

WOMEN FLYING WITH GOD: ALLAN BOESAK'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE LIBERATION OF WOMEN OF FAITH IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

In 2005 Allan Boesak published a book entitled *Die Vlug van Gods Verbeelding* ("The Flight of God's Imagination"¹). It contains six Bible studies on women in the Bible, who are Hagar, Tamar, Rizpah, the Syrophenician woman, the Samaritan woman as well as Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus. This article argues that women of faith in South Africa have, throughout the ages, in religious literature been stylised according to six depictions, and that Boesak has, in the said book, undermined these enslaving depictions skilfully. The six historical presentations deconstructed by Boesak through the Bible studies are the following: 1) Women are worthy only in their usefulness to church and family without agency of their own; 2) A good woman is submissive on all levels, privately and publicly; 3) Women should sacrifice themselves to the mission of the church, without acknowledgment that they themselves are victims of patriarchy; 4) A good white woman is one that is loyal to the nation and to her husband while black women are to reject their cultures; 5) Women's piety is restricted to dealing with their personal sins, while they are not to express their piety in public; 6) Women are forbidden by the Bible to participate in ordained religion.

After references to these discourses in Christian literature of the past 200 years, the contents of Boesak's Bible studies will be analysed to determine how—and how far—he has moved from these traditional views of women of faith. Finally the research findings will be summarised in a conclusion.

Keywords: Allan Boesak; women in the Bible; women of faith in South Africa; liberation of women; *Die Vlug van Gods Verbeelding*

1 Translations from *Die Vlug van Gods Verbeelding* in this article, are by the author of the article.



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INTRODUCTION

Background

In 2016 Allan Boesak turned 70, having been born on 23 February 1946 in Kakamas in the northwest of South Africa. He became famous as a cleric in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, which was “reserved” for brown people until its unification in 1996 with the black Dutch Reformed Church in Africa to form the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. His public and published anti-apartheid pronouncements earned him, nationally and internationally, a place amongst the most prominent liberation theologians of the past century.

Although Boesak wrote about gender (in)justice in the more than 20 books he has published, scholars writing on Boesak do not seem to identify gender as one of the major themes in his work. In the two *Festschriften* that were recently published in honour of Boesak, *Prophet from the South* (Dibeela, Lenka-Bula and Vellem 2014) and *A life in Black Liberation Theology* (Flaendorp, Philander and Plaatjies van Huffel 2016), references are made to his contribution to gender justice as part of his theological quest for justice in general without developing it as a major focus in his work.

Boesak has indeed published a book with a sole focus on the liberation of women of faith. This was his *Die Vlug van Gods Verbeelding* (“The Flight of God’s Imagination”) that was published in 2005. However, since this was published in Afrikaans and was never translated into English, it remains neglected by scholars. It contains six Bible studies on women in the Bible, three on women in the Old Testament, and three on women from the New Testament. They are Hagar, Tamar, Rizpah, the Syrophoenician woman, the Samaritan woman as well as Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus—and this publication probably counts amongst the most overlooked of Boesak’s works.

Aim

The aim of this article is to describe the contribution of Allan Boesak to the liberation of women of faith in South Africa through the six Bible Studies in *The flight of God’s imagination* (tr., 2005).

This will be done, firstly, by identifying themes from the history of how women of faith in South Africa have been depicted throughout the centuries, and, secondly, by describing Boesak’s contribution in undermining these traditional stereotypes of women of faith present in the literature.

DEPICTIONS OF SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN OF FAITH: SIX DISCOURSES

The author of this article grew up in the same apartheid South Africa as Allan Boesak, albeit 20 years later. Although privileged as a “white” person, she was severely restricted

by the draconian Theology of Order supported by the same Calvinism that kept apartheid in place. This white theology propagated as divine truth that God has placed people in a deliberate hierarchical order to rule over each other: whites over blacks, men over women.

In 1995 the author published an academic article in which an overview was given of how Christian women were depicted in religious publications during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Landman 1995, 3–26). From this overview, six discourses² emerge of how women of faith were constructed by the religious authors of the day. Also, these discourses in turn display the standards by which women of faith were evaluated by opinion formers as well as by society during the past two centuries. The discourses, incidentally, coincide with the experiences of the author herself during apartheid times. They describe the extent of female stereotyping and restrictiveness to which women of faith were subjected during the life and times of both the author and Allan Boesak.

