

FIERCE: Women of the Bible and their Stories of Violence, Mercy, Bravery, Wisdom, Sex, and Salvation
by Alice Connor

Questions for contemplation and discussion

Introduction

- What have you learned about women in the Bible over the years? Whether from the Bible itself, from church attendance, from Christians? Be honest.
- Who are the women in history you stand in awe of? The women you'd induct into the Women's Pioneer League?
- Who are the women in your family, whether you know them or not, who have shaped who you've become?
- Tell us/yourself the oldest story you know about a woman in your family. Tell us/yourself the wildest story you know about a woman in your family. Don't know one? Go ask someone.
- Why do you think we don't read many stories about women from the Bible in church? Do you even agree with that statement?
- How satisfying is it to swear?
- What do you think "feminism" means? What does it mean to you?
- What do "power" and "presence" mean to you right now?

The Only Four (plus Mary)

Tamar: When Sleeping with Your Father-In-Law is Righteous

- What surprised you about Tamar's story? What did you learn? What offended you?
- What are liminal or transitional spaces in your life? Now and in the past?
- When have you played the trickster to get what you needed? How do you feel about it? What were the consequences? Who are other people you'd consider tricksters?
- What is not as it should be, in your life or in the world? How might you respond?
- Design a knitting pattern to celebrate Tamar.
- Try using the illustration of Tamar as an icon for meditation. Sit comfortably and relax your gaze. Allow your eyes to move over the image. Notice, distantly, what draws your attention, what loops your eyes make as they move across the image. What do you settle on? What disturbs you? Look into Tamar's eyes in silence and feel her looking back at you. Breathe slowly and allow your emotions to bubble up—fear, loss, awe, confusion. Sit as long as you feel called to, then slowly come back to yourself. What was that like? What did you learn from Tamar?

Rahab and Bathsheba: Who's Naked Now?

- What surprised you about Rahab and Bathsheba's story? What did you learn? What offended you?
- What/who did you identify with?
- Did you say Rahab's name out loud? Don't lie.
- What difference would it make to you if Rahab's occupation as a prostitute were somehow definitively proven or disproven? Not just historically, but to this story and to your understanding of sin and redemption. Do you think the Israelite spies slept with Rahab? What difference would it make to their story and that of Israel's conquest of Canaan?
- When have you put everything you have and are on the line to help your family? Or a friend? Or even a stranger? What was that like? If you haven't, what would it take to put you there?
- Was Rahab's helping the spies faith or work? Why? Why does it matter to you?

- When was the first time you realized that your body was vulnerable? What was the most recent time you realized it?
- How does this story change how you think of King David and of the centuries of people who hold him up as a great king? Does it change how you think of him?
- Whose bodies are being used as pawns in a larger game now?
- Find some markers or pens or crayons. Whatever you like to doodle with. Sit comfortably with the image of Rahab/Bathsheba in front of you. (If you prefer, photocopy it first—you have permission to do it just this once...) Take a deep breath. Maybe another one. As you continue to breathe slowly and deeply, allow your mind to slow down, soften your gaze. Contemplate the violent and selfish desires of the world and in yourself. Use the markers or pens or crayons to doodle in the white space around her. When you are ready, begin to contemplate vulnerability and the blessings it brings. Contemplate the ways that you are strong and resilient. Doodle in her hair as you think of these things.

Ruth: Who are You Responsible For?

- How are you an outsider? Don't stop at the obvious answers—dig deep.
- How do you use that outsider-ness to change things? How do you use it as a defense mechanism?
- How are you an insider? Again, don't stop at the obvious.
- How do you use that insider-ness to invite others in or to raise them up? How do you use it for selfish reasons?
- There are threshing floors all over our lives—places where God comes near, where we are brought together with others we love or ones we come to respect: A Habitat house, where the studs on the insides of the walls bear folks' signatures and words of love, bearing witness to the great number of people who have come together to shelter one family. Where are the threshing floors in your life? Both spiritually and, you know, sexually?
- Who are the people you take care of? Who are you responsible for? How do you take care of them? And how do we take care of each other as a community—your church, your neighborhood, your country. To what lengths do we go?
- What is a woman worth? How do you/we quantify a woman's worth?
- Try using the illustration of Ruth as an icon for meditation. Sit outside in a comfortable chair or on the ground if you prefer. Relax your gaze. Look at Ruth's hair and face. Let her help you calm your breathing. When you're ready, look up at a tree or a flower or a single leaf. Gaze at it as though it is an icon, as though it was created by God simply for you to appreciate. Look at its shape, its color, its movement. Sit as long as you feel called to, then slowly come back to yourself. What was that like? What did you notice?

