

## **“The Spirit Searches Everything”**

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**Psalm 112:1-9 | 1 Corinthians 2:1-13**

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There’s a graphic novel from 2022 called *Let There Be Light*. Written and illustrated by Liana Finck, a Jewish, millennial cartoonist based in New York City, *Let There Be Light* is an adaptation of the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Scriptures. The title comes from one of the earliest verses in Genesis: “And, God said, let there be light.... And, there was light.” Finck traces—literally—some of the most significant passages and events in all of Genesis. *Let There Be Light* captures the Creation story, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel, Noah and the flood, the Tower of Babel, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Esau, Rachel and Leah, and Joseph the dreamer and his eleven siblings. There are a couple of twists to the retelling of Genesis, though. For one, Finck breaks up the book into three parts as she tells the stories of our religious ancestors: past (from Creation through the ancient world), present (twentieth and twenty-first centuries), and future (a climate-changed era many years ahead of us). As readers, we engage with the stories from Creation to the Tower of Babel in the past, from Abraham to Isaac and Esau in the present, and Joseph and his siblings in the future. It’s an interesting conceit, really, how Finck bends time and space in *Let There Be Light*. No matter where we find ourselves in the timeline of the graphic novel, Scripture is not only beside us but, rather, guiding us. I’m reminded of Moses’s call in Deuteronomy 31 to God’s people: read the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, every seven years. A lot can happen in seven years, and God’s word will still be with us—wherever and whoever we are at that point. So, the first twist Finck brings to her Genesis adaptation: bending time and space. Here’s the second twist: God, Creator of Life and Sovereign of the World, is a woman.

In April 2022, NPR’s Book of the Day podcast published an interview with Finck. The podcast’s host, Andrew Limbong, describes Finck’s interpretation of God as such: “God is a woman who loves men—she absolutely *adores* them. But, then, men do these awful things that

men do that frustrate her and make her feel miserable to the point where, you know, flooding the earth seems like a viable option.” He continues, “It’s a way to empathize with God that I’ve never heard before.... [For Finck], writing it was a way of connecting with a religion she’d been drifting away from.” In a TEDTalk called “Life is Hard. Art Helps” given in 2024, Finck describes her relationship to God the Woman in *Let There Be Light*, whom she portrays as an artist with doubts, insecurities, and loneliness. She says,

As an experiment, I decided to remake the Book of Genesis as a graphic novel. My version of God is not confident. And, maybe not coincidentally, She’s a woman. It surprised me how few changes I needed to make to the original text, which is sparse and ancient and lends itself well to interpretation.... My version of God doesn’t know exactly what She’s doing. But, She draws a horizon line, and things start to fall into place. She banishes Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden not because they disobeyed Her but because, by eating the apple and becoming wise, She feels they’ve outgrown the world She created for them, and She needs to let them go. She scatters the builders of the Tower of Babel not because She’s threatened by their power but because, like any introvert, She needs her privacy. When She destroys the world in the story of Noah, it’s not because She’s incensed with mankind but because She’s incensed with Herself. She knows She could have done a better job when She made us.

Some of you listening to this sermon may be thinking, “Wow! Finally! I’ve found someone who imagines God as I do!!” Some of you listening to this sermon may be thinking, “Well, that can’t be right at all. And, hey, isn’t that borderline heretical to attribute human qualities to God, anyways?” Or, perhaps, you find yourself somewhere in the middle. Parts of Finck’s interpretation may speak to you, other parts may not. Maybe, you can appreciate Finck’s creative liberty and feel inspired by how thoughtfully she committed herself to a depiction of Genesis that feels most authentic to her, even if your personal and theological relationship with God don’t align. [Pause]

If you’ve known me for a while, you have likely heard the story of how I came to receive the call of Christ to ordained ministry in His church. If you haven’t heard it yet, or if you need a refresher, here it is. I was raised in two churches with very different theological and social beliefs. My father took me and my two half-sisters to a fundamentalist church, which took the

Bible literally and had a heavy emphasis on the separation of gender roles, purity, sin, and the very-real and very-imminent threat of Hell and Judgment Day. All the girls and women in the church wore skirts or dresses, not slacks or jeans. No female leadership was permitted in the church beyond stereotypical women's work, like serving on the hospitality committee and teaching Sunday School. My mother took me to a mainline Protestant church. For years, I had considered her church to be a radical, left-leaning worship community. I've realized, though, that I only believed that because it was such a departure from my father's conservative church. In reality, her church was probably theologically and socially middle-of-the-road—replete with a trendy (for the time) evangelical flair and all-male praise band.

