

Psalm 80:1-7  
Luke 1:39-56

Fourth Sunday of Advent  
December 20, 2020  
Midway Presbyterian Church

## **The Visitation**

### *Introduction to the Psalm*

In our Psalm today we hear a lament of the people of Israel following a national calamity. Their prayer is that God will again bless Israel, as he has in the past. Listen to these words from Psalm 80:1-7...

### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

In our Gospel Lesson today we find the account of Mary's visit with Elizabeth. Both women are expecting babies. We then hear Mary's Song of Praise, which we know as "The Magnificat." God has indeed shown mercy again to his servant Israel. Listen to these words from Luke 1:39-56...

### *Sermon*

Normally, many people who come to worship on this Fourth Sunday of Advent feel battered by this time that is often called "the holidays." The stress of balancing work and home and church expands beyond the busy levels of contemporary life, while people long for the fulfillment of a Christmas ideal that was inherited years ago. Those who grieve or doubt or fear may find little patience for their plight. And some feel envious of others whose lives seem so rich, harmonious, and happy. Cultural nostalgia can crowd out gospel truth as people look backward, rather than God-ward, for inspiration. Of course, this year has been different. As most everyone's life has been changed by the pandemic of Covid 19.

To any who are feeling lonely, fragmented, marginalized, or just tired, Luke offers a wonderful gift to unwrap this last Sunday before Christmas. It's a short story about the

connection that was formed between two expecting women of different generations. The passage in chapter 1 is commonly known as “The Visitation.” One woman is old and her son will close an age; the other is young and her son will usher in a new one.

The scene is an unnamed town in the Judean hills where Mary meets with her older relative Elizabeth. Mary knows about Elizabeth’s condition because of the angel’s declaration to her, of how Elizabeth in her old age and barren, has conceived a son. Mary’s visit will end Elizabeth’s seclusion.

While it’s true that Mary *received* confirmation and encouragement from Elizabeth, Luke meant to make a different point, namely, that Mary went to *offer* confirmation and encouragement. Gabriel’s announcement brought Elizabeth’s situation to mind and Mary concluded that Elizabeth needed to know what God was doing.

As it turned out, the visit did prove to be a significant confirmation for Elizabeth. As Mary approached, Elizabeth’s child prophetically “leaped in her womb.” Even prior to his birth, John the Baptist recognized with joy the One to come. And from that, Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, concludes that Mary is to give birth to “the Lord.” And Elizabeth proceeds to pronounce the first of two blessings upon Mary and one upon “the fruit of her womb”:

Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb...  
And blessed is she who *believes* that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.

Elizabeth’s first blessing regards Mary’s place among women: the one chosen by God to bring the Son of the Most High into the world. While it’s true that Mary was to be blessed among women, there is also to be revealed what William Barclay calls “The Paradox of Blessedness.” Her very blessedness would later prove to be a sword to pierce her heart. For one day she would see her son pierced and hanging on a cross.

To be chosen by God does not necessarily mean that one will always wear a crown of joy; can also mean that one will carry a cross of sorrow. God's choice can mean that it will take all that head and heart and hand can bring. Joan of Arc, knowing that her time was short prayed,

“I shall only last a year, use me as you can.”

But the story seems to give more weight to the second blessing that Elizabeth uttered:

And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.

Perhaps there would be times in her pregnancy when Mary doubted her ability as a mother. Maybe she even wondered why she had said:

Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord;  
let it be to me according to your word. (Lk. 1:38)

Of all the gifts of Christmas, what greater gift is there than the gift of faith. The gift of believing that not only has God done wonders in the past, but that God is able to perform wonders in the present and in the future—in and among you and me. At Midway Presbyterian Church. Mary believed, and in that believing she was blessed.