Mary Theotokos: More than Meets the Eye

- What surprised you about Mary's story?
- What did you already know about Mary? Or what did you think you knew?
- How important is it to you that Mary was a virgin or even that Jesus was sinless? Why? Go deeper into the side you don't think is important (that is, if it's not important to you, go deep into that)—what's valuable in that perspective?
- What does it mean to you that "God is all about enthusiastic consent"?
- What would it mean to you to consider Mary as a prophet? What is she saying to you about your life with her Magnificat?
- What has changed your life epically? A child? A job? How was it different from one moment to the next? How did you change because of it?
- In this chapter, Mary asks, "What have you done, my boy? I can't tell yet." What has Jesus done so far?
- What does it mean to hope?

- Try using the illustration of Mary as an icon for meditation. Sit comfortably and relax your gaze. Rest your eyes on the center of the spiral in Mary's belly. On your out-breath, let your eyes travel around the spiral and down her gown to the end of the line. Then breathe in and follow the line back to the center of the spiral. Follow this breathing meditation for as long as you care to. What do you notice?

Hebrew Women

Asherah: So God Had a Wife, Maybe? Probably.

- What surprised you about Asherah's story? What did you learn? What offended you?
- How have you been erased? Or how has part of your story been erased?
- Did you know about those other stories? What was it like to hear them? What have we lost in forgetting them?
- What/who do you identify with in the story?
- How are you present to your own life? How are you now invigorated to be present?
- Try using the illustration of Asherah as an icon for meditation. Sit comfortably and relax your gaze. Allow your eyes to move over the image. Notice, distantly, what draws your attention, what loops your eyes make as they move across the image. What do you settle on? What disturbs you? Look into Asherah's eyes in silence and feel her looking back at you. Breathe slowly and allow your emotions to bubble up—fear, loss, awe, confusion. Sit as long as you feel called to, then slowly come back to yourself. What was that like? What did you learn from Asherah?

Eve: Mother of All Living

- What did you already know about Eve? Or what did you think you knew?
- What surprised you about this story? With what/who did you identify?
- When have you been tempted? By what? How do you feel about it now? What did you learn from being tempted, whether you gave in or not?
- Wasn't that scene in *The Lord of the Rings* so good? I mean, damn.
- What are you grieving? What are you hoping for?
- How would the world be different if the Church had gone with original goodness rather than original sin? How would your own faith be different?
- Find some markers or pens or crayons. Whatever you like to doodle with. Sit comfortably with the image of Eve in front of you. (If you prefer, photocopy it first—you have permission to do it just this once...) Take a deep breath. Maybe another one. As you continue to breathe slowly and deeply, allow your mind to slow down, soften your gaze. Contemplate your death. Or the death of someone you love. I'm serious. Allow your grief, or the potential for grief to rise. Use the markers or pens or crayons to doodle in her hair. Allow your doodles to be enshrouded in the blackness of her hair. When you are ready, begin to contemplate life and the belovedness of creation. What is hopeful and new on the horizon? Doodle in the white space around her as you contemplate these things. When you're ready, come back to yourself. What do you notice?

Hagar: Abraham's Other Woman

- What stood out for you in Hagar's story?
- Think of/tell a story about when you felt divine presence—what happened? How could you tell it was God/divine? What did you learn from the experience?
- What do you do with misogyny, slavery, and xenophobia in the Bible? Ignore it? Internalize it? Fight against it? How do you talk about it to your friends, kids, or people with a different faith experience than yourself?

- Would you return to the scene of your oppression if you had an incontrovertible experience of the divine? Why or why not?
- In the chapter, Hagar says, “Where are you now, God, and where is your Promise?” When have you asked something like this? What was the response? How did you move forward?
- What does God do that you could name God after?
- Try using the illustration of Hagar as an icon for meditation. Sit comfortably and relax your gaze. Allow your eyes to move over the image. Notice, distantly, what draws your attention, what loops your eyes make as they move across the image. What do you settle on? What disturbs you? Look into Hagar’s eyes in silence and feel her looking back at you. Breathe slowly and allow your emotions to bubble up—fear, loss, awe, confusion. Sit as long as you feel called to, then slowly come back to yourself. What was that like? What did you learn from Hagar?

