

Christmas Eve visions

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [December 24, 2014](#) issue



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On a Christmas Eve in the 12th century, a Benedictine nun named Elisabeth kept vigil in the church with her community. During the celebration of the Eucharist, she saw a woman sitting in the center of a bright, shining sun. The woman's hair fell over her shoulders, and the light from the sun around her filled the monastery where Elisabeth was praying and then gradually spread out to illuminate the entire world.

As Elisabeth gazed at the woman, a dark cloud moved in to obscure the rays of the sun, and the woman began weeping. Elisabeth's vision lasted all through the night of Christmas Eve, with the cloud moving in and out, the woman shining and weeping, the earth lightening and darkening.

On Christmas Day an angel appeared to Elisabeth, and she asked him who the woman was. She is the sacred humanity of Jesus, the angel explained, and the sun is the divinity that holds Christ's humanity and illuminates it.

It's hard to imagine a better time to have a vision of the humanity of Jesus in all its beauty and compassion than Christmas Eve, one of the most visual liturgical celebrations of the year. Elisabeth saw her visions in contemplative trances, but any Christmas Eve service can fill our eyes with the humanity of Jesus: children in their shepherd robes and angel wings; families, friends, and strangers wedged together into pews; the illumination of a face when one person turns to light the candle of another. Elisabeth saw humanity lit by divinity on Christmas Eve, and so do we.

Elisabeth's vision is not just a vision of light, however, but also of darkness and despair. Christ's humanity shines in glory in Elisabeth's vision but also weeps and grieves. Elisabeth's vision captures the joyful mystery of the incarnation, but it also captures the sorrows carried in the Christmas story: the weary couple needing shelter; the mothers left inconsolable when Herod murders their children; the journey to his own death this newborn child seems already to have begun. As Elisabeth understood, our sorrows and the world's sorrows are part of Christmas Eve too.

The threads of sadness that run through the Christmas story extend into life in our present time. Weary travelers are still refused shelter, the innocent are still slaughtered, Rachel still mourns her children. Our culture's frenetic approach to Christmas muffles those realities, distracts from them, and aims to keep us cheerful. But in the dark silence of Christmas Eve we hold and remember those realities. As we keep vigil with Elisabeth, we know that a little baby has been born into a broken world, and we lift our candles together to bear witness to a light we hope the darkness cannot overcome.

The mystery of the incarnation blesses both the sacredness of our embodied life and, in Elisabeth's vision, the vulnerability of God's life. When the cloud obscures the light of divinity, the woman who is Christ's humanity begins to weep. Elisabeth describes her weeping as copious and profuse, reflecting a grief that is wholly inhabited, wholly felt. When the light of divinity is clouded over, it is the tears of Christ's compassionate humanity that shine instead.

Elisabeth's vision was apparently troubling to some. Before her vision was recorded, someone directed her to ask her heavenly messengers why Christ's humanity did not appear in a masculine form. When John the Evangelist appeared to her a few days after Christmas, Elisabeth dutifully asked and received an answer: Jesus' humanity appeared to you in feminine form, John told her, so that she could also represent Jesus' mother.

Elisabeth took John's "also" very seriously. But rather than replacing the original interpretation with the new one, she kept both in her book of visions, letting them both be true. In her vision, Christ's humanity shines forth as a woman and as a mother, and knits him ever more deeply into the fabric of human life. By adding an interpretation without subtracting one, Elisabeth invites us to imagine the multiple forms Christ's humanity takes, the many faces out of which we see it shine.

Every Christmas Eve is an opportunity to see anew the humanity of Jesus: the babe in the manger, the mother exhausted from labor, the father trying to figure out what to do next. The children making their way to the border. The young man lying dead for hours in the street. The girls from Chibok, the Yazidi women. The person next to us in the pew who turns to light our candle with hers. Christ's humanity is around us and within us, on this night and every night, waiting to be recognized.

When we lift our candles during "Silent Night," we honor the light that shines in the darkness, a light that unflinchingly shows us the world as it is and offers us a vision of what the world might become. In the space in between, it's our work to look for the humanity of Christ in the humanity of each other, and to protect, nurture, and cherish it in all the forms it takes.