Elizabeth's blessing is echoed in a larger way throughout the New Testament. Blessed is belief. If one will only trust and obey, wonderful things can come to be. We recall Jesus own words:

According to your faith be it done unto you. (Mt. 9:29)

If you have a faith as a grain of mustard seed,  
you can move mountains. (Lk. 17:6)

In what has been called the “Last Beatitude,” when doubting Thomas came to believe that Jesus had risen and was present, Jesus said to him,

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come  
to believe. (Jn. 20:29)

We know all too well that belief is not always easy. And sickness, sorrow, and suffering, or the sheer dead weight of the material world, can pull heavily the other way. But faith is our turning of the heart toward God. It is the quiet surrender of self to the Spirit of God, the opening of the window for God's light to shine upon us. Mary was twice blessed: First, as the chosen mother of the Lord, and second, in believing.

Zachariah, the husband of Elizabeth and the officially sanctioned priest, is silenced due to his unbelief of the angel's words about Elizabeth bearing a child. So it is the unassuming "preacher's wife," Elizabeth, who functions as a prophet of God. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, she provides an outline of the special role her younger kinswoman has been called to play. So Elizabeth's prophetic witness also encourages and strengthens Mary. And recognizing her own vocation in Elizabeth's description, Mary is empowered to pronounce the bold words of the Magnificat:

My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

What began as a simple visit to the home of a sidelined priest and his expecting wife in a Judean village in the hill country, now issues forth into a pronouncement of global and eternal impact, scattering the proud and lifting up the lowly, bringing down rulers from their thrones.

If we look closely at this story, we see that God gives Mary and Elizabeth two things they each needed: community and connection. God helps them to understand themselves more fully as part of something larger than their individual destinies. Together, they can see themselves and their roles more clearly than they do as individuals.

How many Marys and Elizabeths, or Zechariahs and Josephs, might there be sitting in church pews this Sunday, or at home wishing they could be in their church pew, awaiting an

opportunity to connect more deeply with people around them? How many might be led to connect their small stories with the larger stories of God?

While the world may push us relentlessly toward a louder, larger, and ever more expensive Christmas, much can be learned from sitting quietly and meditating upon this story of “The Visitation.” Yes, there was a time when churches enjoyed an easy familiarity with the wider culture: town Christmas trees on courthouse lawns that didn’t seem to offend anyone, carols sung freely in public school concerts, Christmas cards sent by politicians to their donors. Everyone comfortable with “Merry Christmas!” Truth is, today the church is marginalized. Demographic, cultural, and political changes are undeniable. And some of us feel like we live in the “far country.” Where moral standards we grew up with seem to be “gone with the wind.” We can identify with the Psalmist of today’s lesson who, when praying for Israel’s restoration, said:

O Lord God of hosts,  
 how long will you be angry with  
 your people’s prayers?  
 You have fed them with the bread of tears,  
 and given them tears to drink in full measure.  
 You make us the scorn of our neighbors;  
 our enemies laugh among themselves.

Restore us, O God of hosts;  
 let your face shine, that we may be saved. (Psalm 80:4-7)

Visiting one of our older members here at Midway a while back, I couldn’t help but to be struck by her words revealing that she believed Midway to be a place of genuine caring. She said that she found here a community, a home, a place of belonging, a place to be connected to others, a place to nurture faith, a place to be part of something larger than self.

Yes, even though the church does not have the standing it had in a former time, it can still play the vital role of providing community to people. The church can provide a place for people

to listen and wait. When we celebrate Holy Communion on Christmas Eve this Thursday, we come together at the Table of our Lord—all are equal in status, all are children of God. We connect not only with one another and Christians throughout the world, but also with that Communion of Saints—those whom we have loved and lost, but for a while; who are now with God in his heavenly kingdom. Where every tear is dried, where sickness and sorrow and suffering are no more. Where we shall live eternally in the light of the One who was born to Mary on Christmas Day. And so we become, like her, the vessel of God's healing and wholeness, compassion and encouragement, comfort and strength, salvation and peace.

Amen! And Amen!