

*Benediction by Becca Stevens, Founder of Thistle Farms*

CLAIRE K. MCKEEVER-BURGETT

# Blessed Are the Women

Naming and Reclaiming  
Women's Stories from the Gospels



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*Wade and Liv,*

*This book is for you and because of you.*

*Your wisdom leads me to deeper healing  
and bigger love every moment of every day.*

*I love you with my whole heart. Forever and ever. Amen.*

*Your Mama*

*\* \* \**

*Mom (Susan Kay Livingston McKeever) and  
Dad (Russell Dean McKeever),*

*This book is also for you and because of you.*

*Thank you for being my first home.  
Thank you for showing me what love is.*

*Thank you for giving me my life and my name.*

*I am forever grateful for you and forever anchored by you.*

*Your daughter, Claire*

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*For the purposes of this book, I understand “women” as those who stand their sacred ground amid all oppression, find their voices, and use them. Women bring forth life and fight like hell to make that life worth living. Women lead from the margins of society and from the deep center of their beings. Women sit in sacred circles to process, listen, and dance, healing the world one open and honest question, one deep belly laugh, one peaceful melody, and one true, heartfelt story at a time.*

\* \* \*

*Some of the women’s stories in this book, including my own, contain accounts of sexual assault, harassment, mental illness, stalking, cyberbullying, issues of fertility/infertility, and traumatic birth. I give warnings at the beginning of the chapters that contain sensitive content, and I implore you to skip these chapters if reading these narratives might reactivate your own trauma.*

\* \* \*

*Let your heart lead you into these stories. Let your kindness and generosity overtake any need for certainty. Let your desire for a different way of living and being in the world guide you toward new truth and a bigger love. Let these stories be at the center of your life. Talk about them over lunch, at the dinner table, before bed. Imagine the stories you wish to hear and write them down. Conjure the stories of your own life, and tell them to your children, your sisters, your friends. Just as each of the women in this book have a story to tell, a vision to birth, a song to sing, a sermon to preach—stories, visions, songs, and sermons we’ve been waiting centuries to hear—so, too, do you. Tell them. Birth them. Sing them. Preach them. We’re here. We’re listening.*

*Alleluia! Amen.*

# INTRODUCTION

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I walked to the center of the sixty-five-year-old chapel, cold morning light piercing the windows. I stood dead center without a pulpit blocking me, adorned in a clerical robe and a purple-and-gold stole, which signified it was the season of Lent. A flimsy black music stand held my printed sermon, but my body held the actual sermon. She was ready to preach.

*I want Jesus to walk with me*

The opening line of the African American spiritual rang throughout the pews, bounced off the tile floors, and soaked into the wooden carvings as I sang.

*I want Jesus to walk with me*

It felt like a cry, a plea. My most haunting poem. My most honest prayer.

*All along life's pilgrim journey, Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me*

It was quiet, a collective congregational holding of our breath. What would come next?

I exhaled and began to speak as Eve.

\* \* \*

In March 2018, the dean of The Upper Room Chapel asked me to preach a Lenten sermon at the midweek service. I was currently on The Upper Room staff, working with The Academy for Spiritual Formation in the realm of contemplative spirituality. Having enjoyed pastoring a church prior to my work at The Upper Room, I was eager to accept invitations not only to preach but also to craft liturgy and worship experiences for the community.

I was beginning to understand that my gifts as a writer and communicator weren't merely tools that *helped* me to be pastoral; they were me *being* a pastor. I was beginning to see that a church building, pews, and a pulpit were not necessary for me to embody my pastoral calling to love the world and the people within it. I was



awakening to the possibility that I could be most fully me and most authentically pastoral outside traditional church walls.

Moreover, for several months my husband and I had been trying to get pregnant with our second child with no success. I'd awakened that March morning to blood between my legs, and I'd cried in the hot shower before getting ready for the chapel service. As citizens of the United States, we were also two years into the tenure of an American president who frequently reduced women to their body parts as if those body parts were an insult and not the most powerful things on earth.

