

Homily - Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel NYC
December 23, 2018

4th Sunday of Advent Year C

Luke 1:39-45

In reading today's Gospel what strikes us first is that Jesus is nowhere present as one of the characters. Nor, for that matter, is there any male presence at all in the dialogue of today's Gospel. It's not surprising that we find this particular scene of Mary and Elizabeth in the Gospel of St. Luke. For in reading Luke we often find that his is a gospel about Jesus and women. For instance, Luke recounts in greatest detail, and from the perspective of Mary, the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. Luke relates events from the ministry of Jesus that are recorded in no other gospel: how Jesus restores to life the son of the widow of Naim; how Jesus is dining at the home of Simon the Pharisee, when a prostitute rushes in, perfumes His feet and wipes them with her hair; how Jesus is accompanied by a group of women as He journeys from town to town; how Jesus, when He is being led to crucifixion, stops to comfort the weeping women of Jerusalem: and, finally, how it is women who are the first to report that Jesus has been raised the dead. In Luke, we find highlighted values that might be labeled feminine: compassion, tenderness, acceptance, connectedness, a love that is unconditional.

What are we to make of all this? Certainly it shows the capacity of Jesus to relate to women, and their ability to relate to him. More importantly, it shows a face of God different from the one the people of that day had come to expect—an image of God less patriarchal, less distant, less remote, less detached, and one more related, more involved, more intimate, more feeling. I would suggest it shows a feminine face of God. It can remind us, men and women alike, that it is in those moments when we bridge the gaps that divide us, in our “otherness,” that that’s where God is found; when we dare to be less remote and distant, and in our vulnerability allow ourselves to touch and be touched by another, that’s when something miraculous can happen.

Today we read of two pregnant women meeting in a small hill town, which even by the standards of its own day was totally insignificant. The women belong to a conquered people and are destined to live out their lives in a remote corner of the Roman Empire, far from the center of power. Indeed who could have been more powerless in a male-dominated society than a woman past menopause and a young, unmarried, pregnant girl? It is a patriarchal society wherein each is or had been considered “damaged goods”---Mary because of her suspect pregnancy and Elizabeth because she had not performed her wifely duty of bearing a child. But the births about

to take place, of John the Baptist and of Jesus, are indeed miraculous. They are seen as the result of God's desire to intervene in human affairs in order reveal a new way of living—a way of living where dominance and power and attachment are replaced by empathy and vulnerability and, as the Telephone Co. ad used to say, by “reaching out to touch someone.” That is exactly what Mary is depicted as doing today's Gospel, in journeying to the house of Elizabeth. She does not shrink back from involving herself in the confusion and fear that is besetting her cousin.

It might be appropriate here to mention the novel/movie that many of you have seen, “The Color Purple.” I mention it not just for the obvious reason, that purple is the liturgical color for the season of Advent, but because it brings together the themes of today's Gospel—the themes of God, of women, of the dispossessed, of where God is found. The novel, as you recall, is the story of a poor black woman in the rural South in the early part of the last century. The novel has the form of a series of letters that the main character, Celie, writes to God and to her sister Nettie, a missionary in Africa. In those letters is revealed how, in spite of a life of sexual abuse, of poverty, and abandonment, Celie finds the ability to forgive, how she finds love and happiness. The other main character is a woman named Shug Avery, a woman much more sophisticated, much more worldly-wise than Celie. Celie and Shug Avery seem unlikely counterparts to the main figures in today's Gospel, but if Mary and Elizabeth could be numbered among those at the bottom of the social heap in first-century Israel, what could be more written-off in ours than two poor, black women of the rural South. But because God acts in some very strange ways, could not God's be revealed even in the likes of Celie and Shug Avery?

I would like to cite a few lines of the book, because like today's Gospel it records the conversation of two women, as they discuss who God is for them, how they discover God in their lives. These lines show how Celie changes her ideas about what God is like from those that are simply a reflection of the way a narrow, patriarchal society paints its picture of God—a God who is distant, judging and remote; a “god” who resembles too much the white folks who told her about God; how she discovers a different kind of God, a God whom she finds in the midst of her own experience of loneliness, rejection, despair, but also in the experience of being touched by the compassion of Shug Avery. And this newfound God leads her to forgive the man who hurt her, even take care of him, and to create a new life for himself.

Celie says, “I don't write to God no more. What God done for me anyway? He give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa, and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow I say, the God I've been praying and writing to is a man. And just like all the other men's I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown. Let

'im hear me, I say. If He ever listened to a poor colored woman, the world would be a different place... " Shug then tells Celie what she thinks about God, "Us worry 'bout God a lot. But once we feel loved by God, us do the best we can to please Him with what us like. I can lay back and just admire stuff. Be happy." To which Celie says, "You telling me God loves you, and you ain't never done nothing for him? I mean not go to church, sing in the choir, feed the preacher and all that?"

Then Celie goes on to tell Shug that the only God she ever knew was the white-complexioned, blue-eyed, gray bearded, old God she found in white folks' Bibles. To which Shug responds, "When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest. Here's the thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you are not looking, or don't know what you're looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think. Sorrow. Feeling like dirt... God ain't a he or a she. God ain't a picture show. Got ain't something you can look at apart from everything else, including yourself."

What Mary and Elizabeth discovered in their lives, what Shug taught Celie is that the real God is a God of surprises, One who can't be boxed in with our ideas and concepts, or painted with brushes from the palette of our patriarchal prejudices. God is real, but beyond our imagining; God is within and without; a God whose values are not the cold, transactional ones of our technological society, but those that our society seems to scorn: values of tenderness, compassion, vulnerability, openness, feeling. Mary and Elizabeth give voice to the themes that Jesus and John the Baptist will announce in their preaching, that God is at work in the world to create a society that is more fair, more just, more caring and compassionate; that God is found in the hidden corners of our lives, if we take the time and have the willingness to look. Now it is up to each of us to do just that.