

Advent 4 (RCL/C): "The Visitation: Recognizing the Holy"  
Luke 1:39-55  
December 22, 2024  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

"Visitation": if we're scheduled at work or at school for a visitation, it usually means someone is coming to check up on us ☺. But if we hear of "**the** Visitation," that means a particular visit between 2 female relatives, Mary and Elizabeth, in today's Gospel. They are one or two generations apart, and I don't know what their relationship was like **before** this visit, but I'm guessing they were soul sisters ever **after** it. The 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza of our hymn of the day, "Unexpected and Mysterious" (ELW 258) describes it like this:

In a momentary meeting of eternity and time,  
Mary learned that she would carry both the mortal and divine.  
Then she learned of God's compassion, of Elizabeth's great joy,  
and she ran to greet the woman who would recognize her boy.

A friend from the Church in Brielle, Bob Schuster, gave me this picture years ago, after I preached on the Visitation at an ecumenical gathering. (Bob and his wife Roni are now among those standing on another Shore, in a greater light, celebrating with us the Word made flesh.) Danish artist Carl Bloch painted the original 150 years ago. Mary is at the foot of the steps, robed in red, the color of earth, and draped in a blue cloak, the color of heaven. She's wearing a diaphanous, gauzy veil, and over her head, nearly invisible, floats a dainty halo. We can imagine the soft curves of pregnancy as we look at her. Blooming in a pot near her is a lily; not a trumpet-shaped Easter lily, but one in the shape of a Turk's cap, with the petals folded back over themselves. The lily is a symbol of purity, and in artwork of the Annunciation, the archangel Gabriel is usually holding one.

Elizabeth stands at the top of the steps, obviously round and soft in her pregnancy. She doesn't look **ancient**, but is clearly **older**. Her arms are extended wide, ready to give an embrace

of welcome, but also foreshadowing the death on the cross of the unborn Savior whom her unborn son recognizes. To me, the heart of this Visitation story is the **recognition of the holy**:

*And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.  
And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?  
For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy."  
(Luke 1:41c-44)*

Elizabeth and unborn John both **recognize the holy** in Mary and her Son. **The Holy Spirit enables us to do the same**: to see God's fingerprint on a sunrise or a snowflake, God's artistry in the vibrant feathers of a cardinal or the velvety fur of a housecat, to experience God's Presence breaking into even ordinary, everyday moment, not just mystical ones.

I was on a crosstown bus in Manhattan one day while I was in seminary (1985 or so). I'm sure I was studying very important things like Major Themes in Luther's Theology or Religion and Psychiatry, but the time I experienced God's Presence most powerfully was on that bus – not because I saw or performed some random act of kindness, but because I had an overwhelming sense of God's love for each passenger, each member of the motley crew who happened to be riding on that bus that afternoon. I didn't know any of them, but somehow they were no longer strangers.... And they may not have realized it, but they were drenched in Heaven's love, and counted as priceless. It reminded me of Thomas Merton's observation (in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*), "You can't just go around telling people they are shining like the sun."

I sensed holiness last night as I heard Ned and Lessons & Carols flautist Patty Lazara play *Gabriel's Oboe* as part of the prelude. Sometimes music that is haunting and beautiful is simply a portal into the holy. That's probably why Martin Luther insisted, "Music is a fair and glorious gift of God."

When and where have you recognized the holy in this Advent, the busy time between Thanksgiving and Christmas? If you don't think you have, think harder, or at least don't give up. We're the Church, not Hallmark, so Christmas lasts 12 days, not just one!

Sometimes **we recognize the holy in the places and people that offer us refuge.**

The Visitation is a beautiful scene, but let's not forget that Mary is in her 1<sup>st</sup> trimester of an unexpected and, to most people, an inexplicable and problematic pregnancy. I think God told Gabriel to send Mary off to the hill country of Judea not just to support aged Elizabeth in her last trimester, but to give Mary, Joseph, their families, everyone in Nazareth, a chance to let things settle. *"The child within you is of the Holy Spirit"* wasn't an explanation everyone was going to understand, or if not understand, **accept**. Mary needed safe haven to ponder and treasure these things in her heart – before returning to Nazareth and surely facing judgment and criticism as well as marriage and motherhood.

So this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent is also a time to look back and ask: who has been safe space for me in a time of turmoil? Who has provided me refuge, safe port in a storm? Who has welcomed me as Elizabeth welcomed Mary, arms stretched out and heart open? Who gave me room, literally or figuratively, to begin to figure it all out, perhaps to gather ourselves and gird for battle?

Mary popped in to see Elizabeth, and that's called the Visitation. Many of our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters believe Mary still pops in, and those are called apparitions, appearances of a miraculous nature. Some believe she has appeared in:

- Lourdes, France
- Fatima, Portugal
- Knock, Ireland
- Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina
- World's Fair Grounds, Queens, NY
- And Guadalupe, Mexico

The story in each instance is that she has appeared not to church dignitaries, seminary profs, big donors, but to children or the simplest and poorest of people. Every year on December 12, our Mexican brothers and sisters tell the story of how our Lady appeared to an indigenous peasant, Juan Diego, and gave him a message for the bishop about building a church on that location. Of course the bishop didn't believe him because Juan Diego was a peasant (what could he possibly know??), and what an outlandish story! So eventually she sent Juan Diego back to the bishop, and when the peasant opened his cloak roses fell out – roses in December – and the image of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe was imprinted on the inside of the cloak. The image was of an indigenous woman.

All of which reminds us what Jesus taught: that it is in serving the last, the lost, the least, that we will recognize Him. In them we will not only **recognize** the holy, but we will also **encounter** the holy, for whenever we feed the hungry, house the homeless, visit the sick or imprisoned, accompany the lonely and grieving, “Whenever you did it to one of these, who are members of My family, you did it to Me,” says the Lord (Matt. 25:40).

The Visitation looks domestic and tame, but Mary's response to Elizabeth's recognition of her Son is anything but. It signals God's plans for a great reversal: the lifting up of the humble and casting down of the proud, the overthrow of the heartless mighty and exaltation of the lowly ones, the filling of the hungry and emptying of those who have gorged themselves. It also foreshadows **the** Great Reversal in the death and resurrection of the Child still within Mary's womb: the One who swaps out our sin for His righteousness, our poverty for His riches, our sorrow for His joy. This is the Word Incarnate whose Birth we celebrate and who comes to us in Word & Sacrament. **May we recognize the holy** in these means of grace and in each other. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

