

“A Reflection on Mary’s Song”  
Luke 1:39-55

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December 20, 2015

This is the week we have been anticipating all month, all season even! For some of us, we've been looking forward to this week all year long. I'm talking, of course, about the premiere of the new Star Wars movie. The release of Star Wars: The Force Awakens is perhaps the only thing big enough and important enough to make my nieces and nephews forget that Christmas is just a few days away. Of course, being a member of the Jedi Council since high school, I have already seen the new movie, and have plans to see it again.

The new Star Wars is as good as we all hoped it would be. Maybe even better. My favorite part is that – and I promise this is not a spoiler! - it is the first out of all seven of the Star Wars movies to pass the Bechdel Test. The Bechdel Test is a test that was created by writer and social commentator Alison Bechdel in the 1990s. It is applied to movies, books, and television shows to help us look at gender equality. To pass the test, the movie or book has to have three things:

1. Two female characters that have names
2. Who talk to each other,
3. About something other than a man.

It's a brilliant test! And once you start applying it to things you watch or read, it will change the way you see them. Surprisingly few movies and books actually pass the Bechdel Test. It's a little depressing. Even more disappointing is that the Bechdel Test has been applied to the books of the Bible and the results aren't good. Out of the 66 books

in the Bible, only 4 of them have two named female characters who talk to each other about something other than men. Only four of them pass the Test.

One of the four Bible books that pass the Bechdel Test, is the Gospel of Luke, thanks to the scripture passage that we read today. The fact that it passes the test makes me love this passage and the relationship between Elizabeth and Mary even more than I love R2-D2 and C3PO. Elizabeth and Mary are cousins, friends, and confidants. Elizabeth became pregnant through a miracle just before Mary did, so it is easy to imagine why Mary would have rushed to Elizabeth's home after finding out the news of her own miraculous pregnancy.

So often the focus of these two women is separate from each other – we talk about Elizabeth's pregnancy with John the Baptist one week and we talk about Mary's pregnancy and her Magnificat, her song to God, in another week. We focus on them each as individuals having two different experiences, even if they do happen to share some similarities. I think that when we separate out the stories of Elizabeth and Mary, it is a mistake. I am especially aware of this in light of the Bechdel Test. The fact that two women are the center of the same Bible story is so rare that I can't help but believe it must be intentional. I believe that we are supposed to not just make connections between Elizabeth and Mary, but we are supposed to understand that their relationship is an important part of their story. I believe that there is much we can learn from this relationship between Mary and Elizabeth.

The first thing we can learn from them is the reminder that when we are hit with unexpected news or a major challenge in life, we are not supposed to handle it on our own. It is advisable, even recommended, that we find someone who can empathize with

us, support us, and guide us. I imagine that Mary had quite a large family – parents, siblings, cousins, aunts. I imagine she also had neighbors and friends in her neighborhood that she was close with. But when Mary is visited from an angel and told about her pregnancy, there is only one person she turns to, and that is the person who knows exactly what she is going for.

Mary seeking out Elizabeth reminds us of the joy of relationships with people who have traveled the same road we have. It makes me give thanks for things like support groups and recovery groups. It makes me give thanks for people who hear that someone has a new cancer diagnosis or a child with behavior difficulties or is going through a divorce and has the courage to say, “I’ve been there. I know what you’re going through. Let’s talk.” Like Mary, we need people who understand us, can offer advice and support, and can listen with a kind of wisdom that only comes from experience.

Which is not to say that Mary’s pregnancy was only a challenge or a stressful situation – although I bet it came with its fair share of stress being that she was young and unmarried and had a lot of explaining to do to a lot of people. No, Mary’s pregnancy brings her great joy. Her faith in God is strengthened, and she is ready to shout from the rooftops how excited she is that she is going to be a mother, and that she has been looked on favorably by God. It is this joy that reminds me of the second thing we can learn from Mary and Elizabeth – when you have a joy or a love in you, don’t keep it to yourself. Share it! Shout it! Find someone you trust or love and tell it to them! Mary’s Song, her outpouring of her love and amazement of God, is not a song she sings to herself. She is singing to Elizabeth. How can do we forget that?

Mary's Magnificat is one we hear often, but we forget that she is singing to Elizabeth. She is proclaiming her love for God and a proclamation doesn't do much good if no one is around to hear it. I love that Mary sings to Elizabeth. Sharing in the best moments of your life is as important as sharing the hard or stressful times. Humans were built to be in relationship with one another, and being in relationship means sharing our joys and our highlights and the things that fill us with wonder.

The third thing we should remember that Elizabeth and Mary taught us is the power of giving someone our blessing. When Mary goes to Elizabeth, Elizabeth's baby leaps for joy in her stomach. This moment fills her with the Holy Spirit and Elizabeth proclaims a blessing on Mary. A blessing is a prayer of thanksgiving, it is a prayer of hope and support, it is a prayer of love. When we bless someone we say, "God, we are so thankful they are in our lives. We are so thankful for all that this person has made possible and for all that they will do." We are proclaiming them both good and beloved. By blessing someone, we are strengthening them for the journey ahead, just as Elizabeth did for Mary. In many ways, a blessing is permission giving. It is a verbal reminder to the person being blessed that we have their back and we believe in them. Offering a blessing on someone is the ultimate sign of love and devotion. It is a truly a gift to both give and receive blessings.

At Christmas time, we often focus on the things that separate us from our loved ones. Before we even gather with our family and friends, we are reminded of the things that could go wrong, the things that happened in the past that you would rather forget, and the things that keep you separate for much of the rest of the year. But this year, I am thankful for Mary and Elizabeth and their reminder of what family and friends have the

opportunity to do for one another. When we gather with our families this week, remember that when someone shares something that is going on in their lives, especially something difficult, we have the opportunity, like Elizabeth, to be empathetic, to listen, and to support them. If we are going home and we have wonderful news, don't keep it to yourself, but be like Mary and sing your song loud for all to hear.

And, no matter what – no matter what bickering or disagreements occur, no matter if the kids are bored or the food is burnt, no matter what is happening – bless each other. Offer blessings to each person you meet. Share with them why you believe in them. Tell them the good things you know they have coming in their life. Love them, pray for them, and take joy in them. Elizabeth and Mary have a lot to teach us about relationships and friendship and family, but most of all they teach us the power of offering a blessing to someone who is in need. And, they remind us that until we give that blessing, we will never know exactly who might need it. Merry Christmas.