



*Women
Speak of
God*

Weekly Letters from Amy Oden

The following eight letters may be copied and distributed to your class. Ideally, each letter should be distributed the week prior to that particular class session. So, for example, the letter for Lesson 3 could be handed out at the conclusion of the second week's class.



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Lesson 1: Our Family History

Dear friends,

Welcome to our study, Women Speak of God. Throughout our Christian family we all speak of God in one way or another. Seldom do we say, "God is this" or "God is that." More often we tell a story. We tell about something that happened to us, perhaps about a crisis we endured and the way God was present to see us through. We tell about the birth of a child and the amazing blessing God has bestowed in our lives. We tell about a prayer answered or a challenge overcome. Stories are the way we tell about our lives. Stories are the way we remember who we are and who God is.

This week we will talk about how families tell stories in order to form identity. Your family has stories that are told over and over at family gatherings. These stories say something about your family, its values, its struggles, and its dreams. As Christians, we are also a family. We tell our Christian family stories from Scripture and from history in order to form identity. These stories reflect our identity, our values, struggles, and dreams. These stories of faith give witness to the ways God has always been at work, in times and lands far away, as well as in our own time and land.

Throughout our eight weeks together, we will listen to voices from ancient times up to the present. Sometimes these voices are strange and alien. Listening to them is like entering a foreign land. Remember what it's like to be a guest in a strange place? You might feel excited, challenged, or even overwhelmed. Yet, when you spend time in a strange place, you see the world through new eyes. You are transformed by being in a new place.

Listening to the stories of these women and listening to the stories of those in your class will be like going on a trip to a new place. God will speak to you through all of these and through your own life.

Blessings on this journey!

Amy



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Lesson 2: Perpetua – Rebellious Daughter

Dear friends,

The first story we will read is a dramatic account of an early Christian who lived in Carthage in North Africa, around 203 CE. Though not even baptized yet, Perpetua is arrested along with other catechumens (those studying for church membership), taken into custody, imprisoned, tried, and ultimately put to death.

This story gives us a window into our Christian family during this early time. Her story shows the collision of Christian faith with national loyalty. For early Christians, there was no confusion of church and state. Early Christians claimed allegiance to a God that was higher than Caesar and the gods of Rome. Their nation, the Roman Empire, believed these Christians were a threat to the traditional values of Rome. Christians' refusal to worship Caesar and the gods of Rome was considered disrespectful and unpatriotic. For more on early Christianity in North Africa, see <http://divinity.library.vanderbilt.edu/burns/chroma/index.html> and <http://www.bethel.edu/~letnie/AfricanChristianity/WesternNorthAfricaHomepage.html>.

Christians have always struggled with competing loyalties. On the one hand, we all are citizens of a particular nation. Whether we are American, Korean, Mexican or another nationality, as citizens, we grow up formed in our national identity, learning the expectations, values and allegiances that constitute that national identity. Our national identity can be complex: I might identify myself proudly as an American, even while disagreeing with particular policies or programs of my government. Being the citizen of a nation can be a source of deep pride and can also be a source of deep sorrow. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., offers an example of a deeply committed American who disagreed with laws that, in light of his Christian faith, he determined were unjust. In presidential and other political campaigns we hear calls to be American and patriotic, but different voices offer different content to our expressions of patriotism.

When we go by the name "Christian," we proclaim our ultimate allegiance through the name we bear. By calling ourselves "Christian," we are witnesses for the one to whom we belong first and most truly—Christ.

Blessings,

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Lesson 3: Macrina – Scientist and Pastor

Dear friends,

Stem cell research, evolution and creationism, cloning, applications of technology, alternative medicine— you can think of others! Our lives are full of the intersection of science and religion. We ponder the ethical and spiritual dimensions of scientific discovery and application. Ours is an age when the conversation between science and religion is especially robust and more promising than ever. If you are interested in exploring this conversation, I suggest looking at the website for the Templeton Foundation, an organization devoted to pursuing "new insights at the boundary between theology and science." Go to <http://www.templeton.org/>.

