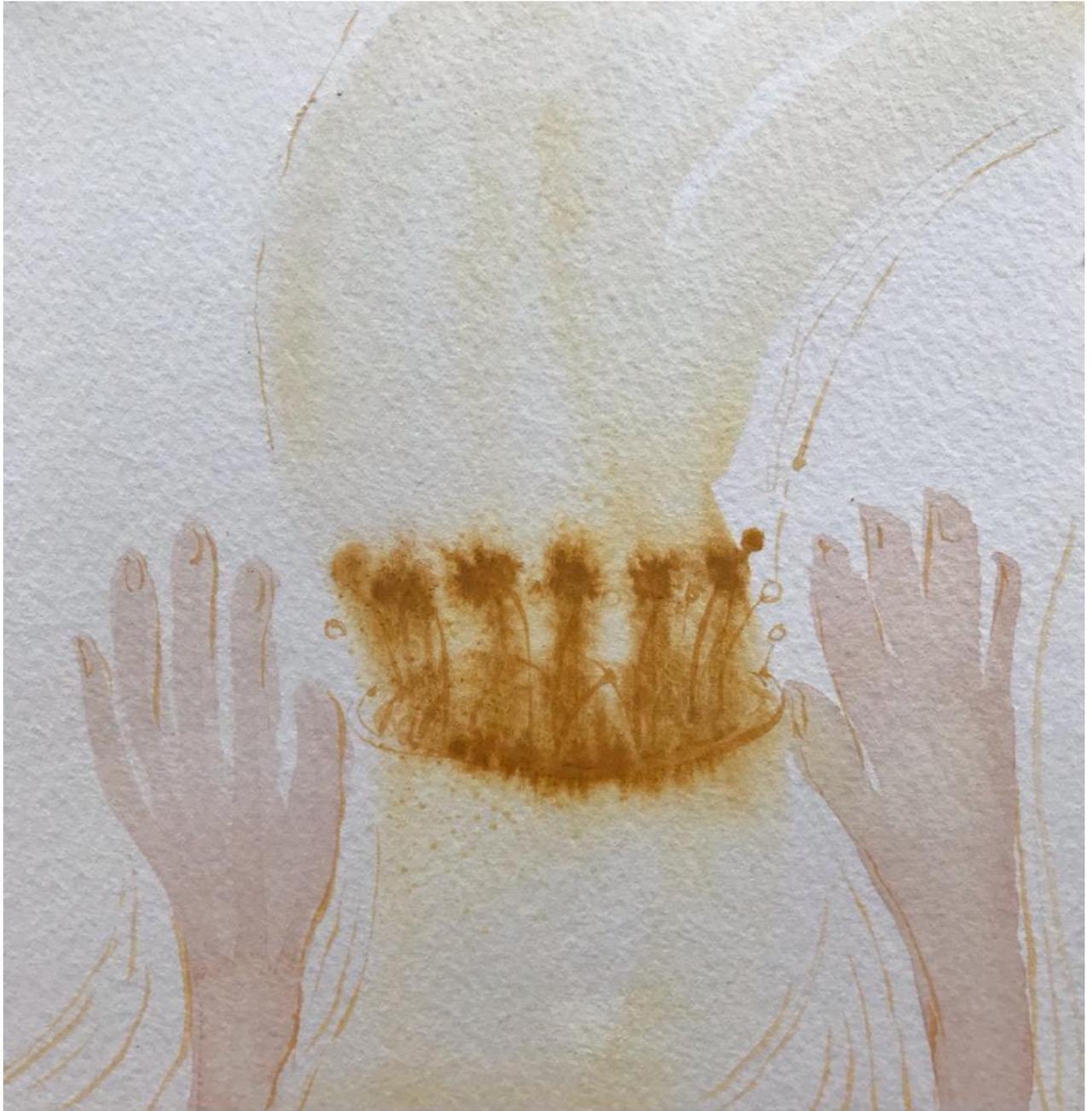
*But we know
that we also bring pain and anxiety.
Some bring feelings of shame and confusion.
Some bring a desire to fix and move on.
And some will bring long silences
they don't know how to fill.
And some will bring silences that give us
the space we need.*

*Be kind to us in these conversations,
and let us be kind to ourselves.*

*For with you,
we bring eyes to see new light,
ears to hear new voices,
minds to imagine new possibilities
and hearts that can be made new
by the stories that are most sacred to us.*

*And we know
that you bring a story,
still being told
of love and healing
and listening and peace.*

*So stay with us now
as you gather us in,
so we can hear that good story again.
Amen.*



Vashti, Esther 1

Key themes: power and control, discrimination, sexism, misogyny

Introduction

There is a sense in which the story of Queen Vashti in Esther 1 is emblematic of the challenge of talking about domestic and sexual abuse in Christian households. We are aware the issue exists, just as we know the story of Vashti exists, but there are more pressing issues which demand our attention. Thus we are in a rush to get to what we think really matters - in this case, the story of Esther - and Vashti serves as an inconvenient, and unsavoury introduction which we seek to pass over quickly on the way to what's really important.

Vashti's story is as follows. The King is secure in his reign and throws a lavish party for all his nobles, officials, and military leaders (Esther 1:3). This is followed by another banquet for all the people in the city.

On the final day of the feast, the King demands that the Queen appear before the men wearing her crown. The mention of her crown and nothing else (along with the repeated references in the text to her beauty) may lead to a conclusion that he required her to parade naked before all the men of the city (Esther 1:10-11).

When Vashti refuses this command, the King flies into a rage, perhaps because of the loss of face in front of so many other men (Esther 1:12). Vashti's actions lead to a major diplomatic incident necessitating the summoning of the King's closest advisers (Esther 1:13-14).

They all recognise the political, social and cultural damage that could result from the Queen's refusal of a command from the King, and so they issue a decree throughout the land to the effect that Vashti be banished from the King's presence and that all men should be in charge of their own households (Esther 1:19-22). This decree is issued in the native tongue of each recipient, thus ensuring there could be no misunderstanding of what is intended.

Reflection

On the surface, this story appears to be a ludicrous, even humorous, overreaction by men who believe their power and position are threatened by a woman's assertion of her own autonomy. And yet we could question whether or not this is an overreaction. It may very well be that the instincts of these powerful men were correct. For in this story, when a woman found in herself the strength to refuse the demands placed upon her (demands which had perhaps been considered socially acceptable, part of an unspoken norm), her act of disobedience revealed a whole system which had amplified the positions of men at the expense of women. This text also gives rise to a consideration of the expectations that are placed upon women by men, and by society as a whole, and the subtle (or not so subtle) ways in which male dominance might be established and upheld.

