

Pay attention to pairs appearing in the Bible

written by Catherine Upchurch |

Explore

When the Bible places two images or characters together, we are drawn to explore the relationship between the two. We may discover patterns of how God interacts with us and our world, or hone our appreciation of God's priorities and values, or even receive the grace to deepen our commitment to the community of faith where we find ourselves. The power of such pairings becomes clear in our prayerful attention to them.

Questions for reflection or discussion:

1. Review in your mind some of your favorite Bible passages or Bible songs. Are there pairs of images that appear in them? (E.g., slavery and freedom, water and dry land, pruning and blossoming, etc.)
2. When you think of your favorite biblical characters, are they stand-alone figures, or do they have companions, or even enemies, that help give them dimension? (E.g., King David could be considered with Bathsheba, or Goliath, or Saul, or Jonathan, each relationship revealing something more about him.)

"In this new series, we will dig into some of the Bible's pairings of people to uncover not only the human dynamics of community but the ways God is revealed in the process."

3. In your own life, how have companions helped you discover more about who you are who you are called to be?

Bacon and eggs. Lost and found. Fun and games. Sooner or later. The English language is filled with common word pairings that go together like, well, peanut butter and jelly. Our conversations are sprinkled with such pairings that have become a natural part of ordinary discourse.

Pairings are not isolated to a particular culture or language. Pairing words, ideas and characters is universal, and can serve as a way to explore values, discover truth and even ponder the essential meaning of life itself.

In the Bible, some images are paired intentionally in contrast and are meant to illicit choices, as in Deuteronomy 30:19: "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live."

Some pairings are intended for instruction and reflection, as in so many passages that contrast light and darkness. The Gospel of John embraces this pairing right from the start, describing the coming of God's son, Jesus, saying "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5).

Some pairings invite us to hope for a kingdom that at first seems impossible, as when the lion, lamb, calf and wolf accompany one another (Isaiah 11:6-7). When we reflect on pairings such as these, we find wisdom and hope for our own spiritual journeys.

The Bible also presents characters in pairs with some frequency. Of course, right from the start we have Adam and Eve, followed by the ancestral couples of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah and their many descendants right into the New Testament period where we find Elizabeth and Zechariah along with Mary and Joseph. These couples stand together as signs of God's promise to create a people as numerous as the stars of the sky and the sands of the sea shore (Genesis 22:17).

Some people paired together are in conflict, with their struggles revealing the dangers of inflated egos, and the neglect of God's covenant. The stories of brothers Cain and Abel (Genesis 4), or Jacob and Esau (Genesis 27), remind us of the power of jealousy and deception that only God can transform. Sarah and her slave Hagar never see eye to eye and yet God intervenes in both of their individual lives for the life of their people.

Quite often, biblical characters are paired together to deepen their appreciation for what God is doing. Mary and Elizabeth, Ruth and Naomi, Paul and Barnabas — all grow in their appreciation for God's work in the world through shared life experiences, no doubt discerning God's presence and direction by their sharing.

In this new series, we will dig into some of the Bible's pairings of people to uncover not only the human dynamics of community but the ways God is revealed in the process. While it is true that God saves each of us individually, we experience salvation in the context of community and discover its meaning in that same context. Our graced encounters with God come to life within our daily relationships, those wrought with tension as well as those that instruct or comfort us.

Our biblical ancestors and the imagery that stirred their hearts still have the potential to teach us how to faithfully navigate a complex world.

Catherine Upchurch is the general editor of the Little Rock Catholic Study Bible and contributes to several biblical publications. She writes from Fort Smith.