

Visited Luke 1:39-56

One of the privileges of being a pastor is that I get to visit people, a lot of people. It is such an important role for ministers, that most search committees will ask a candidate about their visitation practices. And as important as it is for you, know that it is important to me too. Especially in this season it's important; but I don't mean the Christmas season, I mean the opening season of my ministry with you. I think most folks like visits, extroverts like parties with crowds, while introverts prefer coffee with one or two people. Still a visit is a visit. Visits matter. It might just be social call, a way to get you out of house, or it might be a visit with some intention, like a wellness check, or pastoral visit. People appreciate visits for a lot of reasons, and they need visits for just as many reasons.

Our scripture today draws us into a very unusual visit- you might call it a family visit, but it is so much more. For Mary and Elizabeth, it was more than social call. Mary needed Elizabeth, because her life had taken a sudden, unexpected turn. She had just had her own unforeseen visit – from the angel Gabriel. He met her with an astounding greeting, and some important news. She was going to have a baby! But not any old baby, and not in the usual way. And even with her courageous welcome of the news there were a lot of concerns for her to deal with. She was unwed, which meant a lot of trouble; ending her upcoming marriage to Joseph was the least of her problems – she could be stoned to death! Even with Gabriel's words there was no neon sign, no affidavit from God saying “this child is mine. Leave the girl alone.”

Mary was now faced with many concerns. What would happen if... Who could she tell? Who could she trust? Who would understand? Maybe that is why Gabriel ended his visit with a second bit of news – Elizabeth, her old relative, was also pregnant. That baby too was unexpected, inconceivable - a miraculous child – John. That news gave Mary encouragement and direction. And without hesitation, with an eager spirit, Mary shows up at the door of her kinswoman.

Do you think Elizabeth was surprised when she found Mary knocking on her door? Yes, they were relatives, but you don't show up unplanned, at least not with a suitcase in your hands. And it was not reasonable for Mary to travel alone; it went against cultural norms, and it was very dangerous. Elizabeth may have been shocked, but she may also have been glad for the visit. Family was here, someone who could help her in her last months of pregnancy, and through this birth. She didn't yet understand why Mary was there, not until her embryonic baby gave her a push – leaping in her womb. In that moment she realized that as her child was a miracle (a forerunner her husband Zachariah was told), maybe this too was a part of God's plan for the coming Messiah. Without any details, without a comment from Mary, Elizabeth, embraced by the Holy Spirit, embraces Mary and celebrates her unborn child. She shouts with joy, she blesses Mary and affirms her. Mary is

blessed, blessed by God's grace; she is blessed because she believed that God will work, and she is blessed because God will work in and through her, through her trust and commitment.

I can't help but wonder what Mary was expecting when she left her hometown for Elizabeth's home. Was it more than place to her hang hat? What kind of reception would she receive, especially once Elizabeth and her husband, a priest, knew she was pregnant? What kind of support did she hope she could find? More than a social visit, more than anything Mary could have anticipated, this visit was fellowship at its best; it was, or became, a holy encounter, where two pregnant women and two embryos are visited by God, and joined with each other through their trust in God.

That unexpected visit opened Elizabeth to bless Mary. And it opened Mary's spirit, it freed her from the anxieties and concerns of her life, to voice her awe in God's work, to proclaim her joy and wonder in God's marvelous deeds. Mary sings of being lifted up, of being honored by her role; but really her focus is God, what God is doing with her, what God will do through her son, and what God is doing in the world. She lays out the mercy of God, the God who has acted in the past and established a covenant with Abraham and his descendants; and she celebrates God's faithfulness, from one generation to the next, from the day of pregnant Sarah to the days of pregnant Elizabeth and Mary. God would work and God would continue to work, to bring about a world of justice and peace, where what is broken is made whole, where what is lost is found, and where what is wrong is made right, even when it seems impossible. For nothing is impossible for God.

That is what happens whenever God chooses to visit a person. Lives (and worlds) are turned up-side down and right-side up. Have you ever found yourself in Mary's shoes? You are just an average person, without much political or social power in world. Would you ever expect God to visit you, or to be affirmed as one who trusts and follows God. Have you ever seen yourself in Elizabeth's shoes, offering a welcome, a helping hand, and surprised to find yourself visited, empowered by God to offer blessing? I'm wondering when has God visited us here, in this congregation? Does God visit us, even now, even today? How does God visit us? What does that look like, and will that mean things change - surprising, challenging, and transforming change. Do we have the courage to believe? To say yes, to join in the work of God's redeeming grace? To bless, and to be a blessing?

May we sing out our answer with joy- with faith, with hope and with love. Amen.

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