

A Meeting Among Women

Luke 1:39-55

Rev. Benjamin Broadbent
4th Sunday in Advent ~ December 20, 2009

I.

On this, the fourth Sunday in the Advent season, we gather to expel the last, long breath before Christmas. Here to guide our exhale are words from the first chapter of Luke's gospel. In chapter 1, Luke is laying the groundwork so that he might tell the story of Jesus' birth. A master storyteller, the writer of Luke packs a lot into chapter 1, including:

- A dedication to one called *Theophilus*, a proper name that means, in Greek, "Lover of God."
- A foretelling of not one, but two births: John (later known as "the Baptizer") and Jesus.
- These birth foretellings are precipitated by two angel visits. One angel visit to Zechariah, who was "getting on in years," and another angel visit to Miriam, whom we call Mary, a young woman, probably 13 or so years old.
- Then there is a joyful meeting between two pregnant women, Mary and Elizabeth.
- And finally, chapter 1 concludes with a song, inspired by Hannah's song in first Samuel.

For two millennia, the church has called the song "The Magnificat," a title drawn from verse 47, which reads, in English, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

A dedication, two angelic visits foretelling two births, a reunion, and a song. That's a lot for one chapter. But Luke has in mind not only to lay the groundwork for the story of Jesus' nativity. Luke also sets the tone for his entire gospel, a gospel written, most likely, for a church made up of Greek-speaking, professional-class folks. It is possible that *Theophilus* was a patron who commissioned the work and was, perhaps, a major supporter of Luke's church community. But despite this audience of some privilege, Luke's work has been described as "a gospel told from society's margins." In the gospel of Luke, those on the margins of society placed at the center of Jesus' ministry. Those with no social power or capital - that is, women, children, the poor, and the sick - play prominent roles. Luke's narrative begs the reader to understand that the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for everybody, and that those on the edges are in a place of distinct advantage. That is, they occupy a good vantage point from which to catch a glimpse of the good news of God witnessed and received in the person of Jesus Christ.

Several years ago, I led a spring break trip as Youth Minister of this church. A half dozen of us went to have an experience of the U.S.-Mexico border at El Paso and Juarez. On a Wednesday afternoon in Juarez, our hosts brought us to a Catholic church made of sticks, tarpaper, and tin. Inside were 40 children ranging from 6 to 15 years old. We were told they were the Confirmation Class participating in the daily

mid-day mass. When we entered the dirt-floor sanctuary, 40 heads turned to look at us. They smiled. A few giggled and there was a smattering of whispers, but they stayed where they were. We sat in pews across the aisle from them, straining to understand as much as we could of the prayers and reading in Spanish. Then the priest invited all of us to pass the peace to our neighbor. Well, that invitation opened the flood gates of joy. 40 children, heretofore contained, now leaped from their pews, hands extended and voices ringing to greet the strangers. After many minutes of greeting, the priest called us back to finish the rest of the mass, which now reverberated with the expressions of joy that had overwhelmed us moments before.

II.

A gospel from the margins. A vantage point, an advantaged point of view to behold who God is in and through Jesus the Christ. Within the range of human emotions, joy is perhaps the most fleeting and fragile. Joy cannot be manufactured. Joy is never contrived. If arrived at, joy is often short-lived. And joy is easily dismissed by those who don't understand its source. In our skeptical age, joy can be suspect. Joyful people are often accused of being naïve. Perhaps true joy is so rare that many are jealous of those who display it. And is it not the height of irony and the depth of tragedy, that so much of what passes for religion is so bereft of joy? In fact, so much of spirituality, which is touted today as being superior to religion, is also joyless. Religion and spirituality may produce a sense of calm, even connectedness to something greater, but it's as if we've given up expecting that they not only could, but *should* be the source of unbounded joy. We expect our religion to be meaningful, but not joyful. We expect our spirituality to help us feel centered and balanced, but not to de-center and upset our lives with unbound joy. And we are tempted to judge those who exhibit joy. We tend to think of them as childish and out of touch with reality.

I brought communion to the home of one of our shut-in members this week. It being Christmas-tide, I read Luke's story of the Angel Gabriel visiting Mary and announcing to her that she would have a baby. This member, bless him, talked through the entire reading.

The virgin's name was Mary, I said.

"Yes, Mary, thank you," he said.

Greetings! Favored one. The Lord is with you, I said.

"Yes, he is, and also with me," he said.

Do not be afraid, Mary, I said.

"No, we need not be afraid," he said.

And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name his Jesus, I said.