So later that morning as I stood before the congregation, steady and sure, bleeding and not dying (though my heart felt like it might), I thought, *I'm a miracle. All of us women are.*

It was a season of holding my breath while trying to breathe. Of dressing my child in a shirt that read "Boys will be good humans," as if that shirt were the most fervent prayer I'd ever prayed. Of kneeling at the family altar every twenty-eight to thirty days when I could feel the cramps and knew the blood was coming—not a baby. Of praying through cries and groans too deep for words. Of lighting candles and collecting stones and showing our son icons of Mary, Saint Clare, and Julian of Norwich so he could see (and not only hear of) the women who had formed and were forming me and us all. It was a season of learning to trust what I did not know in order that I might learn to trust what I did.

In this sermon, I'd been instructed to give a nod to Women's History Month. But I'd long considered Women's History Month to be constrained—like how I thought of Black History Month and Native American Heritage Month and all of the other months that relegate certain groups to thirty days instead of acknowledging them as central to the whole year. I wondered, *Is not all of history Black, Native American, and full of women? As if this country would have any of it—this land, these people—without us?*

With these personal and political aggressions swirling, I opened my laptop to search the week's lectionary scripture passages in preparation for the midweek chapel service. And there she was: the

woman whose name I did not yet know; the woman who is saved through her love.

As I read Luke 7:36–50,<sup>1</sup> I heard her story as if for the first time—the story beyond the story on the page, the story that told me her name and her circumstances, her longings and her loves, her redemptions and her devastations. And I heard her name: Eve.

Eve first found her way into my heart, then onto the page. Once her presence was rooted within me, I preached her from my sacred and bleeding body that cold Wednesday in March with a congregation of people who quenched themselves with Eve’s story. I could feel myself drinking the water with them. With every word and turn of phrase, I stood more confidently on my own two feet. My heartbeat slowed, and I saw Julian, Mary, Clare, and my grandmothers, smiling from the balcony. For us all, drinking that narrative water was a baptism into a new way of being together, and we floated in those waters like we were fish, finally set free.

All told, I wrote Eve’s story in a couple of hours. She poured out of me like water from a fountain. She felt natural, real. As I often do when I preach, I gave her a song to sing, “I Want Jesus to Walk with Me.” It served as the refrain holding the narrative together.

Singing the African American spiritual was a way to honor not only her but all those whose names have been forgotten, whose stories have been erased, whose truths have been ignored.

I felt powerful that day, not in a “lording over” kind of way but in a “come let me show you something different” kind of way that gives you a glimpse of what it is to be fully you, unafraid to be known and seen.

Discovering and preaching Eve’s story saved me that day. She gave me purpose and passion. She showed me that I could stand on my own two feet even amidst overwhelming sorrow. She reminded

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<sup>1</sup> A woman visits Jesus as he dines in the home of a Pharisee. She anoints Jesus with perfumed oil and her tears. The Pharisee, Simon, is indignant at her presence and that Jesus is allowing her interaction. Jesus uses Simon’s indignance as an opportunity to teach about love and forgiveness, revealing that the woman’s love and gratitude are what save her.

me that the good news is always for the broken-hearted. She showed me that all any of us really want is to hear a melody, be drawn into a narrative, and find ourselves there, walking along the dusty road, with Jesus.

I walked back to my office after preaching and wrote on a piece of paper: *I will tell women's stories (and my own) for the rest of my life.*

Preaching Eve's story that day was different from my previous sermons in that I'd never preached as if I were the woman in the text. Prior sermons seemed to dance around the truth instead of speaking it directly. Channeling Eve's story enabled me to share parts of my own story and not feel alone in sharing them. I became Eve, and Eve became me; our connectedness and power were undeniable and palpable. Though I was terrified, I was also delighted; though I was scared, I still named Eve and told her story.

Offering sermons since March 2018 has come in many different forms as my work and witness in the world have evolved. I've also connected through blog pieces, Instagram posts, newsletters, all-staff emails, podcast conversations, letters to my children, birthing babies, and by sharing reminders of love and solidarity in leadership meetings and gifting monthly gifts to organizations that foster justice, love, and mercy. The connecting thread through all of their many and varied forms is the women. They're everywhere.