Macrina stands as an amazing example of the way Christians have always had to deal with the struggle to integrate various fields of knowledge. Can science and religion speak to each other? Can God speak through natural law and scientific discovery? Can one articulate the Christian faith with the language of science? These questions are at the heart of Macrina's attempts to offer some intelligible explanation of resurrection. She playfully imagines how such a great mystery could be understood.

Her willingness to send up some test balloons and try out possible understandings can embolden us. God's life is bigger than human categories of knowing. We need not fear sending up some test balloons of our own. It is crucial that faithful people engage the issues and insights that science offers. We have things to say and things to learn.

Blessings,

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Lesson 4: Juana Inés de la Cruz – Intellectual in the Kitchen

Dear friends,

Nature or nurture? Do we become who we are as individuals because of our genetic make-up, or do we become who we are through the ways we are nurtured by our parents and our environment? This is an age-old debate that expresses our desire to understand and explain how each person becomes the particular person that they are. Recent work on the Human Genome Project as well as strides in pharmacology have shown us how much of one's personality is indeed based in genetic and biological determinants. At the same time, we push as a society to create programs and environments that will promote human flourishing. Most of us would agree that this nature-nurture debate is not a choice of "either-or," but rather a "both-and."

Still, you know in your own life the awareness that you have certain talents or personal characteristics that seem to have been yours from the start. Even as a child, there were certain things that seemed easier for you than for others. Maybe it was math or athletics or music. Maybe you've always been curious about the natural world, or always loved working with your hands. In large and small ways, we know the tendencies and talents God has given us. It is as though we are each hard-wired in particular ways. It also may be that some of our tendencies and talents are very faint or unformed. You may feel a nudging or a longing in a particular direction for years before acting on it.

Sor Juana reminds us that God has implanted in each of us specific gifts that we are to use to God's glory. Such gifts cannot be completely squelched, because they are permanently installed in each person. But, says Sor Juana, our environment plays a big role in cultivating and celebrating these gifts. God plants the seeds, and we do the watering. When the seeds are neglected or ignored or, in her case, suppressed by the church, then we, as God's children, have failed to provide an environment for the flourishing of God's gifts.

Sor Juana's story tells of the persistence of the natural gifts that God implants in each of us. Your story undoubtedly tells of the same persistence, from the very start, of the gifts God has implanted in you. This week I hope you will water those seeds.

Blessings, for the journey,

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Lesson 5: Susanna Wesley – First Theologian of the Methodists

Dear friends,

Throughout the history of our Christian family we have produced creeds. And invariably we have written these creeds in response to controversies. Creeds are our attempt to speak in one voice when we have struggled mightily with the many voices around the table. One such attempt to speak with a single voice is the Apostle's Creed, an ancient statement of faith from our Christian family.

In the Apostles' Creed, each phrase is a response to a question or issue raised within the Christian family. For example, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth" is a response to the question about whether the "abba" to whom Jesus speaks in Scripture is also really the creator of the universe. Some Christians argued that a real God wouldn't be involved in creating the material world. These Christians conceived of God as in the "other, heavenly, spiritual realm" and not soiled by the earthly, material realm. In their view the creation of the material world was an activity for the lesser powers. There were even some early Christians who said that the creator God of the Old Testament – *Jehovah/Yahweh* - was an inferior deity not worthy of worship and that the entire Hebrew Scripture and faith should be rejected. The word "Almighty," from the Greek word *pantokrator*, denotes that the God we confess is indeed the ruler of all things. The phrase "maker of heaven and earth" reinforces that our God is creator not just of heaven, but of earth as well, with all its foibles. As a Christian family, we took a stand and continue to profess this claim about the very nature of God.

Yet each generation has to receive the Creed and make it their own. We hear the Creed's words perhaps as both familiar and alien. The words of the Creed may roll off our tongues but find few roots in our hearts. Susanna Wesley wanted to make the Creed her own, and wanted Christians of her day to listen to it carefully, taking seriously its claims for their own lives. So she walks through the Creed step by step, unpacking each phrase. It's a revealing exercise that I encourage you to undertake for yourself or with friends. When we recite the Apostles' Creed, we stand in the great communion of saints, crossing all boundaries of time and space. What roots does the Apostles' Creed take in your heart?

