

Genesis 16:1-6

Sarai, Abram's wife, hadn't yet produced a child.

She had an Egyptian handmaid, a slave, named Hagar. Sarai said to Abram, "God has not seen fit to let me have a child. Sleep with my handmaid. Maybe I can get a family from her." Abram agreed to do what Sarai said.

So Sarai, Abram's wife, took her handmaid Hagar and gave her to her husband Abram. Abram had been living ten years in Canaan when this took place. He slept with Hagar and she got pregnant. When Hagar learned she was pregnant, she looked down on her mistress.

Sarai told Abram, "It's all your fault that I'm suffering this abuse. I put my handmaid in bed with you and the minute she knows she's pregnant, she treats me like I'm nothing. May God decide which of us is right."

"You decide," said Abram. "Your handmaid is your business."

Sarai was abusive to Hagar and Hagar ran away.

Genesis 30:1-9

When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister, and she said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!" Jacob became very angry with Rachel and said, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?"

Then she said, "Here is my handmaid Bilhah; go in to her, that she may bear upon my knees and that I too may have children through her." So she gave him her handmaid Bilhah, and Jacob went in to her. And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son...Rachel's handmaid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son.

When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her handmaid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob. Then Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son.

## **"The Handmaid's Tale" and the Bible**

Imagine if you will the following scenario: a Right-wing "Christian" fundamentalists group stages a violent, deadly, coup overthrowing the United States government.

With the President and Congress removed by deadly force, this new patriarchal extremist Christian Nationalist group suspends the US Constitution. They quickly consolidate its power and reorganize society along a new militarized, hierarchical, compulsory regime of Old Testament-inspired social and religious fanaticism among its newly created social classes.

In their new "Biblically based" society, human rights are severely limited. Women no longer have any rights at all, including autonomy over their own bodies or lives. This right-wing, fundamentalist, "Christian" extremist group believes the Bible instructs women to be submissive to and obey men, citing passages like Ephesians 2:23-25 - "Wives should obey their husbands in everything..."

With industrial regulations dismantled, the on-going poisoning of the environment has resulted in a dramatic drop in fertility.

This new Christian extremist regime has, therefore, enslaved fertile women, forcing them to become slaves within privileged households. They are the "handmaids" (there are other classes of oppressed women as well). The handmaids have lost their names; instead, their names have become the patronymic of the men that they serve.

Because the elite women are infertile, the handmaids must undergo a monthly impregnation ceremony with their commanders in order to bear a child for the commander and his wife. (See Goodreads review)

This is scenario Margaret Atwood wrote about in her 1985 novel, "The Handmaid's Tale."

Because her novel focuses on the survival and emancipation of endangered women who go through devaluation, coercion, enslavement, torture, rape and outright genocide, with her male characters using the "Bible" to justify their oppressive patriarchal hierarchy over women, it has been banned in many schools, libraries, and even countries.

This is yet again, another banned books that asks us to take a look at the Bible. If "The Handmaid's Tale" is to be banned, so should the Bible, and for good reasons.

Rabbi Jeffery Salkin, writing for the Religion News Service, in an article titled: **"The Handmaid's Tale' re-spins Genesis, and that's scary."** He says: **"It doesn't take a graduate degree in political science to see 'The Handmaid's Tale' as a warning about the dangers of religious fundamentalism and totalitarian government."**

He adds, **"Some see it as a prophetic outcry against the assault on women's health care and the removal of women's rights, especially at the hands of those who would do so in the name of religion – both in the United States and in Israel."**

**"Yes,"** he says, **"The Handmaid's Tale' is about fascism and misogyny. But it is about far more than that. 'The Handmaid's Tale' is a dark midrash (or commentary) on the patriarchal tales of Genesis."** (<https://religionnews.com/2017/05/04/handmaids-tale-genesis-bible-judaism/>)

While Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel was futuristic in its setting, it was to the past, and the original "Handmaid's Tales" in Genesis, she turned to when writing her novel.

Both the stories we read this morning of Abram, Sarai, and Sarai's enslaved handmaid, Hagar, and the story of Jacob and his wives, sisters, Leah

and Rachael, and their enslaved handmaids, Bilhah and Zilpah, are biblical patriarchal tales told through the lens of the belief that God was "male."

Whereas Genesis 1, talks about "men and women" being created equally in the same likeness of God, the other Creation story (yes, there are two separate ones), in Genesis 2 was used to justify women being created secondary to men, as "helpmates" there to serve men.

This interpretation of Scripture has long been used by the "Church" and its dominate male leadership in the Catholic Church and in our own Protestant/Reformed/Presbyterian Church over the years, to keep women submissive to men, and remove of all autonomy over their body and lives.

In her article, "8 Biblical Themes Hidden in 'The Handmaid's Tale'", Valerie Tarico, names some of them as:

- Men properly hold the highest positions of authority in society and the family. Violation of this male hierarchy is a threat to the whole social order.
- Women are assets that belong to men.
- Slavery, including sexual slavery, is morally acceptable, regulated and sometimes commanded.
- The primary identity and value of women lies in their reproductive capacity.
- Infertility is a female issue not a male one.
- Female consent is not a thing. Nowhere is there any indication that female consent is needed or even desired before sex.

