

December 8, Feast of the Immaculate Conception
Maria Montello, Maryknoll lay missionary, Cambodia

Genesis 3: 9-15, 20; Psalm 98: 1, 2-3ab, 3cd-4; Ephesians 1: 3-6, 11-12; Luke 1: 26-38

In Christ we have also obtained, an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will... – Ephesians 1:11

Standing in front of the class, Navy's (Nah-vee) eyes appeared to dart around behind closed eyelids fluttering haphazardly. Her head was tilted down slightly and her body not quite square with her classmates who looked on. Her hands were clenched. The air was thick; the anticipation palpable. Navy had uttered just the first few sentences of her presentation on the takeover of Phnom Penh by the Khmer Rouge. Then, she stood there frozen in silence, unable to speak. You could almost hear everyone's hearts hit the floor.

I do not know Navy's story. Perhaps I will someday. But to me, her professor, Navy was a marvel. On the first day of class, when I realized that sitting in the back of the classroom was a blind student, I wondered, "How did she make it up the 144 steps to my classroom, let alone have the sort of educational success to make it to the university?"

The realities of being disabled in Cambodia are harsh. It is thought by some that such a child must have been a bad person in a former life and hence been reincarnated in this "lesser form." Or, perhaps, the family had been cursed by someone in the village – someone with a grudge, someone to whom they owed a debt. In any case, the disability itself is only a part of the challenge.

Today, I thought about Navy's mother. She is Cambodian. Surely she was born into a society like today's which would have her see her daughter as less, her family as cursed. How was it that she had the state of mind and moral strength to raise the daughter who was standing there in front of that class? Navy's mother herself seemed not to have "inherited" this social sin – the sort of sin that has us believe some people are of less value than others just by virtue of the groups to which they belong, oftentimes through characteristics which they can't even control; the sort of conditioning that has us not only believe these things but, often unknowingly, pass them along to our children.

Not so Navy's mom. Through some grace – perhaps the care of her own parents – she escaped this "stain" and was able to raise a blind daughter who had made it to the best Cambodian university.

There is something special, it seems, about Navy's mother.

Today we observe the feast of the Immaculate Conception. It is the day when we celebrate that there is something quite special about Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary, the Church teaches, does not bear the stain of original sin, the sin which we all carry, the sin which gives us the predisposition to be judgmental and exclusionary, often unknowingly. Mary is "full of grace" – and from the very beginning of her life.

When Christ her Son stretched His arms on the cross, the crowds – the disciples, the Jews, the Roman soldiers – all looked on at Jesus, "King of the Jews," as the ultimate failure. Not so Mary. She knew: Her Son had stretched His arms from heaven to earth; He had brought God's own back; He had showed the world how to love.

The scene of Navy alone, frozen in front of the class played again and again in my head as I pedaled home that day. I saw the image of her standing there, dressed in her pressed skirt and jacket, knowing full well that all eyes were on her, citing haltingly only the first sentences of a presentation she had likely spent hours preparing. My heart was heavy as I thought about the disappointment Navy must have felt, the disappointment we all felt.

But then I thought about the realities of Navy's upbringing. I thought about the state of the Cambodian education system, where teachers struggle to serve any student let alone those who need special services. I thought that it was likely little had ever been done for Navy and less had ever been asked of her. I doubted that she had ever stood in front of a room full of her peers, let alone speak and in English. I was wrong, I realized, about what had happened that day. It was not a day of disappointment. That woman who stood before all of us was in fact courageous beyond measure. That day was Navy's triumph. Her mother would have been proud.