The discourses are as follows:

1. Women are worthy only in their usefulness to church and family, without having any agency of their own.
2. Good women, who adhere to biblical values, are submissive to authorities that are divinely constituted, such as church structures and men.
3. Good women sacrifice themselves to the mission of the church; they are martyrs of “heathenism” (and not victims of patriarchy).
4. A good white woman is one that is loyal to the nation and to her husband, while a good black woman rejects her culture.
5. Women’s piety is restricted to dealing with their personal sins, while they are not to express their piety in public.
6. Good women do not strive for an ordained position in church.

The author of this article furthermore argued in *The piety of Afrikaans women* (Landman 1994) that white women have internalised these values and depictions attributed to them, and that they evaluated themselves according to these stereotypes in their own ego-texts (diaries). In a follow-up publication *The piety of South African women* (Landman 1999), the author indicated that these discourses on what a good woman should be, were transferred by white women to women of colour during “conversion” situations.

When Allan Boesak published his book, *Die Vlug van Gods Verbeelding* (“The Flight of God’s Imagination”), in 2005, these discourses were alive and well. No books have locally appeared to empower women of faith against the prevailing discourses, especially not in Afrikaans. On the contrary, this was the heyday of the “pink books”,

2 “Discourse” is used here in the Foucauldian sense of the word, referring to a socially constructed metanarrative.

called thus because of the pink roses (or other pink symbols) that appeared on the cover pages of these books. These books flooded the South African religious book market during the 1990s and the early years of the new millennium, confirming the stereotype of the good Christian woman as one that entertains a private piety that reinforces (a pathological) humbleness, feelings of self-guilt, and heroic voicelessness.

In 2005, then, although apartheid had ended, patriarchy was flourishing—especially in the church.

What follows now, is an analysis of Boesak’s Bible studies to determine how, and to what extent, he was able to undermine the discourses according to which women of faith in South Africa have been constructed for several centuries.

BOESAK’S DECONSTRUCTION OF POPULAR RELIGIOUS GENDER DISCOURSES

Target audience and aim of the book

In his introduction to *The Flight of God’s Imagination*, Boesak (2005, i–vii) does not clearly indicate who his target audience is. Are they black, white, brown? Are they rich or poor? However, his aim with the book seems to be to assist all those who want to participate in the democratisation of theology, independent of colour or status. The book, therefore, is not for a specialist, academic audience, but for those who identify—and co-suffer—with the marginalised and voiceless in society. For those Boesak wants to open up the Bible “from below”. They are to hear the previously silenced voices of women in the Bible. For them Boesak will distinguish the voice of the victim from that of the oppressor. Indeed, Boesak states, it is the voices of women which are most often used in the Bible to criticise the injustices of the powerful.

A good woman is useful to church and men

Boesak’s first study in *The Flight of God’s Imagination* is on Hagar, and is entitled “With the eye of the One that Sees: Hagar and Ismael (Genesis 16, 21:1–21)” (Boesak 2005, 1–28).³ He retells the story of a woman who is useful to the childless Sarah and Abraham, but becomes a serious threat to the patriarchal family structure when she develops an agency of her own—an agency that was later recognised by God.

Boesak tells the story of Hagar as a woman who was not strictly speaking a slave, but more probably a rented house worker. However, she is treated as a slave in the patriarchal household of Abraham by both him and his wife, Sarah. She is forced to have a baby with Abraham, and is not elevated to the status of concubine or second wife. As

3 All titles and quotes from the book are translated from Afrikaans into English. The references are to the Afrikaans book, *Die Vlug van Gods Verbeelding* (2005). The translations are from this author, and not from Boesak himself.

a “slave”, she should know her place. This, Boesak comments (2005, 5), tells you more about patriarchy than about Hagar: “The dehumanisation of the one inevitably leads to the dehumanised other.”

