



Reflecting on the Art for the 2021–2022 Presbyterian Women/*Horizons* Bible Study

What My Grandmothers Taught Me

Learning from the Women in Matthew's Genealogy of Jesus

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What My Grandmothers Taught Me is illustrated with artwork that includes vibrant color, theological insight, and provocative interpretations of stirring and troublesome, yet powerful, stories of women's witness. Yes, the artworks highlight each lesson. Yes, they both probe and puzzle if you pause even for a moment to connect them to the story on the adjacent page. But they hold so much more if you are willing to gaze and ponder, examine and wonder, look and listen with the curious eyes and ears of faith. As we draw on the insights and intentions of artist Cody F. Miller,¹ and provide questions to guide your exploration, allow God's Spirit to draw you deep into these illustrations. Open yourself to an even richer understanding of the power these stories of Jesus' biblical grandmothers have to tell us the Good News and inspire our discipleship.

Note: I like to use the word gazing to describe what we will do when we explore the artwork. Gazing at art is not about guessing what the artist intended. Gazing at art draws you into the events, experiences, and feelings of the subject. It invites you to take part, even imagine how you might respond, and then examine your own experience and relationship with God in light of what you discover. What we find when we gaze at the art will help us understand some of the author's insights and help us see how these stories show us God's love, grace, and faithfulness.

1. Many thanks to Cody Miller for an April 8, 2021, 50-minute conversation about his larger artistic intentions and these particular illustrations, and his permission to quote from the interview and allow his insights to spark our reflection. His generous spirit infuses this exploration.

Beyond the Basics: Exploring the Art Lesson-By-Lesson



LESSON ONE: Family Trees "Sarah and the Promise"

1. The genealogy in *The Gospel of Matthew* begins, "A record of the ancestors of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac" (Matthew 1:1–2). Even though five women are named in the genealogy, Abraham's wife Sarah is not one of them. The matriarch of the family, whose actions impact the origin stories in Genesis 12 through 23, is not included. Maybe Sarah represents the multitude of women whose roles, in practice and in hindsight, go unnamed. But Sarah is remembered here in the art. What does the background and her outfit suggest about her life? Where do Sarah's eyes focus? What she looks at will tell you what is important to her.

2. The paper doll chain is Sarah's power. This genealogy in Matthew's gospel, despite omitting Sarah, is due to her. How would you define the power of birthing, nurturing, and educating children?
3. In cut paper doll chains, all the figures are identical. True to the stories behind Matthew's genealogy of this family, all the figures are not the same! Consider your own family genealogy. What differences, actions, and life-stories inspire you? Challenge you? Shape you?



LESSON TWO: Tamar
“Tamar”

1. Reflecting on this art will be more helpful after you know the story. After you've read Tamar's story, find the “unknown” objects that represent what Judah gives Tamar: his signet ring with his seal, its cord, and his staff. What might be strange about these items adorning a woman at this time? How does her possession of them change her situation? More important, how does it change her?
2. To encounter Judah, Tamar “took off the clothing she wore as a widow, [and] covered herself with a veil” (Genesis 38:14). Now she is revealed—with all Judah's symbols of power adorning her. What else do you see that might redefine her, and in what way?
3. What does Tamar's facial expression convey as she looks directly at you? Put her look into words.
4. This is what the artist has to say about Tamar:

“God sees this woman and what she must do not to be forgotten, and the plight of women at that time. I wanted her to look directly at the viewer, with a searching eye but also a certain tiredness. ‘For me not to be forgotten, for me to bear children,’ she is saying with her face, ‘. . . you have no idea what's it's like to be a woman at this time.’

“The bright light behind is the contrast of a deep hardship and a deep beauty inside that hardship. Those parallel tracks run through scripture, and they run through life. They define . . . our own pain and struggles and God's amazing spendthrift grace and love. They help us to be the hands and feet of Jesus to those around us.”