We need not look far to find them. Women are there in the spaces between the words, in the pause between stanzas, in the barns and back alleys, in the dust and the water. They're at the cross. They're in the next room. They're the mothers weeping and the daughters rejoicing, the patrons supporting and the sisters advocating. They're the ones giving birth, the ones longing to give birth, the ones praying in places in which they're told only men can pray.

Without women, we don't have Jesus. We don't have Christianity. We don't have any of it. Jesus, our Deliverer, can only deliver us because he was first delivered by a woman named Mary.

So within these pages are the stories of women who tell the good news. Some of their names we've known forever. Others have always had names; we just didn't know them. I've named the latter, and each time that naming has felt like a prayer I've longed to speak for years.

These are the stories that I want my children to hear during Advent and on Christmas Eve. On any other ordinary day, I hope they might stumble upon the grace of a liturgy that lends itself to love.

These are the stories that I've wanted to hear on Sunday mornings my entire life. They are the stories I kept waiting for someone else to tell until I finally realized they weren't anyone else's but my own, and ours.

These stories are for all who dare to follow God the Deliverer, the One Who Gives Birth, the One who reminds us, again and again, that we can give birth too.

These stories are gospel.

# PROLOGUE

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## Part One

*[Content Warning: Stalking, Emotional Abuse, Cyber Bullying]*

In the beginning, there I was—bright-eyed and hungry, screaming for my mother’s breast, longing for her skin. Born via cesarean section, it took a few hours in 1982 to get me to my mother after I was born. However, once we found our way back to each other, I never wanted to leave. She was my first home, after all, and while I do not consciously remember the smell of her skin or the feel of her face, my body remembers her body’s blessings. They were sacred and therefore eternal.

My parents named me Claire after my maternal grandmother, Clara, meaning “clear and bright.” The youngest daughter of the youngest daughter, the only granddaughter on my father’s side, I was born, as we all are, into a particular set of ideas and expectations for what girls and women are meant to be.

Of course, these ideas and expectations are rarely stated. Instead, they hang in the air like oxygen. They are absorbed into the bone and marrow. In fact, scientists tell us they already exist in our DNA. There is such a thing as generational trauma, what I think of as residue from the downpour of expectations and ideas not set *by* women *for* women but by the overarching culture, the men who hoped to keep those women tame, domesticated, subservient. I also believe there is such a thing as generational joy, that our bones and blood know what it is to dance and sing, free from expectation and fear, guided only by

our collective hearts' wisdom and love. How else do we explain our survival? For a woman cannot live on sorrow alone.

Geography is significant when telling our stories (there's a reason Jesus frequently talks about fig trees and grapevines—ancient Israel was teeming with them); therefore, it matters that I was born in Abilene, Texas. That city is known as the gateway to the West, its horizon dotted with wily mesquite trees and rough plateaus. In Abilene, sky billows out across the dry plains as far as the eye can see. The land and region of Abilene was originally inhabited by the Comanche people, and it's not lost on me that my formation, due in large part to the West Texas landscapes of my youth, was made possible by the conquest of this land from its original inhabitants. My homelands, then, are not mine, though they are part of me. Yet another opportunity to hold two truths at once, to practice nuance, and to continue the work toward reconciliation and repair with the land, its people, and God.

Juxtaposed with those wide-open plains were the constraints of being raised Southern Baptist in which I was shaped in the Christian faith. As a young girl growing up within this entrenched patriarchal religious system, I was told that if I wanted to work in the church, I could be a missionary, a pastor's wife, or a children's minister. The church allowed women to pray publicly, share their testimonies, and sing, but it never considered these offerings to be sermons. No, the sermon was always given by men, who typically delivered it in a pontificating manner, and it was always too long.

I heard sermons of fire and brimstone, of hell and its horrors. The message always circled back to one theme: if we lived a certain way, avoiding certain people and temptations, we could elude eternal damnation. I heard sermons about love too. Messages of love were sometimes a little harder to discern, but they were there, reminding me that life is a mixed bag, and we will be the better for living the contrasts.

Into this mixed bag I was born. In my family of origin, I have an older brother, a mother, and a father. We love each other eternally. Never have I doubted their love for me. Though seeking their approval and their admiration has been a lifelong quest, I've always known

that I am loved simply for being me. Now that I'm a parent myself, I see how intricately intertwined nature and nurture really are; it takes a host of both DNA and life experience to make a person a person, a life a life. Who is to say whether I was drawn to pastoral and spiritual leadership because I was born with gifts for it, or because such leadership was off limits to me being raised Southern Baptist? Perhaps it was both.