With her authority threatened in the patriarchal system, Sarah starts to treat Hagar badly. According to Boesak, she treats her violently. Boesak’s commentary on this behaviour is relevant to our topic: with Sarah being oppressed herself, she in her powerlessness turns against another oppressed, while Abraham withdraws himself in patriarchal indifference. The terms Boesak uses, “patriargale onverskilligheid” (patriarchal indifference), has an even stronger connotation than indifference: it points to recklessness. It was with the same recklessness, Boesak remarks, that Abraham presented his wife Sarah to the Pharaoh as his sister when, during their Egyptian visit, the Pharaoh took an interest in her. Actually, Boesak detects another feature of patriarchal behaviour in Abraham’s handling of the Sarah-Pharaoh situation: emotional blackmail. Abraham told Sarah: “If you love me, you will pretend in front of the Pharaoh that you are my sister.” Here Sarah has learnt her lesson and her position: The reason for her being is to please Abraham. And he recklessly does not take any responsibility for how she does it. Sarah too had to learn: a woman must be useful, in silence and without assuming agency.

In analysing and retelling the story of Hagar in this way, Boesak co-constructs with Hagar the following discourses, alternative to the discourse “A good woman is useful to the patriarchal society”:

1. God sees women. God does not use women but regards them as worthy on their own account and not in relation to their usefulness to a patriarchal society.
2. Thus God not only appears to Hagar as a token of solidarity against patriarchal exclusion, but also makes a promise to her, a promise that links her to the future.
3. God deems women part of salvation history.
4. Thus God renders Hagar “useful” in an alternative way as a role player in salvation history. Not regarded by God as a slave, Hagar now becomes an agent in a story of her own, outside the reach of patriarchy. Eventually she becomes part of the public story of salvation history.
5. God sees the pain of women and takes it seriously. God establishes a personal relationship with women.
6. Thus Hagar gives God a name as “The One who Sees me”. A personal relationship of give and take develops between God and Hagar, in which they acknowledge the worthiness of each other.
7. God renders women agency to participate in their own fate.
8. Thus Hagar acquires massive agency from God. God calls on Hagar to take steps to save herself and her son, and chooses for the road ahead.

9. God acknowledges special skills in women through which they “as women” serve society in an alternative way.

Thus Boesak points out that Izak went to live at the well where Hagar saw God for the first time, after having buried their father, Abraham. In this Boesak finds a symbolic role for Hagar in the reconciliation between the two brothers.

Instead of women’s usefulness to patriarchy, then, Boesak constructs an alternative discourse on women in which God sees and sides with women against patriarchy, establishes them as role players in salvation history, encourages them to agency and acknowledges their special skills in society, such as their role in reconciliation.

A GOOD WOMAN IS SUBMISSIVE; HER BODY DOES NOT BELONG TO HER

Boesak’s second Bible study is on Tamar and is entitled “A torn and lonely child: Tamar and Amnon (2 Samuel 13)” (Boesak 2005, 29–57).

Boesak retells the story of Tamar as one of a young virgin girl who is forced to be submissive to her brother Amnon’s sexual needs and fantasies. When she does not yield, he arranges for her to come to his room on the orders of the king. The full patriarchal system is used to force her into submissiveness, and she is raped by her brother. When he is done with her, he rejects her and expects from her to be submissive to this decision of his as well. Consequently his brother Absalom uses this as an excuse to kill Amnon in order to have access to the throne of his father, David. However, rebelling against David costs Absalom his own life. This is a story of submissiveness, of the mighty forcing the powerless to be submissive. The only voice of resistance in this whole bloody story, is that of Tamar.

Although there never has been any discourse in South African religious literature that an unmarried woman should submit to a man’s desires, Boesak in this Bible study, with the help of Tamar, addresses male sexuality and women’s bodiliness within a broader framework of political violence. In the process he undermines a number of discourses prevalent in local religious thought:

1. A man’s needs are of uttermost importance and given to him by God.
2. The story of Tamar, Boesak points out, condemns Amnon’s behaviour as perverse and against the good order of the religious society.
3. A woman’s body does not belong to herself. She is to please man with her body. The story of Tamar, Boesak states, is written from the perspective of the powerless. It indicates that women’s bodies are important, and that the conqueror in this story is not the victor, but a shameless abuser.
4. A woman should not know the law (Torah). She has no rights.
5. Tamar’s story, Boesak says, shows that women should know the law and, above all, should know their rights.