At the age of eight, I stopped attending church with my family. Without a regular routine and furthered spiritual formation in my adolescence, I wasn't quite sure what I believed in or what to call myself. I knew I was culturally Christian, but what kind of religious grounding did I actually have? Fast-forward ten years, and I am eighteen years old and starting my first week of undergrad. I felt called to attend church for the first time in a decade. I (boldly) sat in one of the first pews. When it came time for the sermon, I realized—almost incredulously—that the pastor, the preacher, was a woman. I can only describe what happens next as the presence of the Holy Spirit making Herself known. I felt so present and so at peace in my pew as this pastor represented the Church and delivered the message of Christ's love in a way I had never before experienced—in a way I had not even known was possible. I felt goosebumps on my arms—mind you, in the heat of the Carolina summer. I felt tears in the corners of my eyes. I thought to myself, “Oh, there's something happening here.” And, I listened to my instincts—I listened to that voice of clarity that told me there was more work yet to be done. You could call this experience of an ordained woman preaching the Good News of the Gospels a kind of conversion story for me, or my own version of Paul's Road to Damascus. [Pause]

[disclaimer about how different Christian traditions are worthy and valid, as long as they are Spirit-led and authentic to the people who follow them]

I share my story and Liana Finck's *Let There Be Light* together today because I can find a common thread within them: the movement of the Spirit in our lives to bring us to the wholeness of who we are and the endless possibilities that God has in store for us. I wonder how many people who have read and will go on to read *Let There Be Light* may finally feel represented by Finck's adaptation or inspired to critically, creatively, and consciously dive into their own faith traditions. Could *Let There Be Light* be for others as seeing a woman preach for the first time was for me? Could a different representation of our sacred text and religious practices bring us closer to God, actually? Could the Spirit guide us to a different narrative that is just as true for us as the dominant, "traditional," and normative narratives we were raised with? Could hearing, and truly taking in, the lived experience of someone from a different identity or position of power help us reimagine our place in God's Kin-dom?

Our lectionary reading from 1 Corinthians 2 can speak to these questions, if we listen closely. I'd like to illuminate a few verses from this chapter. Continuing from a reflection on wisdom, the Apostle Paul writes in verses ten through twelve: "Yet God has revealed this wisdom to us through the Holy Spirit. She searches out all things, even the depths of God. After all, no one knows one's thoughts except one's own inner spirit; by that same token, no one knows God's thoughts except God's spirit. We haven't received the spirit of the world but the Spirit of God, so that we can understand what God has freely given us." I'll reread a part of this again: "*She searches out all things, even the depths of God. After all, no one knows one's thoughts except one's inner spirit; by that same token, no one knows God's thoughts except God's spirit.*" How hubristic would we be, Scripture seems to suggest, to assume that God should be one way? That the Church should be one way? That we should give fidelity to one voice and one reality and one perception that is heard above the rest? That we should be loyal to a certain representation or embodiment of power, prestige, wealth, gender, age, or status? Paul (and, for that matter, the portrayal of Christ's ministry in the Gospels)? That we should

reserve skepticism for the outcast, the marginal, the Other, but wholeheartedly and unquestioningly accept the dominant?

The history of the Christian institution—not Christ’s ministry, but the institution—would suggest to you that a woman’s place is not within the sacred and the divine. It would suggest to you that God the Creative, the Artist, the Wonderer, the Heartfelt is a radical aberration. It would suggest that the voice of a woman or of a marginal identity is inherently less worthy and less believable than the voice of the dominant? Who could argue against this “truth,” when our institution has led us to believe that God *is* the personification of the dominant? What evidence do you have when the case is already closed [“wipe my hands of this”] and decided against you? Is the Spirit leading us to keep everything the same? Is the Spirit leading us to perpetuate a hierarchy that privileges one belief or one identity over another simply because *that’s the way it’s been?*

The Spirit is curious. She’s creative. She’s change and possibility. She’s the ancient, all-knowing, all-seeing Source that lives in, around, and between all of us—even God. The qualities of the Spirit—curiosity, creativity, change, wisdom—are not the antithesis to our Christian institution. Rather, they can be the antidote to millenia of bias, prejudice, and injustice perpetuated in the name of upholding what “should” be on earth, not what “can” be in the Kin-dom. Curiosity, creativity, change, and wisdom help us loosen our control of what we think *should be* and, instead, embrace what *could be*. The Spirit searches our inner selves to pull out the truth of who we are: the Christselfes that dwell within us. The Spirit provides a pathway for unity and a salve for division. [Pause]

*“She searches out all things, even the depths of God.”* [Pause] This week, where can you allow yourself to open to the Spirit of God to help you loosen the control of your own narratives and embrace the possibility of curiosity, creativity, change, and wisdom? Where can the Spirit support you to live outside of your own head, defy your own concepts of hierarchy and status and rights and wrongs, and seek a faith-based representation that is not exactly your

own? Where can you prayerfully ask for God to intervene, shake up the ways you cling to normativity and dominance, and propel you into compassionate, life-giving possibility? Where can you, even with fear and trepidation, say yes instead of retreating into the false security of a well-trodden *no*? Beloved church, may the Trinity (God, Christ, and Spirit) be with us this day and evermore, challenging us to reinvention, assuaging our fears, and bringing us closer to the authentic Christself within each and every one of us. Amen.