

The Beginning of The Beginning

Luke 1:39-55
December 20, 2009

I.

Throughout the year we celebrate significant events in which our Lord Jesus Christ is the central character. The names of these events often are derived from verbs that describe the action, with the ending "-ion" added to make them into nouns. The words "dedicate" and "dedication" work this way. So do "create" and "creation."

And here are nine such examples of these holy interactions between God and humanity that we recognize in worship. They are the Annunciation, Visitation, Incarnation, Adoration, Presentation, Transfiguration, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension.

We will be celebrating the first four of those important occasions within the next seventeen days, and because they are so closely related I believe it would be useful to briefly review them now even though we hear about them every year.

The Annunciation describes the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Mary, and his revelation that she would bear a child who would be the Son of God. The Visitation happened next, and tells of Mary's journey to the home of her older cousin, Elizabeth, who also was pregnant and whose son would become John the Baptist.

The Incarnation, of course, is the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ in the manger. As we say in the Nicene Creed, the divinity of God became incarnate from the Virgin Mary. The Adoration is the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles through the visit of the Magi, which we celebrate on the Feast of the Epiphany.

If you come to the 5:00 pm service on Christmas Eve you will see our own Amazing Praisers offer a Christmas Pageant that embraces all four of these holy days, beginning with Gabriel and Mary, and ending with the three kings. Later, at the 10:00 pm service, we will focus exclusively on the Incarnation of our Lord. At our Wednesday evening service on January 6 we observe the Epiphany of our Lord and his manifestation as Messiah and Savior.

II.

And today, we look at the meaning of the Visitation. Through the Holy Spirit Mary had just become pregnant. And today's reading began by telling us that Mary set out and "went with haste" to visit Elizabeth.

And this was more than an ordinary visit. Mary did not go over to Elizabeth's just to have a cup of tea, or to catch up on the latest gossip. It was an event that set the stage for how the ministry of Jesus would be received, and even today it inspires Christian communities to look to the Holy Spirit for guidance and meaning.

But why did Mary do this? What was the hurry? Some theologians have speculated that because Mary was pregnant and not married, she wanted to get away to a safe place. They say she feared she would be condemned by society and would be an embarrassment to her family. As a result, they say that she had to leave.

I don't believe that is true. Mary most certainly went to Elizabeth because of her joy, and the wonder of it all. In today's jargon, Mary would not have said, "Elizabeth, I'm in trouble and you have to help me." Rather, I think she would have entered Elizabeth's house with a glow on her face and said "Elizabeth, Elizabeth, you won't believe what just happened!" Or perhaps she might have gone in, pumped her fist, and said "Yesss!"

But, people probably didn't talk like that in those days, and so let's see how St. Luke described the visit. The first things we notice are the parallels and the contrasts.

One of the women, Elizabeth, was old, pregnant after her normal hopes for children were gone, and her son John would be the last prophet in the Old Testament tradition. His appearance would punctuate the end of the old era.

The other woman, Mary, was young, pregnant before she ever thought would be the case, and her son Jesus would begin an unprecedented and sweeping spiritual order. His appearance would inaugurate the new era.

Also, just as both women were miraculously pregnant, both women also were supernaturally aware of the condition of the other. Mary knew about Elizabeth because the angel Gabriel told her, and Elizabeth knew that Mary's child would be the Lord, the Son of God, because she was led by the Holy Spirit to that knowledge.

As a result, we literally are in the presence of the embryonic beginnings of Christianity. In a few years John the Baptist would walk out of the Galilean wilderness onto the stage of history and proclaim the coming of the Messiah. Soon thereafter, that Messiah would appear and begin a ministry that would offer salvation to the world.

And in today's gospel we hear about their mothers, talking together in the same room, while they still were pregnant with these yet unborn founders of the faith. Imagine what a scene that must have been. And imagine how their joy in the Lord might have been tempered if they knew the suffering their children would endure to fulfill their destinies. But that is another sermon.

III.