6. When a woman is raped, she has probably looked for it, and should not speak out but accept her punishment.
7. Again, Boesak points to Tamar not giving up, and not shutting up although her telling of the story to Absalom led to her being used by Absalom to conquer his brother, which to Tamar is a second rape. While the prevalent discourse does not allow a raped woman either agency or a voice, Tamar takes on another role, and brings public attention to this injustice. Boesak points out that the present discourse is to expect women to remain quiet about abuse, and especially when the perpetrator is a family member, to keep this shame within the walls of the family. Tamar, however, heroically takes on the role of the public protestor, in spite of the fact that she is not heard.
8. A man does not have to listen to a woman, and he does not have to take responsibility for her. Tamar's story speaks to the opposite. Amnon is invited by Tamar's wise words to not bring shame upon himself but he does not listen. Amnon is, furthermore, urged by Tamar to take responsibility for his actions with her, but again does not listen. Amnon not only rejects Tamar, he chases her away like a dog and gives her names. He calls her "a thing". This is condemned by the Biblical story and stands through the interpretation of Boesak as a warning to abusive men today.

Boesak quite strikingly points out that David mourns for his son Amnon, and for his son Absalom when they died. If David had mourned for his daughter, Tamar, when she was raped, the story could have been quite different.

A GOOD WOMEN ACCEPTS MARTYRDOM

In the third Bible study, Boesak (2005, 59–85) tells the alternative story of Rizpah, whose two sons with ex-king Saul were crucified with five others by King David as a peace offering to the Gideonites. Rizpah stands by the crucified, defending their dignity, keeping the wild animals and birds away from the corpses—until her cry for a decent burial is heard. The chapter is entitled "Flaming like the drought, healing like the rain: Rizpah" (2 Samuel 21:1–14). Using the Biblical story as an intertext, Boesak tells us the story of Rizpah, which we often overlook. Thus he places alternative values for women's behaviour on the table. In this study he concentrates on resistance. He undermines the prevalent religious discourse that women should accept martyrdom and assume victimhood as imposed on them by men in their power games. The alternative values he presents are as follows:

1. God does not forget the rape of a woman. Boesak reminds us that, even before the crucifixion of her sons, Rizpah had been (ab)used in male power struggles. After the death of Saul, Abner, the commander of Saul's army, raped Rizpah in an effort to gain access to the throne. Isboeth, who had taken over the throne in the meantime was not happy with this, needless to say, and saw it as an attempt of Abner to gain

control by sleeping with Saul's "wife". Abner defended himself by saying that he had tried to defend Isboeth against the armies of David while Isboeth made a fuss about something as irrelevant as a woman's rape. However, Boesak points out, both Abner and Isboeth violently meet their deaths as a token of God not forgetting the rape of Rizpah.

2. Do not take on the role of a victim. The consciousness of victimhood is the victimiser's strongest weapon. Boesak strongly depicts Rizpah in her fiery fight against men who use women and children as pawns in their power struggles. She does not see herself as the victim but as the wronged who insists to be heard.
3. Loyalty needs to be redefined, not as women's acceptance of martyrdom, but as women's resistance against (male) power. Boesak commends Rizpah not only for loudly and publicly crying out against the injustices of male power, but also for not accepting king David's concept of God as the one who is on the side of the powerful. Rizpah's experience of God, Boesak surmises, is that God is the One who empowers the powerless to act against injustice. Rizpah's God is not one that can be used undercover to settle the issues between powerful men. God is on the side of the oppressed.
14. Women do not have a designated place in the background of the home. Women's place is in public. Boesak appreciates Rizpah going public with her cry for justice. He furthermore points out that what Rizpah does is not ridiculous and absurd, but wise and meaningful. She is to be reckoned with those in Israel who spoke words of wisdom.
5. Women should not feel ashamed of their role in resistance, even and especially when society isolates them. Boesak powerfully points to the fact that Rizpah has to act on her own. Nobody, no man or woman, assists her, or even shows support. She is to feel ashamed of herself, but nevertheless she proves herself to be strong.
6. Women should go and stand where God stands: in the shadow of the cross. Boesak points out in modern confessional language that the nation could live because Rizpah resisted the palace theology of the powerful.