It is conceivable that part of Vashti's decision-making was a calculation that the luxury, influence and proximity to power she enjoyed as Queen did not balance out

the damage being done to her personal sense of worth and dignity. Vashti's single act of defiance came with a host of much wider implications, not all of which were under her control. What she might not have foreseen is that when she said 'no', it exposed a kingdom-wide patriarchal system that was damaging the status of women everywhere. Xerxes's response was not to impose a new hierarchy, but to codify an existing one in order to strengthen it: to write into law the principle that 'every man should be the ruler of his own home and should say whatever he pleases' (verse 22). Had this not already been the norm, Vashti's defiance would not have caused the reaction which it did.

This story therefore reveals an unspoken understanding about how women could be treated and should behave; one which, when challenged, was made explicit by royal decree. What had hitherto gone without saying in Vashti's society was that women should obey their husbands; that men should be head of their household, and that no demand a husband made of his wife should be considered too unreasonable or demeaning for her to obey.

Such discrimination may not be as easily identifiable as explicit violence. But the one enables the other. A society in which people are made subject to unreasonable and discriminatory expectations (even if these are unspoken) is one in which they will always be at risk of abuse. Vashti's 'no' exposed the cultural limitations of the Empire, and so the advisors moved quickly to re-establish control and the equilibrium of the old system. Their remedy involved the regulation of the behaviours of women in their own homes to ensure that the threat of women's autonomy was removed, and that peace would remain undisturbed in the future.

The equilibrium of a family, a community, and even a church is maintained at a cost. Sometimes that cost falls disproportionately on one party, and we do well to consider who bears this cost and whether or not it is just. The challenge of confronting discriminatory behaviours in faith communities comes with unique difficulties. For many women, calling out coercive or demeaning behaviours may mean going against the established norms of a community she and her family have been part of for generations. Saying 'no' may have the effect of helping her regain some measure of control over her own life, but at the cost of excluding her from her community. Where both partners (and perhaps their respective families) have been part of a faith community for many years, the ramifications can have a profound and far-reaching impact.

It is important to consider whether (or how) a faith community encourages, nurtures or fosters an environment in which power and its abuse can be questioned, and what formal processes and procedures are in place to enable this to happen. This calls for an examination of the public language used in our congregations in liturgy, prayer, sermons and so on which signals that a particular community is a safe place for disclosure.

Some women may choose to endure the abuse or indignity, hoping that someone else in the community will call out the behaviour. But this equally calls for courage from other members of the community who are equally as invested. This may be

made easier if the community regularly signals its intolerance of abuses of power in relationships, and works to create a culture in which inappropriate behaviour or language can be challenged.

Conclusion

There is often a temptation to believe that the maintenance of peace and equilibrium trumps the need to confront conflict. This is perhaps a pressing issue for faith communities where conflict is often perceived to be wholly negative. Developing skills in handling the disruption that accompanies confrontation of difficult issues is essential to nurturing healthy faith communities. Particularly when the issues being confronted are generally considered private.

It is essential for faith communities to indicate (through liturgy and in public language for instance) which behaviours or language are to be considered acceptable or unacceptable. And to call out the more subtle forms of discrimination that exist within our language, attitudes, and expectations of one another.

Similarly, there is long term work to be done in nurturing communities which are not fearful of calling out abuses, and are alert to systemic patterns of behaviour which could be destructive. And of course, as a matter of justice, our faith communities should be aware of who pays the price for the equilibrium we enjoy. We serve our faith communities well by acknowledging the need to create spaces for voices that challenge the status quo, for often, these can be the prophetic voices in our midst.

Discussion questions

How do our answers to the question 'who is this story about?' change the ways in which we read the narrative?

Much of the complexity in this story lies in the details that are missing, yet we are quick to cast our own interpretations on the sequence of events. What assumptions do we use to fill in the gaps in the narrative? What motives or prior interests might influence those assumptions?

Through whose eyes do we see these events take place? How does that impact how we read the text? Which other perspectives might we consider?

Where do you notice your own resistance to alternative ways of reading this story?

What was your initial reaction to reading the story? For instance, you might want to consider the elements which amused you; made you comfortable or uncomfortable; made you curious; or were tedious for you.

Take a moment to imagine alternative responses by Xerxes to his wife's refusal of his command. How might these alternative responses have produced different outcomes for everyone?

What unspoken (and perhaps unequal) expectations exist for women in our culture and in our faith communities?

How might subtle expressions of discrimination and sexism enable or lead to serious forms of abuse?

How can faith communities support women in abusive situations to make decisions which come with a cost?

How can faith communities help address circumstances in which the practice of established traditions make some of their members bear a disproportionate cost?

What mechanisms exist for people to question established practices, language, and culture in your faith community?

What processes are in place to enable exposure of behaviours or practices that are coercive, manipulative or abusive?



Prayer for reflection

Esther 1

GOD IN A DISRUPTIVE 'NO',

free us from silent structures

and unspoken rules

that keep imbalance the norm.

Give voice to those

whose authority comes

from wearing the truth of injustice.

And may those who fear change

become just as upset

by how frightening

the extension of our status quo

already is.

Amen.





Hagar, Genesis 16

Key themes: subordination of women, coercive control, emotional abuse, physical abuse, enabling behaviours, victim-blaming

Introduction

Genesis 16 tells the story of Hagar, the female slave used by her masters, Abram and Sarai, to produce the child they had been unable to conceive themselves. The lesson taken from this story is often one relating to Abram and Sarai's lack of faith. They try to circumvent God's timing by doing for themselves something which they believed God had promised to do for them. Yet it may be that a bigger failure on Abram's part was his refusal to give attention to the situation of violence that was developing under his roof. At the heart of this story is a woman who suffered abuse because her dignity and welfare were considered secondary to divine intent.

Believing that God had promised them multiple descendants, but long past the age of child-bearing, Sarai takes matters into her own hands and suggests to Abram that he turns to one of their slaves for surrogacy (Genesis 16:2).

Abram sleeps with Hagar, who conceives. Her pregnancy causes trouble with Sarai, who turns on Abram. With Abram refusing to be drawn into the conflict between them, Sarai treats Hagar so badly that she takes her life into her hands and flees into the wilderness (Genesis 16:4-6).

Found by the Angel of the Lord in the desert, Hagar speaks with God and is instructed to return home, where she bears a son, Ishmael (Genesis 16:7-10, 15).