Deborah and Jael: Women on Top

- What thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations came up for you as you read about the Wives of Ferocity?
- Who else can you think of, whether in the news or in your family, who is fierce? What have you learned from them?
- Man, slaughtering your enemies gloriously sure is hard work, am I right?
- When have you been like Deborah or Jael? When have you sat and watched people coming and going and seen more than their movements? When have you stood up for someone, though it was frightening or dangerous?
- Why do you think Jael waited outside her tent? What would bring you to do what she did?
- How do you make time to pay attention to the world, to appreciate creation and the people in it? How do you find the courage to work for justice?
- Try using the illustration of Jael as the beginning of a meditation. If you can build a fire outside or in your fireplace, do so. If not, maybe light a candle. If necessary, find an HD crackling fire on YouTube and fullscreen it. Sit comfortably, maybe with a nice laprobe. Relax your gaze and look at the illustration of Jael. Imagine her ferocity burning like a flame. Imagine your own ferocity burning within you. Let your eyes follow the flames surrounding her. When you’re ready, set the illustration aside and gaze into the fire. Imagine the heat at the center of the fire. Follow the flames as they lick away from the center. Imagine the heat and rage and power of the fire within your chest. Breathe slowly into it. Let the flames radiate from your center. Sit with this image for as long as you like. When you’re ready come back to yourself. What did you notice?

Song of Songs: The Sexy, Sexy Bible

- What surprised you about this story?
- Why is this in the Bible?
- What would it be like to hear this passage preached on in church? Beyond the initial “hell, yeah!” How would it change how you view your faith and faith in general if R-rated passages were more common in worship and conversation?
- How would you compare your love to something in the world? How would you use sexual or romantic imagery to describe your experience of God? Give it a try—I dare you.
- Your body is beautiful. Did you know that? Name at least seven ways that your physical being is beautiful. Maybe go listen to Lady Gaga’s “Born This Way.”
- Who do you let really see you? With whom are you truly vulnerable? Why?
- Try using the illustration of the Song of Songs as a jumping-off point for meditation. Stand barefoot in a room where you won’t be disturbed. Close your eyes; let your mind slow. Rest your palms on your belly and feel it rise and fall as you breathe slowly and deeply. As you continue to breathe, slowly bend at the waist as far as is comfortable, ideally so that your head is upside down and your arms hang towards the floor. Rest your palms on your feet or your calves. Maybe caress them

gently. Not in a weird way. Or maybe it is weird to appreciate your body, but it's good. You are beautiful. Appreciate how your feet and legs carry you through your life. Slowly move your hands to your thighs and begin to unfold yourself at the waist. Rest your palms on your thighs and feel how substantial they are, feel their power to support you as you walk. Maybe caress them as well. Slowly straighten your spine and move your hands to your ass, cupping and appreciating its shape. Let your hands move to your lower back, maybe press into the muscles there, and appreciate how your spine supports you. Continue to breathe in and out deeply. Bring your arms to the front and let one hand trail up and down the other arm. Feel the muscles beneath your palm, rub your fingers between the fingers of the opposite hand. Appreciate all your hands can do, both ordinary and sensual. Switch arms. Continuing to breathe deeply, move your hands to your neck, head and face. Explore your scalp and face, appreciating all your brain can do and all your face can express. Appreciate your eyes, your nose, your mouth, your ears. When you're ready, let your hands drop back to your belly as you breathe in and out deeply a few more times. What did you notice? (Feel free to expand on this physical meditation as you like.)

Widows: Those Left Behind

- With what/who do you identify?
- Whose body do you know as intimately as your own? What does that mean to you?
- When have you seen miracles (or something you couldn't explain)? What were they like? How did it change you?
- Do you know anyone like my parishioner Mary? What does she teach you about being partnered and being widowed?
- What is it like to be alone? (Whether widowed or not.)
- Who and what have you grieved? What are you grieving now?
- What are you hoping for?
- Try a physical meditation based on the illustration of the widow. Sit comfortably and relax your gaze as you look at her. With your eyes or your fingers, slowly trace the lines of her face, her garment, the blackness surrounding her. When you feel centered, set the illustration aside and rest one hand palm-up in your lap. With a finger on your other hand, gently trace the outside edge of your hand beginning at the base of your thumb. Trace the edge up to the tip on an inbreath, then back down into the wide space between thumb and forefinger on an outbreath. Trace up to the tip of the forefinger in an inbreath, back down between the forefinger and middle finger on an outbreath. Continue breathing and tracing slowly, becoming intimately familiar with your hands as you do so. Cherish your fingers and your skin. When you are ready, come back to yourself. What do you notice?