Boesak's retelling of the story of Rizpah as an alternative story of resistance and criticism is his most passionate reconstruction of gender discourses vis-à-vis the dominant sexist discourses of the prevalent theologies of the day. From here he turns to the New Testament.

A GOOD WOMAN IS LOYAL TO THE DOMINANT CULTURE

Boesak's (2005, 87–109) deconstruction of the dominant discourses in the story of the Syrophenician woman is not his most elaborate or passionate in the book. And yet it undermines a powerful discourse in the historical way of thinking about women. During

missionary and apartheid times white women were strongly advised to be loyal to their (Western) culture as part of their religious expression, while the colonised—the black women—were encouraged to leave their (African) cultures.

In Matthew 15:21–28 the story of the Syrophenician woman is told who follows Jesus, consistently asking him to heal her daughter who is demon-possessed. Jesus ignores her on account of the fact that he has come for Israel only. She argues that she, although she is from another culture, has the right at least to the leftovers of Jesus' healing powers. Jesus admires her faith and heals her daughter.

Boesak's interpretation of Jesus' initial commitment to Israel only is significant. Through her agency, Boesak argues, the woman opens Jesus' eyes to see his true mission, that is, to proclaim and extend his message of salvation to people of all cultures. Thus, women who have been held captive within the patriarchal boundaries of their culture, are hereby set free.

Not only are women set free from cultural boundaries, in this story it is a woman who lets Jesus realise that the message of salvation is for everybody, and to people of all cultures.

African women have been struggling in the past years to define their relationship with their cultures. Wanting to be proudly African, they remain critical of cultural aspects that oppress women. Boesak may assist them in this struggle. God, he says, respects and acknowledges all cultures; yet God cannot be captured by one culture only. And God, Boesak says, does not favour the patriarchal and sexist in cultures, sending a woman to Jesus to assist him in crossing boundaries between cultures.

A GOOD WOMAN KEEPS HER FAITH PRIVATE

The discourse that women's faith is divinely meant to remain private has a strong history of control in South African religious thinking and practice. This was strengthened by local interpretations of the theology of Abraham Kuyper and the spirituality of Andrew Murray (see Landman 1994, 108; 1999, 99).

In his fifth Bible study on Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman, Boesak undermines this discourse rigorously. The chapter is entitled "Water deeper than the well: the Samaritan woman (John 4:1–42)" (Boesak 2005, 111–134). In this study Boesak points out how Jesus himself deconstructs the discourse that keeps women captive in private spaces:

1. Jesus does not reduce the woman to her stigma. Boesak indicates how Jesus respectfully approaches and deals with a woman who has been stigmatised by society as "well known" for her lifestyle; one she does not have much control over because of the boundaries set for a woman to look after herself.
2. Jesus speaks to a woman in a public place. According to tradition, Boesak reminds us, men were not to talk to women in public spaces, especially not with one who has

a “reputation”. Moreover, Jesus as a Jew was not to address a Samaritan because of the age-old feud between them about where to worship God: in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerasim in Samaria. In 128 BC the Jews burnt down the temple in Samaria, thereby adding fuel to the fire. The relationship between Jews and Samaritans is one of “wounded anger” (*gewonde woede*), Boesak remarks.

3. Jesus talks theology with the woman. In a culture where women are not regarded as being able to say anything intelligent, the woman talks freely to Jesus about the theological differences of the day, the contents of salvation and spirituality in the form of living water.
4. Jesus invites men to take responsibility for women and their sexuality. By asking the Samaritan woman where her husband is, he addresses the everyday dilemma and pain of the woman. She has had five husbands and the present one is a stay-over. No man wants to take responsibility for this woman. And according to society’s guilt-giving, she thinks that she herself is to blame for this.
5. Jesus reacts, with the assistance of the woman, against the establishment theology of Israel. Jesus not only crosses the borders of traditional Jewish belief on where to worship and what salvation is, he also transcends the boundaries of cultures.
6. Jesus offers the woman salvation. By engaging with her in talk about living water as juxtaposed to well-water, he journeys with her towards an understanding and a grasp of what it is to be free and saved.

Eventually Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah to this woman. Jesus publicly shows how important women are—not only when it comes to matters of salvation but also in matters of everyday life, such as a woman not being respected by men.