Reflection

Even though she is Egyptian, we know this slave girl only by a Hebrew, masculine term: meaning 'foreign thing'.^[1] Hagar's otherness, her lack of belonging, humanity, and identity are reinforced every time she is addressed.

In the first part of the narrative, Hagar is both voiceless and passive. In verse 3, she is 'taken' by Sarai, and 'given' to Abram. There is no indication that she took part in the hatching of the plan in order somehow to advance her own position; no record in the text of her having been consulted before being 'given' to the elderly Abram. Hagar's total lack of agency is entirely in accordance with her position in the household. Wilda Gafney explains: 'Hagar is on the underside of all of the power curves in operation at that time... She is female, foreign, enslaved. She has one source of power: she is fertile; but she lacks autonomy over her own fertility'.^[2]

Readings of Hagar's story often charge her with disobedience or arrogance. Once she knows that she is pregnant, Hagar begins to look on Sarai with contempt (Gen 16:5). This loathing, this reduction of Sarai in Hagar's esteem is frequently read as pride: one woman who is able to get pregnant looking disdainfully on another who is not. Or, it could be that Hagar, suffering the effects of morning sickness, traumatised by the way her body has been used by her masters, terrified of the huge danger to her life that childbirth poses, and grieving in advance the loss of a baby which she knows will never really be hers, bears some ill will towards Sarai.

Hagar's life must have been plagued by uncertainty and fear. Abram and Sarai's actions suggest that they valued her more as a resource than as a human being. To what extent was Hagar controlled by fear, and by the threat of the consequences if she did not obey? How conscious was she of her own worth being tied to the survival of the child? Did she fear a repetition of the sexual abuse if she lost the baby? What did she expect to happen to her once the child was born (if, indeed, she survived the delivery?)

Abram and Sarai acted in the interest of meeting their own needs, and behaved out of a sense of entitlement. An entitlement to exert power over someone they viewed as inferior, and a right to use whatever means possible to create the child that had been promised to them. One commentator explains: 'Sarai, due to her inability to bear children, needs Hagar and is drawn to her. But we also see the ambivalence at the heart of this desire when Sarai turns on Hagar'.^[9] As a member of the household who was sometimes called a wife, and (more often) called a slave, Hagar must have lived in a constant state of unpredictability. Will I be shown kindness or hostility today? And if I am shown kindness, is that because of my worth or someone else's need?

Having agreed to Sarai's plan and slept with Hagar, Abram abdicates all responsibility. In a fit of anger, Sarai blames Abram for the predicament she finds herself in and declares that God should judge between them. Abram gives a response which both lays the blame back at Sarai's door: 'your slave is in your power' and makes clear that he will play no part in deciding what happens to Hagar next: 'do to her as you please' (verse 6). Having abused Hagar, Abram washes his hands of her and walks away. And in choosing not to act, Abram makes himself complicit in Hagar's ongoing abuse. Abram's disregard of Hagar demonstrates a propensity for neglect and abuse which he also displays elsewhere in the biblical text. Just as he abandoned Sarai to the mercies of the pharaoh in Egypt (Genesis 12), so he abandons Hagar rather than confront the threat of violence which was arising within his own household.

Sarai and Abram's attitudes towards Hagar are evidenced by the level of abuse which Sarai is willing to inflict upon her. Abuse so severe that rather than endure it, Hagar chooses to flee alone into the desert with her unborn child. In the wilderness, Hagar meets an angel of the Lord (verse 7). Having made a promise which assures Hagar of her safety, the angel sends her back to a situation of abuse. 'Return to your mistress and submit to her' (verse 9).

The angel of the Lord is the first character in the text to speak to Hagar directly, and their exchange places her back at the centre of her own story. In speaking of 'your offspring', the angel acknowledges Hagar as the mother of her own child. Having been viewed only as the carrier of someone else's heir, Hagar is re-humanised and validated. She is not simply a slave, disposable and purely at the mercy of her masters, but a human being, with an independent identity and an inherent worth.

During the interaction in the desert, Hagar becomes the only person in scripture to give God a name. She says 'You are El-roi', which means 'God of seeing' or 'God

who sees' (verse 13). Having fled from a household where she was abused by Sarai and ignored by Abram, Hagar at last encounters someone who truly sees her. And so it happens that the only time anyone names God in the bible, it is to declare that God is one who sees us. In naming God in this way, Hagar reminds us of the huge power and impact upon those who are suffering of simply being seen by those around them. For survivors of domestic and sexual violence, who might feel degraded, ignored, or forgotten, the simple act of being genuinely seen by another person may provide the first step towards healing.

Conclusion

Hagar's is a story which is easily overlooked. Focused on the opportunity to learn about God's faithfulness, skipping forward to the part where Abram and Sarai miraculously bear their own child, we often set Hagar aside and fail to consider the harsh reality which she endured for the sake of someone else's gain.

Hagar's mistreatment was enabled by a complex set of relationships and dynamics of power within which she could be used, objectified, and treated as though she was entirely without value. In reading her story through compassionate eyes, we can begin to confront the wrong that was done to her, and consider the ways in which harm and abuse might be enabled in our own households and communities.

Discussion questions

How do our answers to the question 'who is this story about?' change the ways in which we read the narrative?

Much of the complexity in this story lies in the details that are missing, yet we are quick to cast our own interpretations on the sequence of events. What assumptions do we use to fill in the gaps in the narrative? What motives or prior interests might influence the nature of those assumptions?

Through whose eyes do we see these events take place? How does that impact on how we read the text? Which other perspectives might we consider?

Where do you notice your own resistance to alternative ways of reading this story?

Naming and names are recurring themes in Genesis 16. What is the significance of a name? How might names be used as a tool of abuse?

What is your understanding or experience of the impact that pregnancy and childbirth can have on a woman?

Some readings of the text suggest that Hagar brings further mistreatment upon herself by provoking Sarai. What assumptions do we make about the underlying causes of abuse?

What strikes you about Sarai's response to the situation once Hagar has conceived? What fears, desires, or trauma might be influencing Sarai's behaviour?

What might Sarai's attitude suggest about how perpetrators of domestic abuse respond to those they have mistreated after the event?

What reaction do you have to God's instruction to Hagar to return to Sarai and submit to her? What parallels might be drawn with other victims of abuse?

Can you think of a time when being truly seen by another person was of significance to you? What was the impact?

How seen and heard are those who have experienced domestic and sexual violence in our faith communities? How can we better 'see' those who have experienced or may be experiencing domestic abuse?



Prayer for reflection

Genesis 16

GOD WHO SEES,

your recognition

of who we are

restores worth and dignity

to those the world would devalue.