As a little girl, when my friends and I played church, I was always the choir director, telling the choir members (my friends) what to do. *Sit here. Sing this. Play in this key. Find this melody. Sway to this rhythm.* My family of origin both celebrated my leadership abilities and felt intimidated by them. My parents encouraged my questions and my voice, yet they didn't fully know what to do with some of the things I would say or challenge. As a parent, I now understand how this mix of celebration and intimidation feels. We do the best with what we know in the moment, trusting God to handle the rest.

It is this entrusting me to God that is perhaps the greatest gift my parents gave me. Whether they ever articulated it or not, especially as I grew older, I could sense their desire to let me be as God would have me be. It wasn't always easy, but they tried and are still trying to release the bone of their bone and the flesh of their flesh to the God of the universe. As the one being released and entrusted, I felt and feel both terrified and delighted all at once. To have parents who say I am not only their daughter but also their pastor imitates Mary and Elizabeth, who each understood from the beginning that while their child is from them and of them, the child is also completely *other* and called to *something beyond*.

Stepping into the "something beyond" has been a two-steps-forward, one-step-back dance since I was eighteen. It was then that I first left home for college in Nashville, Tennessee, a fourteen-hour drive from my parents, my hometown, my wide-open skies, and my wily mesquite-tree-dotted plains. I moved back to Texas after one year in Nashville, though, feeling completely lost and alone. Every time I drove from Texas to Tennessee, I felt as if I were driving to an island with only one way in and one way out. It's funny to think of this now, given that I've lived in Nashville for close to a decade,

making this not only *my* home, but *ours* with my family of four. But as a young woman who grew up with a voice and a vision and nowhere to express that voice and vision fully, it took some years to find the best places for those to rest and grow.

During my freshman year of college at Belmont University in Nashville, my teachers introduced me to Dorothy Day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Oscar Romero, three saints who, in turn, introduced me to a radical way of living and being in the world that stood alongside the poor, marginalized, and forgotten. These saints required not a right way to live, but a loving way. They asked questions of God and their faith and invited me into a progressive orientation of living and being in the world that constantly questioned the status quo, asking, “To whom are we not paying attention? Whose voices do we need to hear that we are not hearing?” The way they lived changed the way I lived, or at least the way I wanted to live.

While I was reading their stories and being transformed by them, I was also desperate to be loved, which unfortunately led me into an emotionally abusive relationship for the next two years. Talk about a mixed bag! I was drawn to liberation and love, yet I was trapped in a culture that fostered toxic masculinity and relational abuse, a culture that offered no road map for how to navigate men who, from the beginning, were told they could do what they wanted with whomever they wanted. No wonder I felt lost, alone, broken, and unkempt—all things I was not supposed to be. I, Claire, was supposed to be whole and together. Of course, those of us who have fallen apart know the gift of such falling, the grace of such breaking. We also know that it’s laughable for any of us to think we’re not a second away from collapsing at any moment, and knowing this fragility, this vulnerability, this humanness is what keeps us close to ourselves, to God, and to others.

Though I moved back to Texas to finish my college career at Baylor University, only three hours from my childhood home, I soon learned that my problems didn’t evaporate by changing locations. Indeed, in some ways they multiplied. While academically I found a niche in the English department at Baylor and loved it, socially, I remained confused.



I joined a sorority in which I felt a misfit. I tried out for a choir but was not offered a place in it. I fell in love with my teacher's assistant, who thought me smart and cute but did not share my affections. My ex terrorized me, sometimes calling fifty times a night (thankfully, I learned to put my phone on silent). When he got no response from me, he hacked into my email and sent humiliating messages to my parents about our sexual relationship, shattering their image of their daughter. All of this took place long before the term *cyberstalking* existed, long before colleges woke up to sexual assault and abuse happening on their campuses and among their students, long before survivors' stories were more mainstream. My reality left me in deep shame, unsure of where to go or to whom I could safely talk.