Again, this is an extremely strong and powerful interpretation of Boesak to undermine one of the strongest discourses in the religious history of women: that women are to stay pure of all things public and politic.

A GOOD WOMAN DOES NOT STRIVE FOR LEADERSHIP

The final Bible study in the book belongs to “The early children of Easter: Martha, Mary and Lazarus (John 11:1–44)” (Boesak 2005, 135–158). In this study Boesak redefines leadership as service, and tells the alternative story of the “serving Martha”, thereby undermining the prevalent discourse of the good woman as one that strives towards serving food and evading leadership:

1. The stereotyped image of Martha that has been preached for centuries to local women, is that of Mary remaining seated in the circle of men being taught by Jesus, while Martha attends to the food needs of the men. This earned Martha the name of “serving Martha” and turned her into a role model for housewives. Boesak

points out how this image of Martha has suited male structures in the church with men relying on the “serving Marthas” (“dienende Marthas”) to serve them at their all-male meetings. However, when Boesak retells the story of Martha at the grave of the soon-to-be resurrected Lazarus, she takes on another role and becomes a “leader of hope”. Jesus reveals himself to Martha as the Messiah. He talks theology with her. He acknowledges her in her growth from a submissive cook to a person who leads others towards hope. Boesak, by the way, also points out that Jesus was completely comfortable with Martha and Mary being unmarried and not subjected to marriage, which was the utmost patriarchal system of the day.

2. In his deconstruction of the “women are not to be leaders” discourse, Boesak redefines leadership itself by pointing to the fact that Jesus risks his life to be with his women friends, Martha and Mary. He thereby shuns the (male) political power of Jerusalem to replace it with leadership in humanity and service, also towards women. The Kingdom of God is not built on the politics of power, but on the politics of care and friendship. Jesus takes the “risk of love” to come to Judea where his life is in danger, to identify with the sorrow and joy of his friends and fellow believers, that include women. Eventually Jesus not only acknowledges Martha in her leadership when she shows the road forward towards hope and a theology of resurrection, but Jesus also creates space for Mary to be redeemed from her “sit still and be quiet” role when later she anoints his feet and dries them with her hair, thus preparing him for his death and resurrection.

CONCLUSION

In 2005 Allan Boesak published a book with six Bible studies on women in the Bible. These Bible studies deconstructed the religious discourses still holding women captive in the church and family. The fact that the book, written in Afrikaans, was never translated into English and (inter)nationally distributed, is an indication of how women of faith in South Africa were still victim of oppressive religious discourses a mere 12 years ago.

By retelling the stories of the women “from below”, Boesak succeeds in co-constructing the following alternative discourses with the Biblical women studied:

1. In deconstructing the discourse that a good woman should be useful without acquiring an agency of her own, Boesak retells the story of Hagar as a woman who was used by Abraham but seen but God. God empowers her to take ownership of her own life and to acquire agency within salvation history itself.
2. In deconstructing the discourse that a good woman is submissive in body and mind, Boesak retells the story of Tamar as a woman whose pain is important to God. Tamar knows the Torah, she knows her rights, and she speaks out about her rape. As such, the story becomes a strong invitation to men to take responsibility for the feelings and bodies of women, and to treat them with the respect due to them.

3. In deconstructing the discourse that a good woman accepts her fate whether it is fair or not, Boesak retells the story of Rizpah who calls on justice to be served on her vis-à-vis her crucified sons. Rizpah refuses to be a silent victim and becomes a public agent against (male) political power.
4. In deconstructing the discourse that a good woman should be loyal to the dominant culture, Boesak retells the story of the Syrophenician woman who opened Jesus' eyes towards his intra-cultural mission. Even though she was restricted as a woman, she breaks through cultural boundaries, and even more so, through the patriarchy in cultures that kept her silent.
5. In deconstructing the discourse that a good woman's faith is a private one, Boesak retells the story of the Samaritan woman and her interaction with Jesus. Jesus liberates her not only to talk to a man in public, but to talk theology with him—and this time across cultural barriers.
6. In deconstructing the discourse that a good woman does not strive for leadership, Boesak retells the story of Martha, the sister of Lazarus. Boesak frees Martha from her age-old role model as the "serving Martha" to cast her in the role of a leader who leads in giving hope and showing care.

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