

## “The Visitation”

Luke 1:39-45

“In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country....”

Well, so here we are on the fourth Sunday in Advent. Not to put any pressure on anyone, but there are just five shopping days left counting today! Some of us here (I’m thinking probably mostly of the male variety) will need to set out and go “with haste” to the mall in the next few days and get done what they have been putting off doing.

Another Christmas! We’ve all done this enough times that most of us have developed certain routines. We have settled on regular seasonal tasks that need to be accomplished each year, and so we do them, one by one, and check them off. Cards? Done! Tree? Done! Present for Aunt Gertrude? Bought and wrapped! And so on. So that Advent, these weeks leading up to Christmas, becomes for many of us a time of busily working to get done those things that need to be done and checking them off until, finally, we have checked off everything on our list and we can breathe a deep sigh, feeling, somehow, that we have made it. We have done all that we had to do. But I wonder. Have we? Or have we left undone some of those things that we ought to have done?

I’ve heard more than one person say that the goal is to get through the holidays and come out on the other side more or less intact. But I wonder. Should that be our goal? I can’t help thinking that it might be possible to accomplish all of the tasks on our lists, check off every one of them, and still somehow miss the most important parts of this season.

Our Gospel reading for today suggests some other ways to think about what this time before Christmas could be about. It is the story of Mary, mother of Jesus, going off to visit Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptizer. Luke is the only Gospel writer to give us this story of what is usually called “The Visitation.” He is also the only one to tell about the miraculous circumstances leading to the birth of John the Baptizer, the only one to tell of Gabriel’s annunciation to Mary, the only one who tells about the shepherds, and the only one to suggest that Jesus and John were related. We learn that interesting detail when Gabriel tells Mary that not only is she with child of the Holy Spirit but also that her kinswoman, her relative, Elizabeth “in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.”

And so it is that Mary sets out and goes with haste on a three day journey from her home in Nazareth over the mountains to Hebron, south of Jerusalem, to an unnamed Judean town in the hill country where she enters the house of Zechariah and greets her relative Elizabeth. The Visitation! Two mothers-to-be. One of them is barely a teen-ager, a girl who in our culture and our time would be doing her middle school homework, texting her friends, worrying about pimples and boyfriends. The other woman, Elizabeth, is a card-carrying member of AARP who should be getting calls from her grandchildren or her great grandchildren instead of dealing with morning sickness.

Luke didn’t have to tell it, of course. There is nothing essential here, no facts important to moving the narrative along. Just a little addition of some poetry and some tenderness. Still, it is a nice story. A welcome interlude between noisier, more spectacular events: fearsome angel appearances, birthing of babies (never too quiet an event), and a noisy, not to mention probably smelly, bunch of shepherds showing up unannounced to see the baby. Apart from the *Magnificat*, there is little else that makes the story memorable. It is simply a visit. Two women, both anticipating childbirth, spending some time together.

Only in this case the pregnancies of both women are described in the story as having been miraculous. Mary's, of course, we are quite familiar with, for hers is front and center at this time of year, rehearsed as it is every year in pageants and in Gospel readings. Elizabeth's miracle pregnancy is a bit less familiar, but follows in the same vein as other miracle pregnancies from the Old Testament. An older woman who is, to use the Biblical word, "barren," suddenly becomes pregnant. This is what happens to Sarah, the mother of Isaac, and to Hannah, the mother of Samuel. And now, Luke tells us, it happens to Elizabeth.

And so, the visit -- Mary coming and spending three months with Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah. What a nice thing, this idea of visiting one another. What a nice way to describe such an event: "The Visitation."

And as Luke tells the story, the visitation takes on special meaning right from the moment that Mary enters the home of Elizabeth. There is an instantaneous recognition, a deeply inward connecting that happens between Mary and Elizabeth. Luke tells us that the child in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy at the sound of Mary's greeting.

Whether we take all of this literally and historically or not, the story of The Visitation has something to say to us about our own visits and our own ways of connecting with one another. Many of us here are currently experiencing or will be experiencing soon a visitation of our own, receiving sons and daughters, or parents, cousins and aunts and uncles and other relatives into our homes. Others of us will become guests ourselves as we visit in the homes of relatives. Diane and I, like travelers from the East, will be making our journey to the Midwest on Christmas day to see our daughters and their husbands, but more importantly, their children, our grandchildren!