Jerusalem: I Don't Love You, and I Always Will

- With what/who did you identify?
- What surprised you about this story? How revolted are you? How did it make you feel?
- Does the metaphor of the Church or God's people or even yourself as a faithless spouse speak to you? Why or why not?
- Some folks, notably liberation theologians, suggest we want a god who gets angry at injustice and pain, that this angry, violent god is exactly what we need in a world filled with war and exploitation. What do you make of that? Where do you need an angry god?
- Why do you keep choosing someone or something other than God?
- Why should we remember these stories about Wife Jerusalem and not just ignore them? Does it wake you up to the ways you hurt yourself and others? Does it call you to take up arms against toxic masculinity? Does it ask you to choose kindness so these stories can be forgotten in a cloud of caring witnesses?

- Try using the illustration of Jerusalem as an icon for meditation. Sit comfortably and relax your gaze. Allow your eyes to move over the image. Notice, distantly, what draws your attention, what loops your eyes make as they move across the image. What do you settle on? What disturbs you? Look into Jerusalem's eyes in silence and feel her looking back at you. Breathe slowly and allow your emotions to bubble up—fear, loss, awe, confusion. Sit as long as you feel called to, then slowly come back to yourself. What was that like? What did you learn from Jerusalem?

Susanna's Choice

- What stood out for you in Susanna's story?
- Share a story about a time you felt backed into a corner, whether physically or emotionally—what happened? How do you tell the story now—that is, who is the hero in the story? Where was God in that moment? How did you use or not use your own voice? What did you learn?
- How do you respond when something in your life is ambiguous? When something in scripture is ambiguous? Is ambiguity your friend or foe?
- What are your thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations when you see women being threatened or men acting superior or entitled? Or the other way around?
- What cartoon character did you imagine?
- When have you cried out for help? What happened?
- Try using the illustration of Susanna as a jumping-off point for meditation. Sit comfortably and relax your gaze. Look at the flame over her head. Examine its shape and texture. Let your eyes follow the spiral or the edges of the flame. Breathe slowly. When you're ready, set the illustration aside and arrange your arms into a similar posture to Susanna's, palms up. Close your eyes. Recreate the flame in your mind's eye. See it shiver in the breeze, gaze at it's hottest point. Try imagining that flame just inside your forehead, illuminating your thoughts and your path. Let it glow as a comfort and as a call to open yourself. Breathe. Feel the openness of your hands, your willingness to receive. Breathe deeply and slowly. When you are ready, come back to yourself. What do you notice?

Christian Women

At the Well and on the Road: Women Back-Talking God

- Do you ever argue with God? What's it like? If you don't, why not?
- Don't you just love this kind of mischievous Jesus? Surely he wasn't serious and pious all the time, right? Maybe he and the disciples got up to practical jokes? Discuss.
- What do you think about the five husbands conundrum? What interpretation(s) appeal to you or challenge you?
- What the hell is Jesus doing in rejecting the woman on the road's plea for her daughter's healing? But really, though.
- Does God change? How would your experience of the world be different if God does change?
- Who is the outsider now? To your community? To you personally? Be honest, even if you don't speak it aloud. Who is beyond the pale for you?
- When you do make connections with those "outsiders," are you speaking in a way they can hear you? Are you hearing what they are speaking? But are you really?
- Find some markers or pens or crayons. Whatever you like to doodle with. Sit comfortably with the image of the Woman at the Well in front of you. (If you prefer, photocopy it first—you have permission to do it just this once...) Take a deep breath. Maybe another one. As you continue to breathe slowly and deeply, allow your mind to slow down, soften your gaze. Contemplate all the times you've had questions about God. You needn't cling to them, just allow the feelings of wanting

to ask questions, having them answered or having them shut down, flow through you with your breath. When you're ready, use the markers or pens or crayons to write questions in her hair. They could just be single words that evoke questions. Doodle question marks or anything that arises in you. Continue to breathe deeply and slowly, being gentle with yourself and those who come up in your questions. When you're ready, come back to yourself. What do you notice?

