

Last spring, I made a pilgrimage to Egypt.

Right before I left, I encountered some sexual harassment. For reasons relating to...power, and realities of politics...there would be and will never be justice to be had around the issue.

It was a whirlwind for me to get to Egypt, and when I finally found myself with some moments of silence to even notice my own frustration and sadness, well, it was several days into the trip, when I was sitting on a bus headed across the Suez canal, into the very same desert of Miriam and Moses fame— the Sinai Desert.

It's vast, wind-swept, gritty— there were dust clouds swirling hurriedly to nowhere across drifts of sand.

I couldn't help but think that the weight of thousands of years worth of women and their stories while traveling this wilderness were somehow embedded there between grains of sand, just waiting to be heard.

But, no matter how hard I listened, I just couldn't seem to hear them.

Have you ever read all of Numbers? Or Exodus? Or...any of the books in the New Testament?

Having earned an entire MDiv, this is a thing I have done.

And, you know what? I have questions.

BIG questions— still, even after three, now nearly 3.5 years of formal theological study.

You know what my main question is?

Where are all the women's voices?

I have been given a pile of reasons the women seem to be missing:

- "that's just not how the culture worked"
- "The voices are there...but you need to just listen *between* the words to hear them"
- "some of the authors might have actually been women...but they had to change their name to male names so that people could hear or understand the stories"
- "women were actually really powerful, and jealous men intentionally wrote them out"

{PAUSE}

have you noticed that when we DO find our voices and bodies in these books,

They are muddled with unhelpful stereotypes

that we are then culturally cultivated to accept and adopt over time?

Our female-identifying biblical models presented to us from a young age are limited, severely.

Have you thought about this before? It's really wild.

Some of you already know I grew up Catholic. Back then, I realized rather suddenly (all the way into my late 20s) that women have two options modeled to them in that system: be a wife **and** mother (like the virgin mary, bonus points if you, too, could maintain your virginity) ...or be a Nun. No one talked about Esther, there.

Now that the ELCA is my home, I notice that we've got.... two options here, mostly:

"Are you Mary, or are you a Martha?"

AND...maybe, an Esther (*but note that she is forced to use her body, and is verbally abused by her uncle for her starring role*)

I suppose there's also the always "helpful" tropes around Eve, too. You know- how Eve and that snake are the reason we got kicked out of Eden? Somehow, even with many a preacher clarifying that Eve is not the reason for original sin, that one keeps coming back to bite us. Doesn't it?

AND I know, I know—

we have these stories we've developed in response to all these shortcomings

stories about how we're so powerful that we were written out/ not included/ etc etc...

But – Honestly ??

in the midst of all the apologetic excuses, and the "we're so powerful that..." narratives, what I mostly hear is:

“Women are missing because we’re comfortable with how things are, and we see literally no reason to change the status quo”

AMEN?

Amen.

Even with these limitations with our scriptural stories,
we still have made ways for ourselves to keep showing up.

We have a history of carefully and subversively showing up, influencing people and places and situations so that needs might be met...

The quilting group that was never **just** about quilting. It was also about helping fellow women navigate divorces, helping their partners find jobs and get connected to other resources.

The bake sales and the raffles and the women's shopping events were never just about domestic ladies doing domestic things and shopping things— NO. They were always about seeing the needs of the community around us, and getting those needs met!

We might not have been “seen” or “heard” for our true selves...but...we still found ways to use the limited resources and power we had by showing up for one another so that we might see to it that communal needs were met.

Fast forward a few decades, **annnnnd....**

we've even been given leadership positions outside of women-only spaces!

(Look!— There are women clergy! And women CEOs AND 50+ years later... we're still paid less, we still do more work, and it still ultimately takes way longer for any one of us to find a job that pays a living wage than all male candidates out there).

Truly, just like Lorde's closing lines in her poem:
I sit wondering, which I/Me/We will survive all these liberations.

{PAUSE}

You know what else I wonder about?

Why don't we demand the recovery and naming of women's voices and bodies in our various texts and scripture stories?