"Yes, precious, precious Jesus. Sweet Jesus. My dear Jesus," he said.

Was this man naïve? Was he childish? Maybe. But as I was reading these verses, I realized that he was hearing them and receiving them with a completely different spirit than that with which I was offering them. Perhaps being shut-in provided our brother in faith a vantage point, an advantaged point of view to behold what God is

up to in Jesus the Christ. I was reading these passages of scripture because it was the right thing for me to be doing in that moment. He was receiving them with a spirit of joy and wonder.

III.

It was with this spirit that Elizabeth received her young relative Mary. Luke, careful to underscore that this is a gospel told from the margins, has Mary travel to a Judean town in the hill country, far from the urban centers of power. Two modest, if not poor, women meet on the outskirts of civilization to acknowledge that something extraordinary is happening to them, and to the whole world through them: One bears the messenger, the other the message.

While childbearing is a rather ordinary occurrence, pregnancy came as pure gift to these two women. Mary, a teenager, engaged but still a virgin, is visited by an angel who tells her she will give birth to a son and that he will be great, and will be called the Son of God, and that God will give him the throne of the most famous and esteemed king of Israel, that of David himself.

Elizabeth gave up hoping for children long ago, but here she is in her 6th month. When Mary shows up on her doorstep with an expectant, “Hello,” the baby in Elizabeth’s womb does a cartwheel. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth cries out, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Do you hear what Luke is after in Elizabeth’s greeting? Luke places in the voice of Elizabeth, a barren, rural, modest woman on the margins, the first words of blessing. This is astounding.

In the cultures of the Ancient Near East, the first word of blessing was reserved for the *paterfamilias*, the male head of the household. And the first public blessing was offered by the priest in the temple. But Luke gives this word to Elizabeth and makes it an expression of her joy, an acknowledgement of the power of the unbounded God to enter into human experience and history in order to turn things upside down, to upset and up-end the present monopolies on power and wealth and meaning.

Astounding. And, if we’re honest, a little unnerving. Unnerving if we think that our privilege grants us special access to God. As a white, straight, educated, able-bodied, male, Christian, clergy person in the USofA, I’ve got plenty of privilege. It is unnerving to acknowledge that none of what I enjoy as a result of these privileges grants me any special insight or access to God’s holiness. According to Luke, the margins afford the best vantage point, the advantaged point of view to behold what God is about to do through Jesus Christ.

Keep in mind that Luke is writing his gospel in the context of a community on the margins. While its members may have enjoyed the benefits of education and some social status, as a religious community, they were on the fringes, just one of many competing sects. In fact, Greco-Romans of the time called the early Christians “atheists” because they did not believe in the Greek gods. It is possible that Luke uses the story of the meeting of the two women, to encourage his own community.

The meeting of Mary and Elizabeth is a description of the church. In essence, Luke may have been saying to his community:

“Our purpose together is to share the joy that is in us. Our life as the church is to be messengers who bear the message of Jesus. We meet in small groups, in humble settings, on the outskirts of society. We have neither wealth nor prestige to boast nor commend, but we have that which is valuable beyond measure: God has announced to us the task of bearing God into the world.”

We are to be the bearers of God and the bearers of God’s good news. And how do we know this? Because a woman who had counted herself cursed offered a blessing to a woman who had counted herself powerless. The vantage point could not be more clear.

IV.

Elizabeth’s blessing is unnerving for another reason: her blessing can *only* be expressed through joy. God only makes sense when we, against our better judgment, abandon our skepticism and embrace the foolishness of the gospel, a foolishness expressed in Mary’s song of joy, a song which can only be sung from the margins. “The Magnificat,” is a song of praise to God, but not just any God, not a God that exists as a general principle or idea. Her song gives glory to the one true God, God who reveals himself/herself as:

The one who delivers the captives and lifts the poor;

The one who disregards the power and prestige and learning of the settled ones;

The one who chooses to use poor rural women rather than mighty urban kings;

The one who laughs at our hubris and decries our violence;

The one who chooses to enter the world in human flesh,

Not through human wisdom, but through a woman’s body;

The one who created the world and continues to midwife it through times of travail into a future of rebirth and resurrection.

The living God about whom Mary sings is the one worthy of our faith and praise. And so the last, long breath of Advent is a blessing, Elizabeth’s blessing, words of joy that cut through the somberness of these dark days. And the last, long breath of Advent is a song, Mary’s song, a song from the depth of her being, a song which magnifies God in the only way it knows how, through foolish joy. Amen.