

Fourth Tuesday of Advent, December 21 Sg 2:8-14; Lk 1:26-38

I may be biased toward my namesake, but I've always had a special place in my heart for the Gospel of Luke. Its parables distill some of the most radical spiritual truths of Christianity and some of which, such as the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, appear in no other Gospel. Its message of universal salvation - for Gentile and Jew - is part of our identity as members of the Body of Christ. Last but not least, I have always loved the Gospel of Luke for the beauty of its Nativity narrative, where God is manifested among the most marginalized and disenfranchised members of society: our image of Jesus as the baby born in the stable comes from this gospel.

Our readings give a perfect example of how Luke frames the Nativity to include the excluded - in today's case, women. The Judea of two millennia ago was, like virtually all societies of its time, one where the voices of women were de-emphasized in most political, religious, and social structures, Luke's Nativity anchors on Mary and Elizabeth, not their respective husbands. Joseph has no dialogue in the narrative, while Zechariah is literally silenced for most of the main events. Their meeting in the Visitation, which some feminist critics have even cited as an example of the Bible passing the "Bechdel Test" for genuine female communication, establishes a legacy of visible womanhood in Catholicism that persists vibrantly into the present day. We all know examples of women whose faith has been a significant part of our personal faith identity: my mother and grandmothers (all of whose names have Marian connections), my teachers that I would see at Mass every week, the religious sisters that felt like the backbone of my parish community.

I am not a woman, and cannot fully understand the life experiences and perspective of being a woman, but in these readings, Luke tells me to reorient my perspective on those who seem fundamentally different - which is what Luke's message is all about. I have seen this with the women in my family who have been so critical in my spiritual development. My mom is not an embryologist, but when she says she knew exactly how I'd be when she became pregnant with me, I believe her, not because the knowledge comes from experiments I could do in a college laboratory, but because I believe the knowledge comes from a deeper font of spiritual understanding that I can't fully fathom. My grandmother never graduated high school and had given birth to most (if not all) of her six children when she was my age, but the clarity of her spiritual insight and relationship with God have done more to advance my spiritual development even now than anything I could learn in school.

What I have learned from my relationships with these women of faith balances on a paradox of difference and similarity: on a real level, a difference between us exists, but it is in actively recalibrating our worldview to "see" those who are different from us, the differences become a lens to see the underlying similarity within the body of Christ. As one of my favorite hymns, "One Bread, One Body" proclaims, we are "Gentile or Jew / Servant or free / Woman or man / No more," once we see our shared inheritance in Christ. It is by opening the eyes of my heart to images like the Visitation that I can truly see those who are different from me, and in so doing, find the root of the similarity that brings us together.

Our country and our world are as divided as I've ever seen in my (admittedly short) lifetime, and these divisions appear to be ever worsening. As our social circles and Facebook echo chambers try to keep us filed in boxes, I think we can all learn from the message of Luke: reframe your focus and shine a light on those who are left out, even if (or especially if) they seem fundamentally different. In committing to truly see those who are different from us, we truly can experience the similarity that transcends the difference.

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