Is it like Audre Lorde's incisive observation in her poem— where we, gathered for our rally,
“neither notice nor reject the slighter pleasures of our slavery”?

Or is it because we're tired of the constant fight?

Or maybe...

we're *actually* not all that tired of the fight, but we are still, ultimately, afraid.

Afraid that those awful Theology of Glory preachers who say Eve and womankind are responsible for all of the pain we experience after being kicked outta God's garden?

Afraid that our voices and lives don't matter?

Afraid that we somehow deserve to be in these uncomfortable positions we have found ourselves in so frequently that we don't even bother to name them, anymore?

Afraid that we're not powerful enough for any real lasting change to come from our collective efforts?

Afraid that, if we try to change anything— the bits of comfort we have now will be taken away?

{PAUSE}

OR, maybe, just maybe underneath ALL of those fears...

Maybe, we're actually afraid of just how painful real change is.

Afraid of the difficult challenges that come with speaking up, placing our bodies and voices in full view when we take a stand on an issue?

Kind of like in the Barbie Movie—

You know, where the Barbies have been brain-washed by patriarchy, and their “wake-up-call” comes when America Ferrera begins her speech—

naming all the paradoxes and unreasonable expectations loaded onto the bodies of girls and women—

Have you seen the movie? Do you know the speech I'm talking about?

Remember how, at the end of her speech, Ferrera says, *"I'm just so tired of watching myself and every single other woman tie herself into knots just so that other people will like us"*

{PAUSE}

Is that us, here? Are we, sorta silent and trying to stay in our "Women" lane, where our roles are largely defined for us because we, too, just want other people to *like* us?

{PAUSE}

"Just to be liked" feels like a low bar, considering the history we've got, isn't it?

Amen?

Amen.

Back to that bus I was on, in Egypt, crossing the Desert to get to Mt. Sinai:

we hurtled down the desert freeway,
and I sat there continuing to reflect on what my body carries
just to be able to live in a Church world that is ultimately built for,
and mostly values, men's voices and men's ways.

A Church world that I know, from experience,
will most often automatically defend men and men's
intentions if there's a his word against mine situation.

I thought about the energy I use up on resolve
and bravery
and carefully concealing rage at the repeat injustices that I,
and fellow women, have faced from this Church, from this world.

I thought on the energy I've wasted
on lies I tell myself every day
about how my behavior might control how others— especially men—
might behave toward me— just so I can get them to *like me*

even though I know I don't have that kind of control, and so do you.

Amen?

Amen.

So, like...I kept sitting there, looking out that bus window.
Watching the desert fly by,
reflecting on how my own experiences
are only a sliver of what fellow female-identifying persons,
especially the ones who have black and brown skin tones,
have endured and continue to endure—
Amen?
AMEN.

And, even once I was writing this talk for you,
I reflected more still—
on my choice to respond to God's call,
to place my female-identifying body as a minister
in an institutional Church whose scriptures,
and long history
are one that, ultimately, has primarily served to underscore and encourage systems
and communities
that will expect us to use our skills, abilities, energy, and resources to nourish them
...but rarely will pour as much nourishment back into us.

Amen?
AMEN.

You wanna know ANOTHER thing I got to wondering about?

Maybe not, but imma tell you anyway.

WHY IS IT that Christian stories, theologies, reflections, prayers, liturgies, and ... practically everything we have here in Christianity has been overwhelmingly controlled and composed by men who entirely overlooked or stereotyped us, even though we're HERE?! **WHY is this still the case!?**

WHY are Women's bodies and voices still mostly overlooked, or...just plain missing.
Amen?

M4: To some degree, this is disappointing, frustrating, and disillusioning, no?

It feels like Church *tells* me it's lifting me and you up.

Yet— I am right out of Seminary, and I tell you, I have read so many scholars (many queer, some female-identifying) who are working really hard to find and uplift women's voices **while acknowledging** that there is nearly a total vacuum where those voices should be, and it makes me angry that they have to work this hard just to justify talking about women in these spaces.

Amen?

Amen.

I'm *angry* that I have to work twice as hard to identify where the rest of the women might be in the in-betweens, while (not all but many)— of the men in my world continue to roll on down the road seemingly able to avoid this issue entirely, if they want to.