Yet every night as I struggled to sleep, I opened my Bible to the Book of Psalms. In these ancient songs, I read my reality reflected back to me, and I imagined the songwriters as women.

"I lift up my eyes to the hills; from where will my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth."<sup>2</sup>

"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for You are with me."<sup>3</sup>

"Be still, and know that I am God!"<sup>4</sup>

The sacred text offered me sacred hope, and it was with these songs and stories that I began to dig my way up and out. I changed my email and phone number. I encouraged my parents to do the same. I spoke with the district attorney of my hometown to put measures in place for my protection. I slowly began to breathe more deeply. I found a therapist . . . and I gently began to rest.

While the Psalms offered me an entry into the biblical text and into my sacred imagination, I did not stop there. Once I began to imagine women as the singers, women as the writers, women as the storytellers, I saw them everywhere—and they comforted and healed me.

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 121:1–2, *New Revised Standard Version*.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 23:4, *New Revised Standard Version*.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 46:10, *New Revised Standard Version*.

Healing is never linear. From the moment we're born to the day we die, it is our work to heal, to remember the love from which we came, and to go about dancing, living, and dreaming in that love. Because we don't remember this love all on our own, we always heal in community with others.

Women from the Bible, the ones named and the ones unnamed, joined my community of healing. They whispered their stories to me, and I began to see that I was not alone. I was not the only one abused and terrorized, shamed and undone. I was not the only one with a broken heart, longing to be made whole.

The prayer I pray to myself and my God before I preach, speak, and lead is this: "Make me an instrument of Your peace." Though tradition attributes these words to St. Francis of Assisi, I imagine them coming from St. Clare, Francis's devotee who, when a man yanked her away from the Eucharist table by her long hair because (wait for it) the table was allegedly no place for a woman to be, she promptly cut her hair off and returned to the table to pray, worship, and receive the bread and wine—body and blood of Jesus.

As I pray this prayer, I think of peace not as without conflict, rage, astonishment, or turmoil; rather, I think of peace as standing on sacred and ancient ground *amid all* conflict, rage, astonishment, and turmoil. I ask God to make me an instrument of peace that speaks truth, challenges systems, uproots the lies, and dares to transform that which is into that which might be.

In the beginning there I was: bright-eyed and hungry, screaming for my mother's breast, longing for her skin. I was born with a voice and a vision, a word and a prayer, a clarity and a sacred story birthed from women's stories throughout time, for I would not exist without them. Indeed, none of us would. Into the interconnected stories of women, we enter. Here, we listen, we pray, we identify, we honor.

# Elizabeth

## *Help Me Grow*

**Luke 1:5-24, 26, 39-56**

*Content Warning: Fertility/Infertility*

## HERSTORY

*But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive.<sup>5</sup>*

I was a mother before I was a mother.

My grandmother handed me a date seed when I was eight and said, “Plant this. Watch it grow.”

Every day thereafter I checked on the seed, made sure weeds didn’t choke it out, knelt in the brown earth, and prayed, “God of my grandmother, help this tree grow.”

The seed grew into the palm tree that fed us and healed us, that provided shade from the hot sun and a sign of hope in a dry, broken land.

As I grew and changed, married and moved, the date tree remained steady and true. Zechariah and I were married under the tree and enjoyed its luscious fruit drenched in honey at our wedding feast.

After the wedding, we hoped for a child. But the days turned into months, the months into years, and I had no child to show for being married and sexually active with my husband, something that often became burdensome instead of joyful, a task to complete instead of a love to make.

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:7, *New International Version*.

So that the grief wouldn't swallow me whole, I used to walk the three miles from our home to the date tree's shade, fall on my knees before it as I did when I was a little girl, and pray, "God of my grandmother, help me grow."

My tears watered its roots, muddying the ground beneath me, a portrait of what I thought my life had become. I used to stare into the muddied ground and beg the God of my grandmother, "Please, bring my child to me."

Sorrow became my best friend. For me, it was a particular kind of torture to long for something so intensely, then be reminded that it doesn't yet exist by discovering, month after month, my blood leaving my body. With every cycle of the moon, I'd experience a personal cycle of hope and despair, love and loathing.