With eyes of compassion,

may we acknowledge

the harm we have done to those

forced to serve another's story.

And in recognising, at last,

the repairing love

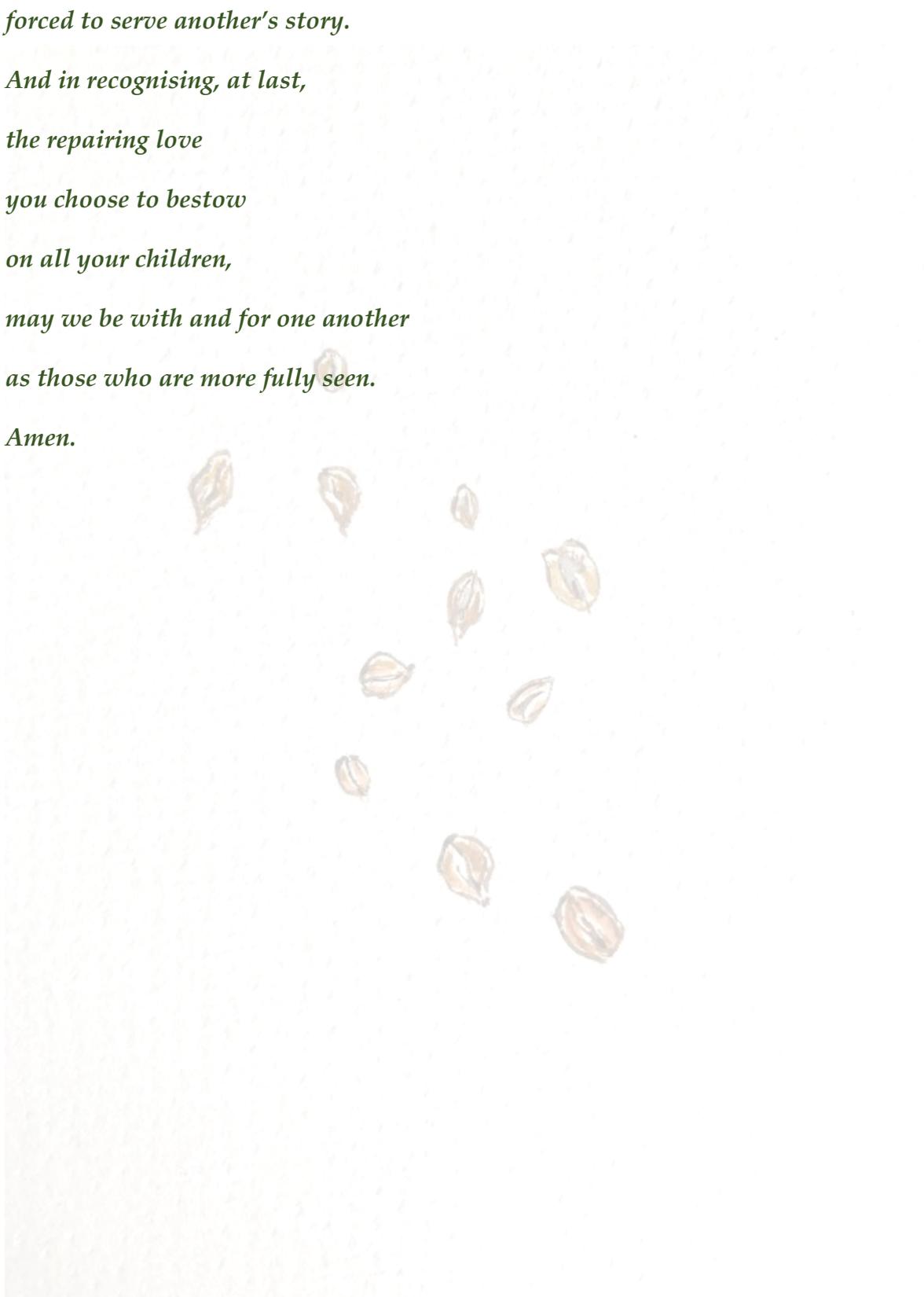
you choose to bestow

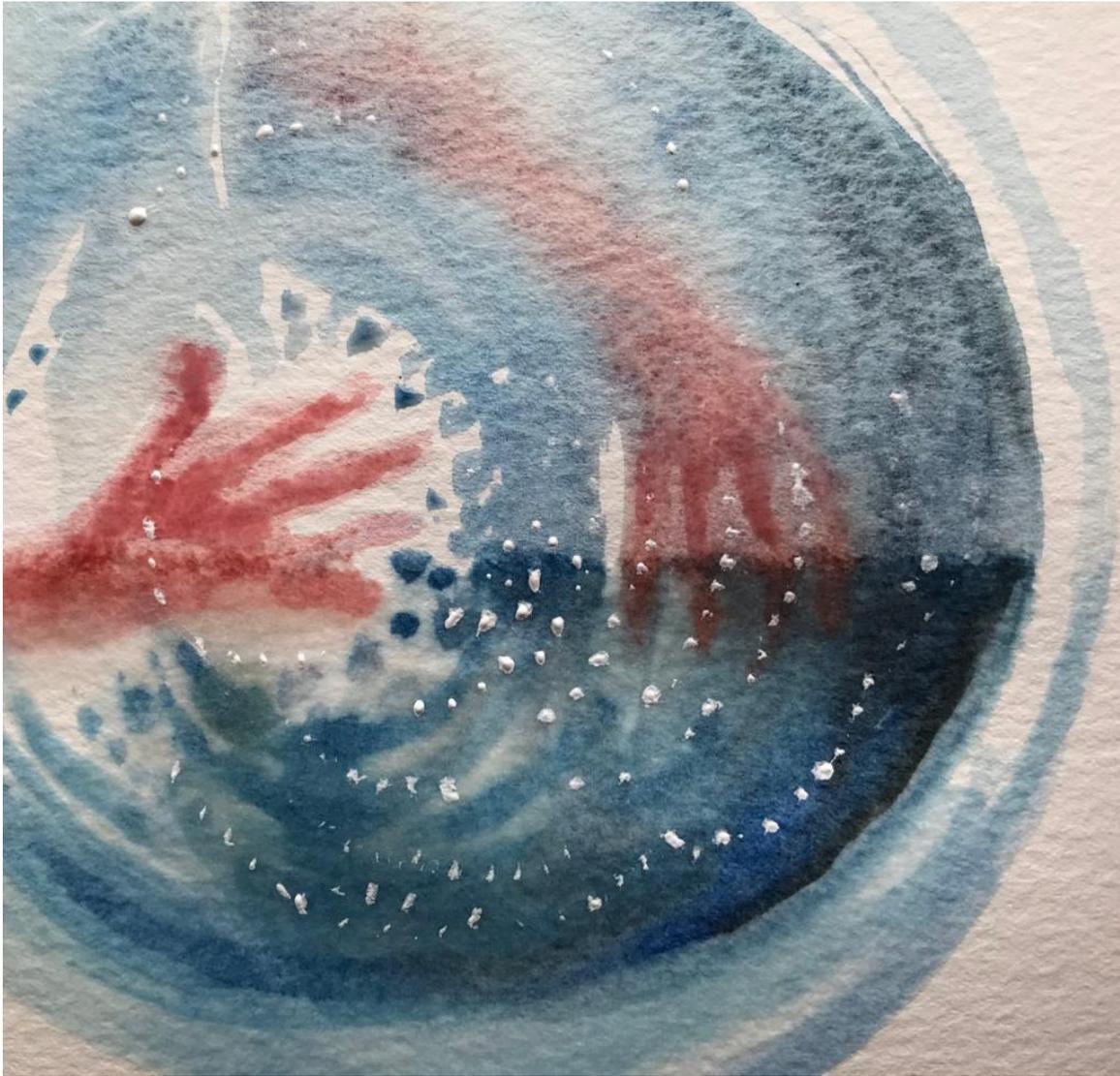
on all your children,

may we be with and for one another

as those who are more fully seen.

Amen.





Bathsheba, 2 Samuel 11

Key themes: power and control, victim-blaming, sexual coercion and abuse, issue of consent

Introduction

Bathsheba's story is a familiar one. Spotted bathing from the roof of his palace by a shirking King David, she is sent for, and taken to meet the king. David has sex with her, and shortly afterwards, she returns to her house (2 Samuel 11:4). In modern translations of the biblical text, the whole encounter is dealt with in the space of a single verse. The speed with which the events take place suggests that Bathsheba had little time for deliberation. The discrepancy in her power relative to his suggests that she would have been denied the opportunity to exercise choice. Bathsheba is a passive subject in a narrative which focuses almost entirely on the actions of men, and one immensely powerful man in particular.

Having returned home, sometime later Bathsheba sends a message to the palace, informing David of the only long-term consequence of the encounter likely to trouble him: she is pregnant (2 Samuel 11:5).

David acts quickly. He summons Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, back from the battlefield, and commands him to go to her, seeming to assume that Uriah will sleep with his wife and thus make the pregnancy appear legitimate. Uriah refuses David's command, and instead, David asks his military commander to ensure that Uriah is killed in battle (2 Samuel 11:6-15).

After a period of mourning for her husband, Bathsheba is again summoned to the palace, where she becomes one of David's wives, and bears him a son (2 Samuel 11:26-27).

Reflection

King David's encounter with Bathsheba is read as a cautionary tale for those at risk of succumbing to temptation, and held up as an iconic example of how God's forgiveness is available to those who truly seek it. In Psalm 51, David's prayer of repentance following his meeting with Bathsheba, he says: 'Against you, and you alone have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight' (Psalm 51:4). The concept of any wrong having been done against Bathsheba is not dealt with anywhere in the text.^[4]

Much of Bathsheba's experience is left to the imagination- we encounter her only through the eyes of King David. We do not know how she responded when messengers arrived at her door telling her that she was to be brought to the King. We do not know whether any words were exchanged between David and Bathsheba when she arrived. We do not know what was in her mind as she left the palace, nor how long she had to wait before reaching the conclusion that she had conceived. We do not know how she sent word to David, or how many other people she had to disclose the fact of her pregnancy to before it reached him. Nor do we know how she came to discover that her husband had been killed, and that she would be taken permanently into the home of the man who had fathered her child.

David and Bathsheba's introductions in the story set out the stark imbalance of power between them. In verse 2, we are reminded of David's position: he was walking around on the roof of his (the king's) palace. Elevated above her both physically and in status, he looks down and sees a woman bathing. Bathsheba is introduced as Uriah's wife and the daughter of Eliam: she is spoken of in terms of the men to whom she is immediately related (verse 3).