Mary and Martha: Jesus' Family of Choice

- With what/who did you identify?
- What surprised you about these stories?
- Who is your family of choice? Why did you choose them?
- When do you notice that you're actually there in the moment? What does presence feel like to you?
- What are you preparing for? How do you prepare?
- How are you cool and fine?
- When have you felt that God was not there? When have you said, "Lord, if you'd been here..."? What did you learn from that situation?
- Try using the illustration of Mary and Martha as a jumping-off point for meditation. Ask a close friend or partner if they'll try this with you. Agree to a length of time before you start—set a quiet, soothing alarm. Sit comfortably in chairs or on the floor as close as you like. Gently hold hands or allow your hands to rest against knees—be as comfortable as you can with the other. There may be some giggling to start, it's totally fine. Look into each other's eyes—typically it's easier to choose one eye to focus on. Let your gaze soften as you look into your friend's eye. Pay attention to your breathing, slowly breathing in and out. Look into your friend's eye: see them as they are, see them as created by God, see them as beloved. Know that they are seeing you the same way. When the alarm sounds, slowly come back to yourself and turn it off. What do you notice?

Herodias and Herodias: Not so Sexy after All

- With what/who did you identify?
- What surprised you about this story?
- What place does politics have in the church? It's not going away, so how do we respond to it?
- How do you respond to someone who speaks out against you or who just seems vaguely to dislike what you're doing? Hopefully you don't behead them at a feast, but no judgment from me. What resources do you use to change the situation?
- Have you ever used your body to get what you want? Maybe in a sexual way, maybe not. Maybe even in a totally legit, long-term relationship?
- How do we get done what we want to get done? How do we play politics to further God's justice in the world? How much brutality and sacrifice of our own bodies do we allow even now to do what needs to be done? And could there be another way?
- Try using the illustration of Herodias as an icon for meditation. Sit comfortably and relax your gaze. Allow your eyes to move over the image. Notice, distantly, what draws your attention, what loops your eyes make as they move across the image. What do you settle on? What disturbs you? Look into Herodias' eyes in silence and feel her looking back at you. Breathe slowly and allow your emotions to bubble up—fear, loss, awe, confusion. Sit as long as you feel called to, then slowly come back to yourself. What was that like? What did you learn from Herodias?

Priscilla and Phoebe and Lydia and Rhoda: Paul's Church Ladies

- With what/who did you identify?
- What stood out for you in Priscilla and Phoebe's stories?
- Who were the church ladies for you growing up? What did you learn from them?
- Share a story about a woman who has given you much, to whom you are greatly indebted.
- How is your own existence an act of rebellion? How could it be?

- What is in your ordinary, daily life which speaks of great love?
- Try using the illustration of Paul's church lady as an icon for meditation. Sit comfortably and relax your gaze. Allow your eyes to move over the image. Notice, distantly, what draws your attention, what loops your eyes make as they move across the image. What do you settle on? What disturbs you? Look into her eyes in silence and feel her looking back at you. Breathe slowly and allow your emotions to bubble up—fear, loss, awe, confusion. Sit as long as you feel called to, then slowly come back to yourself. What was that like? What did you learn from her?

Mary of Magdala: Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?

- Could Mary Magdalene have been Jesus wife? How would that change your experience of faith or of God?
- What difference would it make to you if Mary's occupation as a prostitute were somehow definitively proven or disproven? Not just historically, but to this story and to your understanding of sin and redemption.
- A friend of mine once said, "God always heals, God doesn't always cure." When have you been healed?
- What does it feel like to give away your money?
- How would you recognize Jesus if he popped up in your life all of a sudden? Or, rather, "when he popped up"?
- What does it mean to you that Jesus rose from the dead? Not in theological formulations that you hear in church—your own words, your own experience. Why does it matter to you?
- What do you weep for now?

Try using the illustration of Mary of Magdala as a jumping-off point for meditation. Find a palm-sized object—a stone or hard-boiled egg or whatever. The item doesn't matter. Sit comfortably and close your eyes. Hold the object in the palm of one hand, resting the other hand on top, enclosing it gently. Feel its weight, its temperature, its texture. Breathe in and out slowly, imagining the object absorbing all the pain and heartache you carry with you. As you continue to breathe slowly, let your outbreath fill the object with grief and bullshit and your inbreath fill you with lightness and forgiveness and possibility. As you continue to breathe slowly, imagine the object shifting purpose. Now, instead of a repository of pain, it is a source of strength, warming your body and spirit, filling you with light and life. When you are ready, come back to yourself. What do you notice?