The months wore on. The grief cut deeper. *I will not survive this*, I thought. *This will be the month the sorrow will kill me*. Yet I always lived, though I became increasingly more worn out than the month before.

One day, sitting beneath the date tree's shade, I began to whisper:

*Dear son,*

*I love you and I miss you.*

*The world is different with you not here, and I don't know if you're supposed to be here or somewhere else. I'm trying the best I can to honor wherever and however you may be.*

*Mostly, I feel a slow, deep ache of longing for you. I want to hold you and love you and feed you and hear you. I want to bask in your wisdom and light. I want you to teach me and lead me. Son, I want to follow.*

I never doubted that John the Baptizer was real; he simply hadn't arrived yet but was as real as the sweat and blood pouring from my body. So I began to believe that I was a mother whether I ever grew a baby in my body or not. Society's understanding of fertile and infertile, mother and not a mother were not necessarily wrong, just limited, shallow, untested in the court of real, lived experience.

For I never understood myself as infertile, and I resisted that label for years. My mother, sisters, cousins, midwives, men—all of

them called me barren, unable to conceive. But what of Zechariah? What part did he have to play in the making of a child? Why did the blame rest solely on me and my body?

Further, why dismiss the creations I'd conceived other than a human child? The date tree I continued to mother and nurture. The pottery I made with my hands from earth and water. The nieces and nephews I taught how to milk the goats. The husband I loved. The family I fed.

The reality that my body had yet to grow another human felt secondary to the reality that my heart remained wide open to love, which seemed to me to be the most fertile place I could be. And there was something of the God of my grandmother that was persistent in reminding me that openness and love were the very beginnings of anything worth keeping alive.

So as I walked to the date tree every few days to tend and weed and cry and pray, I began to grow not a child, but a life. And that life, I was convinced, is what would lead me to John.

\* \* \*

*After this Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.<sup>6</sup>*

I knew I was pregnant before the angel revealed it to Zechariah, though I was grateful the angel of mercy showed up for him when she did. His heart was broken too.

So often these stories erase men's emotions, pretending that they don't hurt and cry and lament and rage just as much as women. What violence has been done in the name of masculinity, we may never know. What I do know is that Zechariah felt deeply and longed deeply and joined me in the sorrow, though at times it felt as if that sorrow would tear us apart. The more we learned to embrace our grief as a friend, the closer we drew to each other. The more we learned to give voice to our pain, the more we healed.

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 1:24, *New International Version*.

Once again, I was sitting underneath the date tree. My blood was a week late. Could it be? Laughter filled my throat. What a wonder! What a grace!

My hands found their way to the space just below my belly button. Soft, supple skin. I could imagine a tiny heartbeat beating to the rhythm of my own. I took a deep breath in through my nose and exhaled a long, knowing sigh. Looking up to the tree, lush with fruit, it was as if she smiled at me and said, *You know. I know. We know.*

I bowed my head at her roots, a deep and long thank you, then stood and walked slowly home.

\* \* \*

*In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Gabriel visited Mary... Then, Mary hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea to visit Elizabeth.<sup>7</sup>*

Immediately, I sent word to my cousin Mary that I was pregnant. When I was six months along, she showed up on my doorstep, sweaty and bedraggled, gracious and kind.

I fetched her a cup of water and smiled at her presence. I knew neither of us would walk this motherhood journey alone.

The scriptures say my baby leapt with joy at her presence, which is true. What is also true is that *I* leapt with joy at her presence, gratitude coursing through my veins. My baby took my cue, sensing the jubilation of solidarity, the rapture of hearts and bodies connected, the relief of physical presence. Our collective joy poured up and out of our hearts and into melody and music.

My song echoed the songs of countless women before us who knew what it was to stand side by side, blessing and believing one another against all odds:

*Blessed are you among women. . . Blessed is she who has believed.<sup>8</sup>*

Mary's song joined the chorus of the prophets, heralding the God who feeds and upends for the sake of love, foreshadowing the

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<sup>7</sup> Luke 1:26, 39, *New International Version* and *New Revised Standard Version*.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 1:42, 45, *New International Version*.

life-altering work our children would one day undertake. Mary's song was the song of our grandmothers, and it was the song we sang daily, sometimes hourly, as our bellies grew and as we waited for the world to turn.