This week as I was preparing this sermon I began to think back to another visitation that happened ten years ago this month. Early in December of 1999 Diane and I came to Auburn and to visit Westminster and the Pastor Nominating Committee. I had had my Personal Information Form out there in the Presbyterian network for some time and we had had calls from several churches. Each time that a call came I asked the caller, who would be a member of a Pastor Nominating Committee, why they thought I might be the pastor they were looking for. What was it in my PIF that made them think that I might be a good candidate? And in all of the calls that had come so far the person who called kind of stammered a little and couldn't really say what was in my PIF. The impression I got was that somehow the committee had picked three or four PIFs and had assigned someone to call.

But then one evening a woman named Karen Mazzeo called from somewhere in New York and when I asked that same question, she actually seemed to know what I had written, and in fact, she said that the committee seemed to feel that from how I described myself I sounded like the kind of person they were looking for. Auburn, New York. Where exactly is that, I asked. Well, she said, it was right on one of the Finger Lakes in upstate New York. Wow! Right on one of the Finger Lakes? And then when she said that there was a YMCA right next door to the church I said, "We're coming!"

So it was that Diane and I made haste and went from the plains of the Midwest to the Finger Lake region of Central New York to meet with the Pastor Nominating Committee in a town we had never heard of. We were picked up at the airport by Bob Sylvester and Midge Drummond, and Midge graciously opened her home to us. The Pastor Nominating Committee knew what they were doing when they had us stay with Midge. We slept in a bedroom on the ground floor overlooking Owasco Lake and decided to leave the blinds open so that when we awakened in the morning we would be able to see the sun coming up over the lake. Sure enough, when we woke up, we were able to look right out onto the lake where we saw some ice fisherman looking right back at us! Midge, of course, was a wonderful and gracious hostess, as everyone who knows her knows that she would be.

We had our first tentative meeting with the Pastor Nominating Committee at a place called “Spirits.” Bob Sylvester, Midge, Karyn, Linda Gero, Ted O’Hara, Mike Plum, Molly Trapani, Walt Wasserman and Annie Wisniewski (in case you want to know who to blame.) It was a great committee. In the evening I preached a sermon for them in the chapel. During the visit we got our first look at this beautiful sanctuary that was all decorated for Christmas as it is now. We had dinner one night at Bob and Dottie’s and the next night at Midge’s where we talked and asked questions of one another, probing and prodding, trying to get a feel for each other and whether this would be a good match.

Something clicked at that meeting. The Pastor Nominating Committee, I think, felt that they had recognized something in me and in Diane that said to them that this would be a good fit. And likewise, we saw something in them – the way they spoke of the congregation, what it meant to them, and what they were looking for in a pastor. That said to us that this was a congregation we would like to be part of. There was a kind of recognition on both sides. Maybe it wasn’t as dramatic as that of the child who leaped in Elizabeth’s womb, but it was there.

And, of course, everyone here knows the rest of the story. We were called and we came, and except for that first unbelievably rainy spring of 2000 when we thought we would never see the sun again and were tempted to pack up our things and move back to Iowa, we have never been sorry. I can’t speak for the church’s side of that. I tell that story only to say that the kind of recognition and connection told about in the story of the Visitation is possible in our lives as well.

Then after being here for a couple of years I found myself seated at a table with some Jewish people from Auburn and the local Imam from the Muslim community planning an interfaith Thanksgiving service, a tradition that we were trying to revive. And again, even though we were from different faith traditions, we sensed in each other something that we recognized as valid. There was a deep spiritual connection. I wonder if one of the tasks of Advent and Christmas is not to find these deeper connections with one another.

So we come to one of the holiest celebrations in the Christian faith shortly. We should cherish this celebration of the Nativity. In Christian thought, the birth of Christ itself represents a visitation of sorts – Jesus is Emmanuel, meaning “God with us.” So Christianity teaches that the world has been visited. If we believe that, if we believe that our world has been visited in a special way in the Christ child, then it seems to me we need to take seriously his life and his teachings. And as I think about what kind of person this baby grew up to be, the kind of life he lived, the things that he said, it seems to me that he taught us several things: He taught us not to look at one another with suspicion and distrust but to learn to embrace those who are different from us and to look at the heart of the individual and not at the outer trappings. Jesus responded to people who were outside of his faith tradition, to Samaritans and Gentiles, and on more than one occasion seeing the faith in a person such as this, he said, “I have not found faith like this in all of Israel.”

If Jesus were here today, I truly believe that there would be a lot of visitations going on with people of different faith traditions, nationalities, ethnic groups. There would be a mighty coming together, an openness, a sharing – and somehow, I believe, we would move closer to that dream the angels spoke about when they sang: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.” May we all enjoy wonderful visitations this holiday season with family and friends, and may all the world find ways to connect deeply with one another despite our differences.