David's behaviour nods to his sense of entitlement. Standing on the roof of his palace, surveying his kingdom, he sees something he wants, and sends his servants to go and fetch it for him. He acts in the belief that he can bring this woman to himself, without consequence, and do with her what he wills. David was a man of conquest. In this case, rather than making conquests at war, he was at home, making a conquest of a woman. His ability to do this, with so little immediate consequence, makes obvious the power differential between them.

Much scholarly debate has taken place over whether Bathsheba was abused by David or willingly committed adultery with him. Traditional interpretations often tend to assume that Bathsheba would, at most, have attracted David's attention deliberately, and, at least, have been a willing participant in the liaison. The presumption is sometimes made that to have been seen bathing, she must have been intentionally immodest, or negligently naïve.

By placing at least some of the responsibility on Bathsheba's shoulders, we risk exonerating David of any crime against her. The gaps in the narrative allow for this. The kind of language that is used to describe instances of sexual assault elsewhere in the bible is missing from the account of David's meeting with Bathsheba.⁶¹ We look for, and find, clues with which to apportion blame to Bathsheba, before confronting the possibility that this woman, silent throughout the encounter, was taken advantage of by a man in a position of authority.

If we allow ourselves to be pulled into conversations about whether Bathsheba intended for David to see her bathing, or how her response to her pregnancy reveals her underlying motivations, we risk being distracted from the fact that regardless of her intentions, David abused his position in order to get something that he wanted.

As countless contemporary examples demonstrate, use of force is not the only means by which someone in a position of authority can manipulate vulnerable people. It is hard to imagine a situation in which Bathsheba might have said no to David, at any point in the narrative. What might the implications have been if she had refused to go with the messengers whom he sent for her? Given her husband's and father's history of service with David, what might the cost of her disobedience have been? Regardless of whether David was physically abusive, the prominence of his position carried with it its own kind of force, which would have made it extremely difficult for her to refuse him. As one commentator framed it: compliance does not equal consent.⁶² In other words, the absence of a no does not constitute a yes. Particularly when the no could carry with it highly damaging, or even fatal consequences.

Perhaps these traditional responses to Bathsheba may therefore be indicative of the expectation that we place on victims to avoid or limit their own abuse. Faced with domestic abuse, we ask why the sufferer did not leave sooner, or disclose the violence to someone in a position of trust. Faced with sexual assault, we ask why the victim wasn't wearing something less revealing, or did not fight back, or chose not to call the police immediately. We expect those who are vulnerable to carry the cost and the consequences of preventing abuse taking place against them.