Reading both Margaret Atwood's book and these two biblical handmaid's tales in Genesis, one can begin to see these dismissive and degrading male attitudes towards women playing out once again in our nation and Church.

The recent decision by the Supreme Court to overturn of Roe v. Wade wasn't just about abortion. At its core, it was about taking away the fundamental right of autonomy of a woman over her own body.

In forcing women or young girls who have been raped or sexually abused by a family member and find themselves pregnant to carry that pregnancy to term, knowing that this pregnancy was the result of hate and violence, is further victimizing the victim. God is not present. There may be a pregnancy but there is no sacred life present.

There are no government laws or church doctrines that legislate what we as men can and can't do with our own bodies.

Why is that? It has to do with the biblical patriarchal attitudes that men in power have long had towards women. They have freely used and abused

this distorted understanding of the Bible when writing Church doctrine and political laws.

With the rise of Christian Nationalism, which wraps the American flag around Christian symbols like the cross, extremist groups connected to this movement, participated in a violent insurrection against the United States Government. Couple this with the Supreme Court's recent decision undoing a Constitutional right of a woman to have full autonomy over her own body, and you can begin to see why there is great outrage by women of all ages, and many men, and faith leaders.

This past Wednesday, Staci and I participated in a press conference with faith leaders from around Wisconsin held at the Planned Parenthood office in Milwaukee.

As a members of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, we were there to condemn the recent decision of the United States Supreme Court in striking down the landmark and precedent setting ruling of Roe v Wade, while releasing a letter calling for our elected leaders to pass laws that support a person's right to choose reproductive freedom.

**"As faith leaders, we believe that Roe v. Wade had had clarified and determined the sacred privilege of bodily autonomy. Now, that right has been taken away from all Americans. This is a tragic occasion for us all.**

**As faith leaders, we are also distressed that this ruling seeks to enshrine into law one narrow religious viewpoint, thereby violating the Constitution's explicit protection for freedom of religion. The free exercise of religion – including the right not to observe any religion – means that no one religious concept can control law and life for those of a different religious belief.**

**People of faith believe many different things about the beginnings of human life."** (See full letter here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1eb3tLVkLUW3VmEEzXHRRMmeVyOhr3RNf/edit>)

As our Call to Worship noted, when God created the first human, God breathed the sacred breath of life into the nostrils, and the human came alive. Life, the Jewish tradition, and remember, Jesus was Jewish, not "Christian," begins at breath.

Other faith traditions including some Christian ones like our own honor this understanding of when life begins.

As Presbyterians, we support a woman's right to reproductive health and choices for herself and her family.

In a 2018 statement on Religious Freedom from Discrimination, the Presbyterian Church USA said: **"Personally choosing not to have an abortion or use birth control is religious freedom. Making that choice for someone else on the basis of one's own religious principles is religious oppression."**

And religious oppression is what Margaret Atwood is warning us about in "The Handmaid's Tale."

In an interview with Layton Williams for Sojourners magazine, Atwood was asked if she considered her characters of the right-wing fundamentalist extremist group "The Sons of Jacob" to be "Christian," she replied:

**"I don't consider these people to be Christians because they do not have at the core of their behavior and ideologies what I, in my feeble Canadian way, would consider to be the core of Christianity. And that would be not only love your neighbors but love your enemies. That would also be 'I was sick and you visited me' not and such and such... But they don't do that either. Neither do a lot of the people who fly under the Christian flag today. And that would include also concern for the environment, because you can't love your neighbor or even your enemy, unless you love your neighbor's oxygen, food and water. You can't love your neighbor or your enemy if you're presuming policies that are going to cause those people to die."**

Friends, in reading the original "Handmaid's Tales" in Genesis, or the whole of the Bible, and in reading secular novels, like Margaret Atwood's novel, we do so through the lens of Jesus, and how he treated women.

In each of his encounters with women, he broke many of the religious, social and political taboos held by the male dominated leaders.

Jesus challenged these religious, social and political norms, and in doing so showed us that women have equal standing in God's Kingdom, and full autonomy over their lives and bodies.

Through his teachings and relationships, Jesus lifted women up, and never degraded, demeaned, or abused them or his authority over them.

When we read books like hers, or watch the television series, we need to do so through the lens of Jesus, and in doing so, see the sacredness of women, and the God-given autonomy they have over their own bodies and lives, to make decisions for what is best for them and their relationships.

We men need to respect and honor that right. It is her body and her choice, and we should not be making church doctrine or laws that take those rights away from any women!

My friend, and Presbyterian colleague, the Rev. Brian Shivers, shared this poem he wrote recently. It is worth sharing with you:

Her resilience  
has confounded  
powerful armies,  
strong empires,  
wise shaman,  
and pious clergy.  
Her body,  
her being,  
her decisions  
have always been her own.  
All attempts  
to take away her autonomy  
or to silence her voice  
are met with world-changing  
ferocity and determination.  
She is her own.  
She is woman.

She is God's own likeness!

Amen!