LESSON THREE: Rahab
“Rahab”

1. Rahab is portrayed in silhouette, pondering the meaning of what is happening “behind her.” After you read the story cited in the bottom left-hand corner of the painting, Joshua 2:1–14, look closely at the background. What does it represent for you? What might what you see mean to and for Rahab? Just above Rahab's head are the hidden spies. Imagine her dilemma, and the danger she faces no matter what she chooses.
2. On the base of the frame on the far right, a second scripture reference is etched: 1 Corinthians 1:26–31. Read it. Focus on verses 27–28 in relation to this situation: “But God chose what the world considers foolish to shame the wise. God chose what the world considers weak to shame the strong. And God chose what the world considers low-class and low-life—what is considered to be nothing—to reduce what is considered to be something to nothing.” How does this “frame” add to or shape your perspective on this story?
3. When have you found yourself caught between a rock and a hard place? How might considering what action God would most honor help you discern a way in such situations?
4. This is what the artist has to say about Rahab:

“God honored Rahab for lying. . . Rahab had to take a big risk. She put her life at stake for someone else’s life. She believed in who they said they were, but it’s still a risk to believe. . . . Maybe, because of what I just did now, something might change. Something might look different. Just maybe. God sees [our] hearts and the people God uses are often so completely contrary to what we are thinking.”

“The light in the background—the person in the foreground is making a decision and it’s a hard decision because [their solution] is the best bad idea they have.” There’s something going on behind them they can’t see. This notion of God working behind the scenes, when we often can’t see it—I believe that is the heartbeat of all scripture.”



LESSON FOUR: Ruth and Loyal Love
“Ruth and Naomi’s Journey”

1. Ruth and Naomi are on their way home to Bethlehem from Moab where they escaped a famine but experienced three deaths: the deaths of Naomi’s husband, and her two sons—the husbands of Ruth and another daughter-in-law. As they cross the Jordan River on a footbridge, they know the future is bleak. What do you see in this picture that shows their mood and feelings? What aspects of their surroundings contribute to, and which ones give a false impression of, their sense of the future?
2. Pay attention to detail (a magnifying glass might help you!). Why do you imagine the butterfly is present? The turtle and her cargo?
3. Here we have two women who find themselves between a known and terrible past and an unknown and possibly terrible future. What is a woman to do?
4. This is what the artist has to say about this picture:

“The bright red behind the women is a really bright exaggeration of a bark on a tree. So many emotions are raging inside them as they are walking back, I wanted to have that color next to them. You can tell they are tired, and they are thinking. That color designates more of what is going on in their minds and hearts as they try to process all of it. Sometimes in our life, [the choice we make] is our best bad idea.

“The turtle reminds us “. . . how pain often makes everything feel like it is in slow motion. This turtle sets the pace. The eggs [in the basket on the turtle’s back] signify new birth. [Possibly Ruth and/or Naomi are thinking,] ‘Maybe when we go back, just maybe, God will surprise us with joy in some way; but right now, I’m not seeing anything on the horizon other than I can’t think of anything else to do.’”



LESSON FIVE: Ruth and Redemption
“Gleaning”

1. Gaze at the picture and allow a stream of consciousness brainstorm to produce a list of all the gathered and earth-bound bounty represented here in fabric, hills, sky, and faces. Offer prayers of thanksgiving for the bounty you see. Praise God from whom all blessings flow!
2. Count the butterflies. Imagine they represent the blessings Ruth and Naomi receive. Name each blessing butterfly. Now imagine they represent your blessings. Name each one of your blessing butterflies.
3. Wonder about what the “unknown” cutouts integrated into this image might represent. Have fun with your interpretation!

4. Butterflies often symbolize new life, new hope, new beginnings, new paths discovered through the choices we make. Often, these new things are gleaned from the remnants of hard times, challenges, even insurmountable hardships. Often, we see hope and opportunity only in hindsight. What newness has come into your life out of challenging circumstances or experiences?



