Spirituality
Scripture for Life
Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



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As 2023 draws to a close, we recall major events that have happened this year in our church and world. In Rome, Catholic clergy and laypeople gathered at the Vatican Oct. 4-29 for a synod to discuss synodality, with an emphasis on communion, participation and mission. As Carolyn Weir Herman wrote for America, the synod working document underscores the problem of sexism in the church and highlights the need for women to have meaningful roles in ecclesial life.

In Dubai, United Arab Emirates, heads of state, ministers and negotiators, along with climate activists, mayors, civil society representatives and CEOs met from Nov. 30 to Dec. 12 for the United Nations climate change conference, known as COP28, the largest annual gathering on climate action. The summit began as new reports showed that the planet is set to breach 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming sooner than expected. Elsewhere in the Middle East, Russia, Ukraine, Africa and many other parts of the world conflicts and wars rage on.

Against this backdrop, the post-Christmas liturgical season invites us to celebrate the feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. The readings for this Sunday's feast day are as varied as this year's events, and yet, when read in the context of our present world, we see how they provide us with insight and challenges.

Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

December 31, 2023

Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14, or Genesis 15:1-6; 21:1-3
Psalm 128, or Psalm 105
Colossians 3:12-21 or 3:12-17, or Hebrews 11:8, 11-12, 17-19
Luke 2:22-40, or Luke 2:22, 39-40

Two of the readings today are about family. The first reading from Genesis sets the stage for the flourishing of the Israelite community. The story's main characters, Abraham and Sarah, are about to start a family, the fulfillment of a promise made to them by the Divine One.

Interestingly, the storyline features prominently the two male characters: the deity and Abraham. The male deity singles out another male out for a divine vision; he converses with him, makes him a promise, grants him a son whom the woman bears and whom Abraham names. Even though the woman, Sarah, has a major role in the development of the Israelite ancestral line, she remains in the shadows as the deity "takes note" of her and allows her to become pregnant so that the divine promise can be fulfilled. Never once do we hear the woman's voice.

Embedded in many biblical stories is a culture that was patriarchal, patrilineal and male dominated. This culture embedded in most biblical texts continues to be reinscribed into today's cultures, especially when a story like this one from Genesis is proclaimed during liturgical celebrations. Without a critical hearing of the text that beckons the preacher to preach on it in new ways that call out the story's embedded cultural sexism, stories like this one will continue to shape our theological imagination and our experience of church.

Sarah, like many women today in our church and world, needs to be recognized and esteemed for the significant role she had — and the new roles today's women need to assume. Unfortunately, Sarah's role as a child bearer was a traditional role in biblical times, but this was millennia before synodality. The time has come for the church to move forward with its teachings about Scripture and its preaching on texts like this one.

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The second story about family is heard in today's Gospel reading from Luke. In this story, Mary and Joseph are careful to follow the law of Moses. They fulfill the demands of the ancient purity laws and then fulfill further prescriptions of the law that required them to present their new child to God. For this family, the Jewish laws were important and they kept them as was the custom of the day and not because of legalism. From a Christian perspective, as the Gospel stories develop, we see a shift from the Mosaic Law to the new covenant grounded in an emphasis on love and right relationship, which was also at the heart of the Law of Moses.

The theme of covenant is central to the responsorial psalm where the refrain reminds us again and again that the Divine One remembers forever the covenant made with the people. In biblical times, to be remembered by the Holy One was to

be favored and blessed. All creation shares in the divine covenant and remains graced. The question is this: Have we who are believers forgotten the Holy One and in doing so, have we forgotten who we truly are? If we are remembering as we are remembered, then our engagement with the world takes on a very different tone than what is often experienced today.

Finally, the reading from Colossians beckons us, as holy and beloved people, to live differently in our world — to embrace compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness and above all, love. Thus, the readings for the feast of the Holy Family invites the world's people to turn the page of history, to embrace a new vision for 2024.

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