Conclusion

How we interpret this story says much about our own inclinations. The lack of detail about Bathsheba's actions present in the narrative allows us to place our own interpretation on the sequence of events described. Given this opportunity to fill in the gaps, we face the temptation to make assumptions about Bathsheba's actions and motivations in the story.

Perhaps in an attempt to mitigate David's actions, some readings of this text assign Bathsheba responsibility for the affair, and thus miss the opportunity to consider how the validity of consent might be negated by circumstances of power and position. In doing so, such readings risk failing to hold David up to the high standard his position should have conferred upon him, and placing an unreasonable expectation on Bathsheba that, regardless of the consequences, she should have taken further steps to avoid her own abuse.

Discussion questions

How do our answers to the question 'who is this story about?' change the ways in which we read the narrative?

Much of the complexity in this story lies in the details that are missing, yet we are quick to cast our own interpretations on the sequence of events. What assumptions do we use to fill in the gaps in the narrative? What motives or prior interests might influence the nature of those assumptions?

Through whose eyes do we see these events take place? How does that impact on how we read the text? Which other perspectives might we consider?

Where do you notice your own resistance to alternative ways of reading this story?

What are the first questions we ask of vulnerable people who have been or are at risk of being taken advantage of?

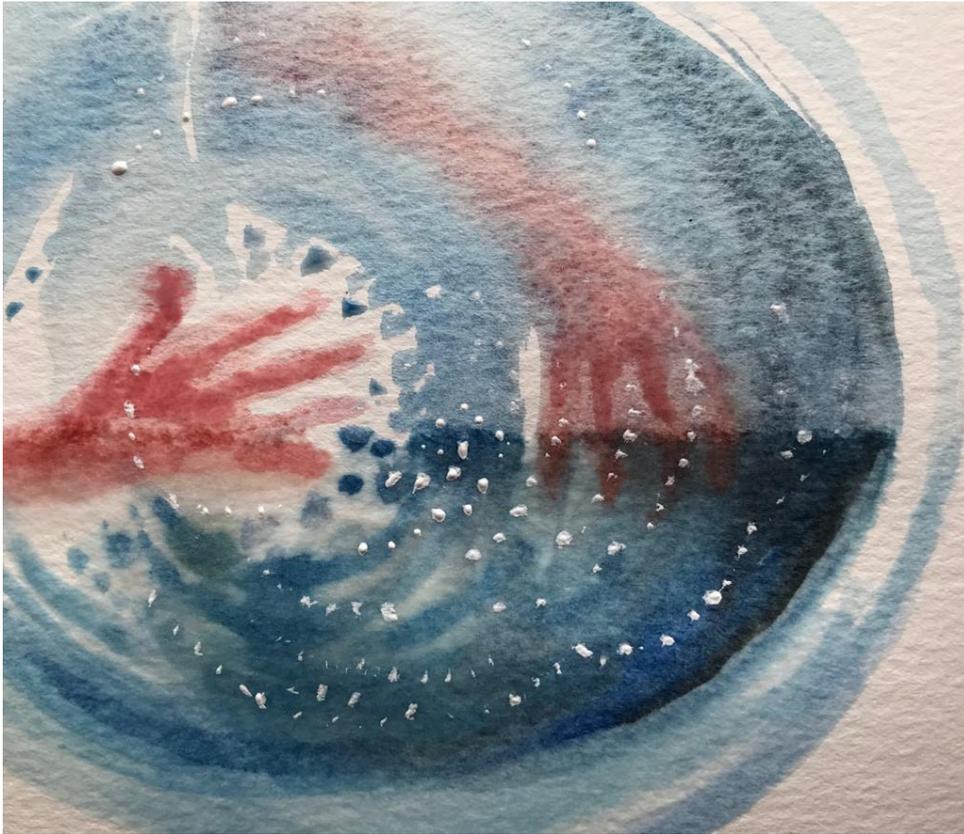
In what ways might we apportion responsibility for abuse to those who have suffered it?

How do you respond to the idea that, regardless of whether physical force was used, Bathsheba might have had no choice but to go to David?

What are our understandings of the nature of abuse? Are there instances in which behaviours have to carry certain hallmarks or reach a certain threshold before they are considered unacceptable?

David's behaviour can make unsettling reading for Christians who consider him to be a key example of a faithful man of God. How might our feelings towards those who appear to be exhibiting abusive behaviours impact on the way in which we deal with instances of abuse? Are there ways or situations in which we favour perpetrators over victims?

Have you ever felt silenced or voiceless, in a particular situation or environment? If so, what was the impact? In what ways might a victim's inability to speak out help to perpetuate abuse against them?



Prayer for reflection

2 Samuel 11

*GOD OF A HOLIER POWER,
before we seek out your forgiveness
or allow blame to rest on others,
may we seek deeper understanding
of what wrongs have been wrought,
where we have used and misused our power,
and what still remains ours to confess.*

Then may we find your power at work,

unveiling one's privilege as a garment of vanity;

and revealing the mercy,

the restorative mercy,

that exposes the judgement we're due.

Amen.





The Woman who was Almost Stoned to Death, John 8

Key themes: masculinity, exploitation, aggression, conspiracy of silence, responses to conflict

Introduction

This story is generally known as 'The Woman Caught in Adultery' (although a title would not have been part of the original text). The traditional naming of the story leads us into an exploration of this woman's narrative predisposed to assume that she was at fault. Her supposed misdemeanour becomes the feature that defines her, long before she has had a chance to speak for herself of her own experience. The woman is without a name, only speaks once (towards the end) and is constantly under threat of death from the other characters in the story- all men. She is defined entirely by her alleged actions and the charge brought against her, and as such is sexualised from the beginning.

For the sake of this conversation therefore, we propose a different name for this story, one which will make her plight the centre of attention so that we can also consider more closely the actions of those who looked to condemn her, and the one who did not. So, we will call this story 'The Woman Who Was Almost Stoned to Death'.

Jesus continues to teach crowds in and around the Temple precincts despite considerable opposition. Early one morning as he is with a crowd, some religious leaders bring to him a woman who, they claim, was caught in the act of adultery (there is no mention of her partner) (John 8:3-5).

Jesus studiously ignores their question regarding what should be done with her, and bends down to the ground, appearing to write in the dust. When they continue their questioning, he stands up and makes a statement of his own before bending down and continuing to write in the dust (John 8:6-8).

