

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 22, 2024

**“And how does this happen to me,
that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”**

So says Elizabeth to Mary. The Visitation is one of those stories that can be a little hard to wrap our minds around. The details of the story are such that it's difficult to know exactly what happened or how it happened or whether or not we are to take the story as presented at face value.

For one thing, there is so much we don't know about this visit from Mary to Elizabeth, so much left out that we might be wondering about. Did Mary travel all by herself? (I'm guessing, unlikely.) Did Elizabeth know in advance that Mary was pregnant? (I'm guessing, no.) Those sorts of things. And the truth is, we really don't know. We are free to speculate on the details that are omitted. And on top of that, the words from the mouth of Elizabeth seem SO perfect, don't they? Or should I say they seem a little TOO perfect? Who talks like this?

Well, no one, probably even back then. Remember, these are stories that had been passed down by word of mouth for decades before they were ever written down. When St. Luke chose to include this story in his account of the life of Jesus, he had to take the various stories he heard and do the best he could to get at the heart of what had happened, reveal to his audience that which reflected the importance and meaning of such an event. He had to use his abilities to best communicate a story he felt needed to be told. I'd say he did a beautiful job.

Of course, St. Luke was not alone in this process. No, we believe in faith, that the Holy Spirit was at work in and through St. Luke, not providing him with divine dictation as some imagine, but rather by encouraging and inspiring and enlightening St. Luke to tell the story as it needed to be told. It's the divine and the human which come together in our sacred texts. Sound familiar? And what a beautiful story we have! One of the most

inspiring part is the Magnificat that Mary speaks immediately following the passage we just heard.

I imagine that St. Luke might have included this story to emphasize the indispensable role of John the Baptist in the story of our salvation. After all, he's the one "leaping" in Elizabeth's womb after Mary greets her. St. Luke also might have included the story to remind us of the joy that the Incarnation brought to the world.

Elizabeth can hardly contain herself. She is "filled with the Holy Spirit" and can't help herself from showering Mary with words that we continue to pray to this day. And of course, St. Luke probably included this story to leave no doubt as to whom Mary was carrying in her womb. Yes, the story works on many different levels.

But of course, the words of Scripture are a living Word, and therefore, have the power to inspire and teach and edify and comfort people across generations, maybe even in ways the original human author never intended. Imagine that.

And so, whenever I hear this story, I can't help but think that maybe we're supposed to see a little bit of ourselves in both Elizabeth and Mary, that maybe we are supposed to take inspiration from them and try to be a little bit more like them. Maybe this isn't a story in which we're just supposed to think about what happened to them two thousand years ago, but rather see this story as an allegory for what is supposed to happen in our own lives as we journey in faith. Maybe being a good and faithful disciple is being both like Elizabeth and Mary.

In one sense, we are invited to be like Elizabeth, the one who recognized God in the most unlikely of places. In a few days we will celebrate God being born into the world, breaking into the world to be a lasting part of it, becoming one of us so that we can become more like him. Do we believe that? Do we believe that God is still present, dwelling within the human heart and mind and soul? When we look at others, what do we see? Do

we see the God within? Or do we simply see their faults and limitations? Elizabeth didn't just see her relative coming for a visit. She saw the God within Mary coming to meet her too. Can we do the same?

And in another sense, we are invited to be like Mary, the first disciple. And there are many ways we are to be like Mary - trusting, humble, brave, willing to say "yes" to God, no matter what. But in regard to this story, we are to be like Mary in a particular way. You see, it wasn't just about Elizabeth's ability to see what was hidden. It was also about Mary's ability to radiate the God within. Mary's whole being, her whole purpose, her whole identity was all about the God alive and well within her. Mary was so in love with God, so "full of grace" that it was obvious to all. Can we do the same? After all, we are reminded every Christmas that we are invited to welcome the Lord into our hearts and minds, into our very lives. We are invited to bear him, to carry him, to bring his love and mercy and compassion to a world that needs him more than ever. What will people see when they look at us? Will the God within us be obvious? Will people see goodness and kindness radiating from us, or will they see something else?

My dear friends, we are getting close. Less than a week to go. As we get ready to welcome the Christ child, let's make sure that we realize God isn't just coming for a "visit" at all. He wants to stay forever, within you and within me. Let's be sure we can recognize him in both places as Elizabeth and Mary did, and help others to do the same.

Short Story

Composer and performer Bradley James has set Mother Teresa of Calcutta's teachings and prayers to music in the internationally acclaimed recording, *Gift of Love: Music to the Words and Prayers of Mother Teresa*. Bradley remembers her teaching: "Mother said we don't have to go to Calcutta to help the poor; rather, we must help them right in front of us." He applied this lesson when he encountered a homeless beggar on the streets of San Francisco. Bradley placed some money in his metal cup, then reached out and shook the man's hand. The recipient gave him a big smile, and the two exchanged names and small talk. Bradley recalls:

“Then he pulled me a little closer and said, ‘Thanks for the money, but what I really needed was a handshake’”

Indeed, what was remarkable in this incident was not the coin, but the gift of human dignity and the love of Christ that Bradley James brought to the beggar through the handshake and his fraternal presence. In effect, Bradley replicated in his life and experience the joyful mystery of the Lord’s Visitation described in today’s Gospel.