\* \* \*

*Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.<sup>9</sup>*

Here's what happens: A small cramp just below the abdomen signals it is time. The cramp grows to an ache, intensifying every few minutes. By the end, you're doing well to breathe. "Get this baby out!" you scream.

Though you know you were made for this, the mindful mantras no longer satisfy. Only a baby out of your vagina and screaming upon your breast will do.

Three pushes and he was out, thank God! The lad was screaming sermons from the start.

I held him upon my chest, too tired to cry. As he latched onto my left breast, I looked up, my eyes catching Mary's. Because she'd stayed with us for three months, she was present for the birth of John the Baptist. She held my hand. She sang me songs. She helped me breathe.

As our eyes locked, tears formed like waves behind her eyes. She never uttered a word. She didn't have to. I knew. The thin line between life and death that's always present in the birthing room shook her to her core. Though she held my hand in one of hers, her other hand held her belly. A look of terror and delight spanned her face, anticipating her own deliverance of Jesus in a few short months.

I refused to look away. *Stay with me*, my eyes said. *Stay with me*.

We stared at each other for no more than sixty seconds that blessed day, sixty seconds that felt like sixty years. Before turning back toward baby John, we leaned toward each other. Our foreheads met, the tips of our noses touched, our eyes closed, our breath matched.

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<sup>9</sup> Luke 1:56, *New International Version*.

Offering a blessing as only sisters can, it was as if we were saying to each other: *Your life matters too.*

It was as if we knew the energy, gravitas, and emotion each of our sons would require. Both were beautiful and worthy, no doubt, yet nevertheless exhausting and time-consuming, heart-wrenching and nerve-racking for their mothers.

We knew the power a simple blessing could sustain. It was as if we were made not so much for motherhood, but for sisterhood, a tethering to the very best of each other for life and for whatever lay beyond.

Before parting, we whispered our sister-prayer: “God of our grandmothers, help us heal.”

*“Blessed are you among women, I said. Blessed is she who has believed.”*

## LITURGY FOR MORNING PRAYER

*Inspired by Elizabeth’s Song from Luke 1:42–45*

### OPENING

*If you are gathered with others, position yourselves in a circle. Place a candle in the center. If you are alone, light a candle as a sign of connection to the circle of women saints who join you, even now, as you pray.*

### Morning Confession

Blessed are the women.

**Blessed is she who believes.**

### Morning Prayer of Gratitude

For the women who, throughout time, have kept us alive with their relentless believing, we give thanks.

**For the women who, throughout time, have sustained us with their determined practice of joy, we give thanks.**

For the women who, throughout time, have joined one another in song, dance, and jubilation, we give thanks.



For their mercy, for their grace, for their connection, for their love, we praise you, O God of our grandmothers.  
Amen.

**Morning Psalm | Psalm 18:1–3** (inspired by the Common English Bible translation)

I love you, Sovereign, my strength.

**You are my solid rock, my womb, my Deliverer.**

My God is my ground. I take refuge in my God.

**You are my heart and my place of safety.**

Because you are praiseworthy, I cry out to you.

**You deliver me, time and again, from all my fears.**

**Scripture Reading:** Luke 1:5-24, 26, 39-56

The word of life.

**Thanks be to the God of our grandmothers.**

*Silence*

**Prayers of the People**

For women everywhere, who are living amid war . . .

**For women everywhere, who are giving birth . . .**

For women everywhere, who are feeding their families . . .

**For women everywhere, who are leading in loving ways . . .**

For women everywhere, who are longing to be heard . . .

**For women everywhere, who are speaking words that are sometimes hard to hear . . .**

For women everywhere, who are stitching scraps of fabric together to make a blanket, to make a life . . .

**For women everywhere, who . . .** (*Follow with your own prayer for women throughout the world, for women in your own life, for women who beckon us to believe.*)

Loving God, we give You thanks.

**Merciful God, hear our prayers.**

**Amen.**

## Song of Praise

### “Blessed Is She”

Words and music by Claire K. McKeever-Burgett

The following song can be sung several times through in the practice of meditative singing, the repetition of which offers a deeper connection to God and to the women who are to be followed and whose stories are to be believed.