When he eventually stands again, all of the men have left and he is alone with the woman, whom he pardons- a move which has excited considerable controversy in the church for centuries (John 8:9-11).

Reflection

The story makes it clear that Jesus appears at dawn in the temple courts surrounded by crowds of people and that he begins to teach. Rather quickly it seems, the religious leaders bring in a woman whom they claim to have 'caught in the act of adultery' (verse 4).

As indicated above, this study is concerned with placing the woman at the centre of the drama that unfolds and then examining the reactions of Jesus and those around them. Several questions spring to mind immediately. Had the woman been 'caught' only moments earlier, or had they held her overnight? Where was the partner to this act of adultery? Was this act of adultery a set-up, or a coincidence? Was this woman being exploited in the relationship, or was she a willing partner? (Women wouldn't have had much choice if there was a social or power differential between the parties). What was she wearing when they brought her before Jesus?

What seems clear is that the theological argument the religious leaders are intent on having is more important than the welfare of the woman. There would have been a question about who, if anyone, would have advocated for her in this debate (the Roman authorities would not allow the death penalty without a proper trial for her, whereas Jewish law would. This was the dilemma on which they hoped to hook Jesus). This woman's dignity, privacy, and perhaps even her life are all collateral damage in the saga. The calculated question of whether to stone her is less about the delivery of justice than about the spectacle; the jeopardy of placing Jesus in a heightened, life-or-death situation which requires his immediate response. It becomes apparent that she is bait in a trap being built for Jesus by these leaders- as is acknowledged by the gospel writer in verse 6.

Jesus finds himself in the middle of a volatile situation, liable to descend quickly into violence. It is worth reflecting on the other ways in which he could have responded. He could have entered into an argument with the men. He could have redirected the attention towards the woman and her alleged behaviour. He could have squared up to them or looked around to see who might come to his aid in the event of a physical altercation. And yet, instead of taking up more space, puffing out his chest and standing tall, Jesus resists the temptation to meet aggression with more aggression. He makes himself smaller, reducing the amount of space he is taking up by bending over and doing something entirely unthreatening, almost childlike: beginning to write in the dirt.

Much creative endeavour is expended speculating on just what he might have been writing. In part this is a further distraction from the issue at hand: a (presumably terrified) woman at the mercy of all the men around her. What is interesting is to speculate on how the actions of Jesus would have impacted on the temperature around the encounter.

Not only does he refuse to enter into a confrontation, but through his actions he also deflects attention very effectively. By appearing to write in the dirt, he diverts the focus from the woman and the challenge to what on earth he might be doing on the ground. The woman is absent from the story for nearly two verses. In the face of their continued angry questioning, Jesus then straightens and faces them, making a simple statement (verse 7) before stooping down and resuming his drawing.

Jesus refuses to participate in a system in which fidelity to God is proven by a willingness to engage in violent action towards another as a punishment for their alleged sin. Instead, he offers a chance for everyone involved to grow in their own capacity for empathy and to move away from violent male righteousness to an awareness of the female 'sinner'.

Having resisted violent confrontation while at the same time diverting attention from the woman to himself, Jesus challenges us to consider the use of physical power as a tool of control. The men are forced to confront their use of power and their own capacity for sinful activity, and they begin to depart, one by one, beginning with the oldest. It is interesting to note that it was the oldest who went first, possibly because of their awareness over the course of a long life of the many

times they had succumbed to the use of power and even violence to assert their version of righteousness. But it should also be noted that having saved the woman, Jesus doesn't stand and accuse these men. He remains small, taking up little space, absorbed in his activity in the dirt. Perhaps only when silence has returned to the place does he straighten up.

He then speaks to the woman and we hear her voice for the first time. Significantly, it is clear that Jesus listens to her answer so that she is heard for the first time in the story. Whilst we still don't know her name, Jesus's actions towards her accusers, his empathy towards her, his kind words spoken, and the affording to her of a significant voice deserving of a hearing, serve to humanise her. Not only that, but taken together this may have gone some way towards the beginning of healing from traumatic violence. She is no longer bait in an elaborate trap, but a real human being. In this way he goes far beyond simply stopping the violence towards her.

This brings us to the closing words of Jesus to the woman which are challenging for a number of reasons. Her accusers having melted away, Jesus refuses to condemn her. Was this because he discerned something nefarious behind the setup of the situation in which this woman had become embroiled? Was it a further rejection of the use of violence for the enforcing of purity? Less controversially it is easier to see the words 'Go your way' (verse 11) as opening up a new world for her in the aftermath of this horrible event, particularly when one considers that barely moments ago her life was on the verge of being ended.

Conclusion

This story invites us into a consideration of our own responses to conflict. When faced with a situation which has the potential to become violent or abusive, how do we act? Do we meet aggression with aggression? Do we become complicit? Do we stay silent, or choose to look the other way? Or are we led by justice, by active compassion, and by a commitment to speak out against violent or discriminatory behaviour? How, by our actions or our words, can we be alongside women and children who have experience of domestic and sexual abuse?

Jesus's approach to the situation served both to lessen the tension and to divert attention away from the woman who was standing exposed in front of all these threatening men. And by speaking kindly to her, listening to her response, and thereby acknowledging her personhood, Jesus might possibly have contributed towards this woman's healing.

Notes

^[1] Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), p. 34.

^[2] Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, p. 41.

^[3] Juliana Claassens, 'Just emotions: Reading the Sarah and Hagar narrative (Genesis 16, 21) through the lens of human dignity', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34 (2012), pp 1-6, p.3.

^[4] Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, p. 218.

^[5] Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, p. 214.

^[6] Erin Moniz 'A Tale of Two Rapes: What Tamar and Bathsheba Teach Us About Power, Consent, and Sexual Violence', <<https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/mutuality-blog-magazine/tale-two-rapes-what-tamar-and-bathsheba-teach-us-about>>, [Accessed 28th May 2020].

Discussion questions

How do our answers to the question 'who is this story about?' change the ways in which we read the narrative?

Much of the complexity in this story lies in the details that are missing, yet we are quick to cast our own interpretations on the sequence of events. What assumptions do we use to fill in the gaps in the narrative? What motives or prior interests might influence the nature of those assumptions?

Through whose eyes do we see these events take place? How does that impact on how we read the text? Which other perspectives might we consider?

Where do you notice your own resistance to alternative ways of reading this story?

We have attempted to rename the story (bear in mind that a title would not have been present in the original text). Can you think of other alternatives? What differences do they make to how we enter the narrative?