Amen?

Amen.

I have colleagues and peers who are regularly speaking to me about how they are baffled that women stay with Christian churches at all when it's obvious to them that within many Christianities, we're repeatedly used to keep an institution going... centuries of using women for all our effort and skill while also undermining us—so that we can keep a status quo where benevolent sexism reigns supreme: we're told we're important....but, not much has actually shifted towards true equity in or outside of our church.

amen?

AND, I want to clarify something, here:

I am NOT advocating for WEAK White Woman Feminism where we bash men or hate on men and only prioritize white culture women and white culture women's ways.

We don't want that at all. And we don't want that because we know that the men in our world are FORCED to also pay HEFTY, UNFAIR PRICES emotionally and physically in this social landscape we're living in,

Amen?

AMEN.

I bet if I opened up the floor, we'd have plenty more to say about the places and ways each of us can see how the lack of women in our scriptures and foundational texts has contributed to—and continues to cultivate —

a habitual behavior of near silence, implicitly encouraging us to question whether it's even our place to show up and make any noise at all— For fear “they” won’t like us.

Amen?

Amen.

M5: That bus I was on in Egypt continued down the bumpy road, moving my body ever closer to Mt. Sinai.

I gazed out at a vast empty desert, that very same desert that ancient Israelites traveled,
And remembered that Audre Lorde poem I started us off with. You know those first lines?

*There are so many roots to the tree of anger
That sometimes the branches shatter
Before they bear.*

Is that me? Am I a branch that will, ultimately shatter?
Is that WELCA? Are we a shattered, or shattering branch?

{PAUSE}

I also wondered...where's God in this complicated mess?

I imagined God might give me a new commandment atop Sinai when I got there.

I could use one, really, we all could use a new one. A commandment that might, somehow, help
us know how to respond to the continued violence done to women on this earth.

A commandment just for us women, just for those of us silenced folx. Something to tell us what
to DO to *at least* help one another in the midst of this messy world...

Amen?

Amen

M6: We have another problem, though...

Do you know what AMEN means?

It means “so be it”

And you know what I say to that?

NO.

NO MORE AMEN. NOT FOR THIS MESS.

When Sue approached me about speaking at this gathering, we were both on that same bus in Egypt—literally traveling through the very same territory that Moses and the Israelites had been traveling in the story we studied in Numbers, today.

As she spoke to me of her concerns for WELCA in Sierra Pacific finding it’s voice and purpose once again,

I began to see the parallels between ancient Israelites wandering a desert wilderness, and our predicament.

I saw parallels between the missing women in the story, and the missing agency from us within our story, right now.

The Israelites were on a very long and bumpy ride
through the desert wilderness in their day,

Sue and I were on our own long and bumpy ride
through the very same desert, just last year.

and NOW here we all are,
on yet another long bumpy ride in a “desert”
where we’re wandering about,
trying to figure out what it is WELCA is being called to do in the Sierra Pacific Synod.

Amen?

NO. No more amen. No “so be it” to this kind of lack of purpose and action.

Think about that community of ancient Israelite people from our text in Numbers, today.

Lost in the wilderness, complaining about their seeming lack of freedom— worried about liberations they are not sure they will survive.

Not a single woman's voice is directly mentioned,
but we can hear the women of that community and their potential words—
we imagined them today! And what did we hear when we listened into the story?

They're mad- and honestly? Rightfully so.

People they loved were dying around them.

And what did they DO? They said to themselves, to their leadership, to God—
“this food stinks, and there isn't enough water. Really, God— what good is liberation if we're just going to die?”

They said, “WILL ANY OF US SURVIVE ALL OF THESE “LIBERATIONS”, GOD!?”

Amen?

NO. I'd like to think that the women of that community said
“NO. NOT AMEN. NO MORE AMEN FOR THIS.”

I'd like to think they then marched right up to Moses,
and said “look man, we gotta figure SOMETHING out.
NO MORE AMEN for THIS! IT DOESN'T WORK!”

Are you picking up what I'm putting down, here?