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Lesson 6: Jarena Lee – Preaching Pioneer

Dear friends,

The witness of Jarena Lee brings us onto the American scene. We've come a long way in 5 weeks! The journey so far reminds us that most of our history as a Christian family has not occurred on this continent or in recent centuries. We receive a wealth of treasures from our aunts and uncles and grandmothers and grandfathers in the faith.

The witness of Jarena Lee calls us to remember where we've been as Christians in America. She preached and traveled during a time when white Christians in America enslaved black Christians. Because it is so painful, we don't tell this family story very often. Lee stands out as a Christian of deep courage, risking her personal safety and freedom to preach in among blacks and whites, slave and free.

Lee also calls us to remember that paying attention to the movement of the Holy Spirit is a central discipline of the Christian life. Lee reminds us that just as studying Scripture offers encounter with God, so, too, can our careful experience and observation of the work of the Holy Spirit offer a divine encounter. While she fears others may sneer at her sensitivity to "uncommon impressions," she nevertheless proclaims that therein has been her greatest blessing. May we all be so blessed!

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Lesson 7: Georgia Harkness – Theologian for the People

Dear friends,

Georgia Harkness thought it was important for us as a Christian family to talk about what faith is and what faith is not. Faith is one of those church words we can throw around as though we all know and agree on what it means. It can also be one of those church words that throw up a wall to those outside the Christian family. It warrants our attention for several reasons.

Over the last few hundred years, particularly since the Enlightenment, faith has become increasingly identified with belief. Many Christians use the language of belief to convey faith: "What do you believe?" or "I believe in God." These sorts of speech reveal the degree to which, in the last few centuries, faith has been expressed as an idea, an assent to the truth of a claim. Would you agree, however, that the phrase, "I believe in God" is equivalent to the phrase, "I have faith in God?"

When the notion of faith is expressed in the language of belief, faith is confined almost entirely to the realm of the cognitive, as though faith were somehow in our heads. Belief is an important component of faith, and of our Christian walk, to be sure. Belief can guide our experience and witness. But Harkness wants us to see that faith is bigger than belief.

For Harkness, faith is not a disembodied idea. Faith is a way of life. As such, it includes belief, but it doesn't stop there. Faith is believing and living, being and doing, cognitive and experiential. Faith is in our heads and in our hearts. For you, this may be obvious, but for many Christians faith has atrophied to a set of ideas that are generally disconnected from real life. Harkness calls us to consider a robust notion of faith that encompasses trust, adventure, and insight. Faith is deep and wide. Faith is where we live.

Blessings, for the journey,

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Lesson 8: Our Stories – We Speak of God

Dear friends,

Each week during our study, you have reflected on how you speak of God. Each week you have reflected on the gifts God has planted in you, on the ways God calls you, on the places where you meet God most often, and on the ways you image God. All of these reflections are acts of praise and worship.

In the Christian family we give testimony, just as witnesses in a court of law give testimony. In court, witnesses testify to what they know is true, as completely and fully as they can. When you reflect on your life in the midst of God's life, you are giving testimony. You are a witness to what you know is true, deeply and fully. Such witness glorifies God, the one who created you, longs for you, and surely dances at the discoveries that you have made about your story.

Your life tells a story about God's active presence. It is a revelation of God's life in the world. So each of us must tell our stories. Telling our stories is one of the most faithful things we can do. We also must listen to the stories from our history and from our worldwide Christian family. We must be curious about the stories of the brothers and sisters with whom we worship and serve. We must ask one another, "Tell me your story!" And because our stories change as God continues to form us, we must ask again and again.

So, dear friends, tell me the story of Jesus. Tell me the stories of Perpetua, Macrina, Juana Ines, Susanna, Jarena, and Georgia. Tell me your story. Amen.

Blessings, and thanks for sharing the journey,

Amy