Bless-ed is she, the one who be-lieves. Bless-ed is she, the  
one who be-lieves. Bless-ed are the wom-en who be - lieve.

### Contemporary Connection<sup>10</sup>

Take a few moments to watch and listen to “A Beautiful Noise” by Alicia Keys and Brandi Carlile.<sup>11</sup> Imagine Elizabeth and Mary singing this together.

### The Prayer of Mary (inspired by Luke 1:46–55)<sup>12</sup>

O Mother God, we glorify You.

From the depths of our beings, we rejoice in You,

<sup>10</sup>The *Contemporary Connection* is a reminder that our worship is not meant to be divorced from our everyday lives but is meant to transform and accompany them, revealing to us that the Holy is everywhere and in everything, even and especially in the music we may not traditionally associate with “church.” Perhaps these modern links will also inspire you to dance, sing, and play as a part of your daily spiritual practice and not separate from it.

<sup>11</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_yU1x-p\\_OdY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_yU1x-p_OdY).

<sup>12</sup> Every liturgy in this book includes three elements: *The Prayer of Mary*, inspired by her song in Luke 1:46–55; a *simple chorus* I wrote inspired by Elizabeth’s song in the first chapter, entitled, “Blessed Is She”; and a *Contemporary Connection*, which is a link to a current song and/or video that relates to the woman in each chapter.

*The Prayer of Mary* takes the place of the *Prayer of Jesus* (commonly known as *The Lord’s Prayer*), which is traditionally prayed at the end of each daily liturgy. “Blessed Is She” is a meditative singing moment in which we sing the same few words repetitively as a means of prayer and connection to God and to the women. The simple tune is one I’ve been singing to my children for many years now, introducing different words to suit the seasons of our lives.

Our Deliverer.

**As You show mercy to us, help us show mercy to others.**

**As You honor our bodies, help us honor all other bodies.**

As You scatter the deceitful and remove tyrants from their thrones,

help us work for justice and shalom.

Fill the hungry with good things.

Show us what is enough.

**Deliver us from pride into mercy.**

**Deliver us from evil into love.**

For yours is the birthing room, the power, the vulnerability,

the glory, and the love,

eternally here, eternally now.

**Amen.**

### **Benediction**

May we go forth from this place, believing women, and in believing them, blessing them now and forevermore.

**Amen.**

## **REFLECTION AND CURIOSITY**

The following questions are meant to deepen and expand, invite and beckon your thoughtful, compassionate, curious responses to the story and liturgy of Elizabeth. Whether engaging these questions on your own or in a group setting, carve out space for journaling, collaging, or painting in response. If engaging in a group discussion, choose one or two questions, at most, to hold at the center of your sacred circle.

1. In what ways does your story connect with Elizabeth's story? What resonates? What makes you curious?
2. When reading and praying along with Elizabeth, what sensations do you notice in your body?

3. What is your understanding of sisterhood or siblinghood? In what ways has sisterhood/siblinghood shown itself in your life, and with whom?
4. Who is the God of your grandmothers? Who is the God you follow?
5. What do you know about fertility/infertility? What is the common narrative you've heard about infertility? What is a narrative you *want* to hear about fertility/infertility?
6. What would it mean to regard even your pain as holy and sacred?

## PUBLIC WITNESS

One of the most powerful ways I've experienced blessing is with other women and mothers as we sit together in sacred circles to tell our stories, ask for help, and, in so doing, heal. It is a powerful, tangible act of togetherness that reminds us repeatedly that we are not alone.

The story and language of Elizabeth and her sister-cousin, Mary, lead me to the real-life work of:

**Chamber of Mothers**, a nonprofit focusing America's priorities on mothers' rights through grassroots movements, local chapters, and community-building. Chamber of Mothers seeks to unite mothers as advocates to create the country we want to live in and bestow upon future generations.

**Raphah Institute**, a nonprofit organization working toward the holistic well-being of young children, their families, and their communities by supporting healing and restorative early childhood learning.

Learn more about these organizations and programs, and discover more about organizations in your area doing the work of community-building, family advocacy, and familial and generational healing. Connect. Learn. Give. Grow.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.chamberofmothers.com/> and <https://www.raphah.org/>