Have you ever felt exploited or exposed for the furtherance of another's agenda? Have you ever been in a situation in which you felt you were merely a pawn in someone else's bigger game? What did that feel like, and how might it help you get a better understanding of the plight of this woman?

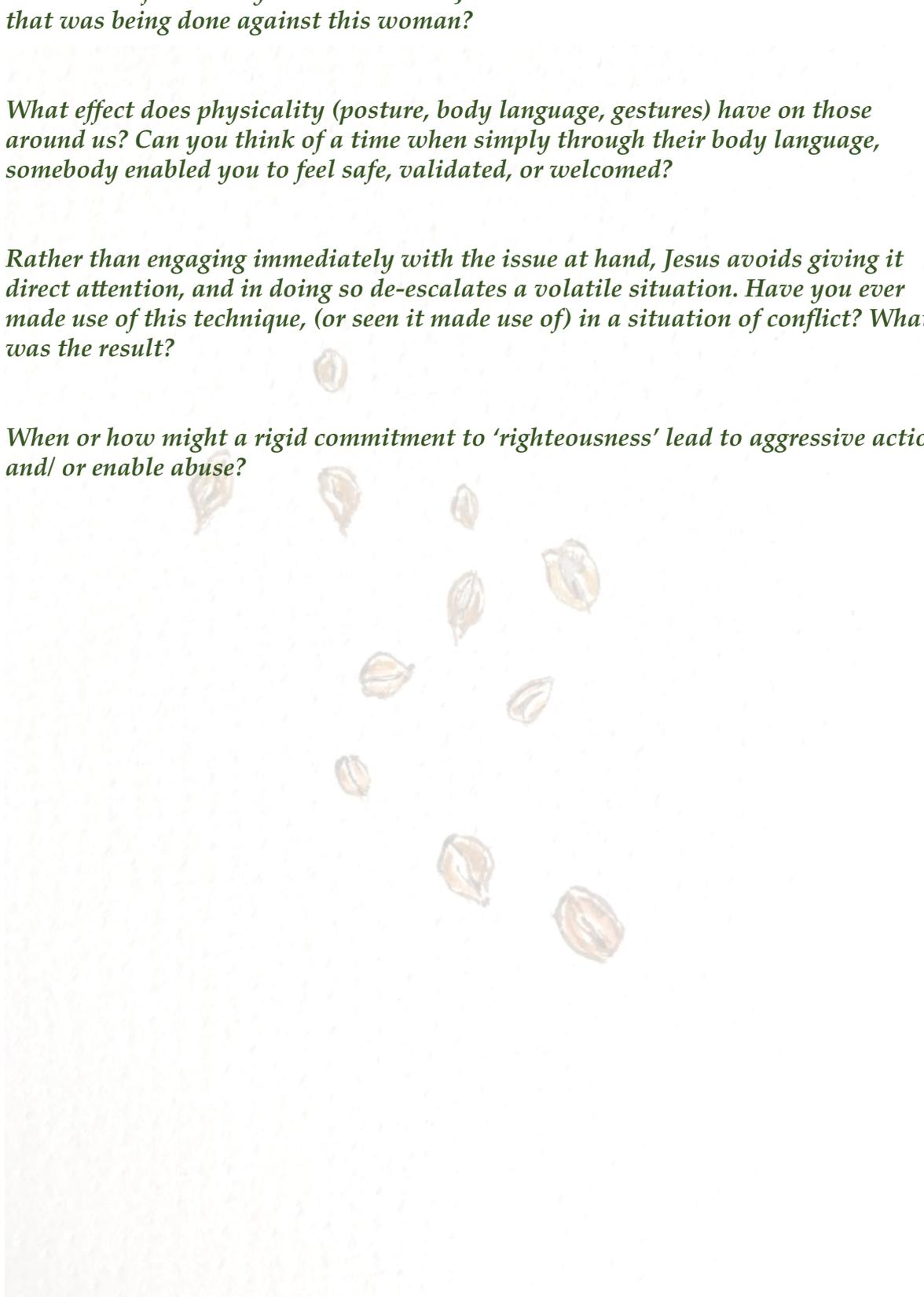
Try to place yourself in the story at this point. What's the atmosphere like? Where is the focus of attention? What might be the effect of Jesus' strange actions?

How might the concepts of perpetrator, enabler, bystander, and advocate support a discussion of this story? Which role did Jesus choose to take in relation to the abuse that was being done against this woman?

What effect does physicality (posture, body language, gestures) have on those around us? Can you think of a time when simply through their body language, somebody enabled you to feel safe, validated, or welcomed?

Rather than engaging immediately with the issue at hand, Jesus avoids giving it direct attention, and in doing so de-escalates a volatile situation. Have you ever made use of this technique, (or seen it made use of) in a situation of conflict? What was the result?

When or how might a rigid commitment to 'righteousness' lead to aggressive action and/ or enable abuse?





A Prayer for reflection

John 8

*DE-ESCALATING GOD,
as the heat rose in the day*

you lowered yourself

to the earth.

You withdrew from the noise

to write in the dirt.

In the midst of charged words,

you changed the atmosphere

to save a life.

May we, as tensions rise

and charges fly



*and heated words are exchanged
find ways to lower the temperature,
to ground ourselves in love,
and to put
down
the stone
we would raise.*

And then.

*Standing before you,
may the release that we feel
as we hold ourselves high
bring a softness
to all we would carry.*

Amen.

A prayer for communities continuing these conversations:

God of Hagar and Bathsheba,

*and Vashti and
all those at risk
of power misused,
may your story be heard
through the noise we have offered
and the silence we've kept:
the story of power
that draws people in
and lifts people up
and protects those
the world would mistreat.*

*Accompany us
as we continue to be
those who can tell of a God
unimpressed with physical conquest,
but whose compassion and kindness
persistence and truth
show a power
that will remake this world.
Amen.*

Further reading and recommended resources:

Herman, J.L. *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror.* (Basic Books, New York 1992)

Paynter, H. *God of Violence Yesterday: God of Love Today? Wrestling with honesty with the Old Testament.* (The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2019)

Paynter, H. *The Bible doesn't tell me so. Why you don't have to submit to domestic abuse and coercive control.* (The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2020)

Porter, F. *Changing Women, Changing Worlds: Evangelical Women in Church Community and Politics.* (Black Staff Press, 2002)

Storkey, E. *Scars across humanity: Understanding and overcoming violence against women.* (SPCK, 2015).

Storkey, E. *Women in a Patriarchal World: Twenty-five empowering stories from the bible.* (SPCK, 2020)