LESSON SIX: Bathsheba
“Bathsheba”

1. Once you know more about Bathsheba’s story, you will be able to name the four people in her painting. Bathsheba’s unexpectedly out-sized role is obvious here. Surrounded by the men in her life, who gets all her attention? Eyes often tell the story.
2. Lines were crossed to place Bathsheba in the position in which she finds herself. Using the power her position gives her, Bathsheba does not hesitate to promote her son, and in so doing, she possibly crosses lines herself. What, for you, represents Bathsheba’s strength and determination in this picture? What obstacles have been placed in your path because of your power, or lack of it, as a woman? What lines have you discovered are worth crossing?
3. I wonder if Bathsheba knows, or suspects, that, in the artist’s words, “God is going to do something spectacular for this child”? What do you wonder about her situation?



LESSON SEVEN: Mary
“A Quiet Morning”

1. The artist says of this picture, “I was thinking about Jesus and Mary and Joseph and when they would have snuggle time.” What signs of rest, contentment, and joy do you find here? What do you imagine this family’s early years held, considering what they knew about God’s plan for Jesus?
2. What adjectives would you use to describe this scene?
3. Find the gigantic (in relative terms), hard almond shell, broken open by and releasing a tiny butterfly. What does this part of the scene signify for you? The artist had something specific in mind: “It’s a device to emphasize how crazy it was that Jesus was actually born, and the hope we have in Jesus. It’s a surprise story in every way.” As you reflect on the angel appearances to Mary and Joseph separately, and the birth stories featured by Matthew and Luke, what surprises do you notice?



LESSON EIGHT: Mary in the Faith and Tradition of the Church
“Mary”

1. Remember, eyes often tell the story. I imagine that, rather than looking down at Jesus in her arms, Mary’s eyes are closed. As Jesus sleeps peacefully in her arms, it is not her gaze that indicates her whole focus is on this child given into her care; it is her prayer. Maybe it is her fervent, “Dear God in heaven, what have I done!” Or maybe her prayer is . . . well, what do you imagine Mary is praying? What might you pray if this was you? How do these prayers differ and why?
2. You can’t miss the birds and the strings. They are a prominent part of the picture. Notice that one of the strings loops behind Mary’s head and points her in the direction she is facing. The artist is helpful here: “Birds are the most frequent creature to appear, especially birds with string in their mouth. The string is a direction God is pointing—this is as far as you can see of this journey. . . . The string is just a fragile thing to guide you through the fragile maze that

life is.” What else guided Mary as this journey began? What has guided you on your journey as a woman worthy of being named and loved by God?



**LESSON NINE: What Are These Women Doing in a Place Like This?
“Ruth and Naomi’s Light”**

1. What in the world is happening here? Let your imagination run wild as you examine all the details in the background of this picture: the places light appears and what that light illumines, where the eyes focus, how the hands cradle the precious light. What story takes shape in your mind?
2. This is the story that took shape in the artist’s mind: “It’s getting late and [Ruth and Naomi] have to find someplace to bed down for the night. They bunk in this field full of fireflies and they collect a whole bunch of them and put them in this little jar. The fireflies illuminate the whole jar and Ruth and Naomi look at it intently. For a brief moment on their journey, everything else fades away and they are completely and utterly in the moment.” Take a minute and relax into the feeling of holding the light, with no thought of any care or worry or anxiety that might be pressing in on you. Focus on the light. You are enough. You are loved.
3. This last image is of “Ruth and Naomi’s Light,” but all the women whose stories are told in this study held within themselves, and spread, light. God is in these stories. God’s light shines through these women as the story of God’s people is told and as God honors their choices. Tamar’s act is judged “right” by Judah; Rahab’s whole family is saved; Ruth finds love and belonging, and Naomi reclaims, and is claimed by, her family; Bathsheba sees her son become King of Israel; and Mary is revered for all time. What characteristics, individually and collectively, did these ordinary women demonstrate as they encountered extremely difficult circumstances? What do you most admire? What models of discipleship might you want to emulate?