Let's bring this up to today:

Here we are,—a group of women associated with WELCA.

Some of us are just tired.

Some of us are nervous.

Some of us think this work is for people who are younger than we are.

Some of us are mad, because we feel like we've already handled this shit and we don't know why it's not actually gone.

Some of us are disillusioned, because we thought we could rely on our sisters...and have learned that we cannot.

The "food" that once nourished us, doesn't seem to do it any longer.

The "water" that once hydrated us, seems like it's not hydrating us any longer.

We have all this knowledge and awareness for how we as women have been perpetually marginalized since (seemingly) the beginning of time according to our own scriptures—

Yet, just like Lorde wrote in her poem—

we seem to neither notice, nor reject these patterns.

What's the purpose of these liberations? Which me/We will survive?

Amen?

NO.

NO MORE AMEN. NOT FOR THIS.

We are bigger, and capable of more than this.

Did you notice that,

despite all the anger and frustration and disappointment in this story,

the people who survived that liberation **were the people who chose to collaborate with God.**

And, that collaboration didn't come easily.

What happened?

First, they used their voices and their bodies to name the problems.

THEN they went to God with those problems, and together with God they collaborated on a solution.

The solution didn't immediately stop the biting snakes.

BUT— the collaborative solution DID, become a source of life despite the snake bites.

{PAUSE}

Is it possible that we suffer from the very same serpent bites as our ancient predecessors, the Israelites in the desert? Are we suffering from a bunch of liberations that were, and sort-of are...but also aren't entirely liberating?

Is God sitting here among us, silent in solidarity, waiting for us to ask for God's help in noticing whatever serpent it is that's biting us, so that we might help one another look at it and live?

Have we forgotten this brilliant wisdom we receive from ancient Israelites in this story?
The wisdom to show up and simply say **NO. NO MORE AMEN to the continuous snake bites that come with modern day life as a woman?**

(And let me clarify— that silencing is silencing we sometimes choose among ourselves, and inflict on one another, just as much as any outside entity or person might be contributing).

Is God right here, afterall, waiting in silence and in solidarity with us—knowing that once we choose to show up with presence, once we begin simply saying **NO. NO MORE AMEN TO THIS**

... we will *also* begin to gather the power to participate in God's salvific action for our neighbors and for us?

Serpents & snakes are as much about life as they are about death.

And, we women intuitively know that this cycle is inevitable.

We'll encounter myriad deaths and rebirths in a lifetime, and despite every one of them—

we are invited again and again to enter into divine collaboration—

to co-create with God in a continuous dialogue that enables Christ's saving action for our neighbors, and for us.

Many people interpret God as silent, today.

And honestly? If you center your understanding and experience of God solely on scripture, it sure does seem as though God has stopped speaking to us— God's people— in the ways God has spoken to prophets like Moses, and through Jesus, doesn't it?

But...I don't believe that God no longer speaks. And, I don't believe we have to only know God through scripture. I believe we can and do know God through our lived actions and experiences.

I believe God is choosing to remain silent from some of God's more traditional forms of communication in favor of simply standing with and among us and those who are also prevented or pushed aside from our tradition's dominant forms of story and history.

And- if this is the case, what was it we learned from our ancestors? Let's take a cue from their wisdom and speak up, loud and clear, plainly saying:

THIS FOOD SUCKS. THIS WATER IS INADEQUATE. WE ARE BEING BITTEN TO DEATH BY FALSE LIBERATIONS AND FAILURES TO SHOW UP AND NAME THE ISSUES.

NO. NO MORE AMEN TO THIS.

As we prepare to hear from Pr. Shafer about LRIS in a few moments, and then we hear from a sister and her family about their immigration struggles, I leave you with these questions:

Is God's seeming silence simply a reflection of our own silence?

Is God waiting for us to speak up with our voices, and our bodies? Seeking for us to give the microphone to those who are even more silenced than we are, so that God might be heard and seen once again?

I can't answer these questions for you— but they are the questions whose answers will determine who and what WELCA is and will be in the future.

Amen?

NO. NO MORE AMEN.