So, let's examine how these two women responded to each other. We can start with Elizabeth. She was miraculously pregnant herself. Six months earlier the Angel Gabriel visited Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, and told him Elizabeth would have a son who would be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth (Lk. 1:13-15). And so Gabriel's visit to Mary about Jesus actually was the second Annunciation.

And when Mary walked into Elizabeth's house, probably unannounced, Elizabeth would not have known of Mary's pregnancy. But according to Gabriel's prophecy the baby John knew, and leapt in the womb when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting. And then the Holy Spirit filled Elizabeth with knowledge of what had happened. Elizabeth blessed Mary twice, and recognized her as the mother of the Lord. This could have been the first confession of faith in the Christian tradition.

And then Mary offered the feelings of her heart. The reading suggests she said these things, but elsewhere they are described as a song. Her words have since become known as the Magnificat, or the Song of Mary, which we said together as the Canticle earlier in the service.

Mary, who probably was not more than fourteen or fifteen years old at the time, spoke with the unique insight of someone who had just encountered an angel. She now knew that God was about to change the world, and her song told what it would mean.

Her words of thanksgiving and praise presented God in two ways. One was as the sovereign Lord who would scatter the proud and boastful, and deliver his people. The other was as the merciful God who would lift up the lowly and needy, and give them hope. This prophetic oracle of Jesus' mother before his birth foreshadowed his own teachings after he began his ministry.

And so if Elizabeth's blessings were the first Christian confession of faith, the Song of Mary had to be the first prophetic revelation that God's kingdom actually was about to be known on earth.

This story of Mary and Elizabeth revealed what we will celebrate Christmas Eve. It told how God's plan for his people was coming to pass. With the birth of Jesus the Kingdom of God began on earth. And since that time his kingdom has been developing and unfolding, and will be complete when we see him again on that day and hour known only to God.

IV.

But this story of Mary and Elizabeth is not just background. It can stand alone with its own unique meaning. It can give us guidance today as to how we live our lives in anticipation of that momentous day when our Lord appears in the clouds.

Just as Mary went to Elizabeth to share her joy, to seek comfort and support, to extend her love to Elizabeth, and to proclaim the coming of salvation, we do the same thing today. We share our joy, seek comfort and support, extend ourselves to others, and through our faith we live in the sure and certain Christian hope of salvation.

And as we contemplate Mary's prophetic words, we know God is not passive in our lives. God is not remote and unconcerned. The God Mary described is in the world and among us, watching over us and working out his glorious plan for humanity.

Those who reject that truth turn away from the beauty of creation and the joy of God's love. They are alone and empty, with darkness and the taste of ashes. But when we embrace it as Mary did, we know there is a greater purpose to our lives and we live in the light of unquenchable faith, which leads to the exhilaration and fullness of God's peace and renewal.

And there is another factor at work today. Certainly, we can go to our friends and relatives as Mary did, but we also can go to the church. Today's church did not exist in first century Palestine, but now it is the Body of Christ that he left behind. And it is here to serve as the path to salvation that Mary proclaimed in that small Judean town described in Luke's Gospel.

Through the church we can experience the Holy Spirit as Elizabeth experienced the Spirit when she saw Mary. Through the church we can extend ourselves to others as Elizabeth blessed Mary. Through the church we can sing God's praises as Mary did so long ago, and we can be led by the Spirit in the paths of righteousness. And through the church we can realize God's promises to us as believers just as Mary lifted up the promises God made to Abraham and his descendants.

V.

Many great ideas, or important movements in history, or dreams that changed the world got their start in someone's living room, kitchen, basement, or garage. In the same way, today's Gospel gives us a snapshot of how that came to pass in Elizabeth's house two thousand years ago.

In that extraordinary time two women, servants of God, by their example and their faith, helped establish the foundations of Christianity. Through obedience they received God into their lives and were transformed, and the world was changed.

In the same way we can receive God in our lives with the same transforming effect. We can care for each other and reach out to each other here at St. Thomas in the same way that Mary and Elizabeth cared for each other and became models of Christian faithfulness.

Today, I pray that we can continue as examples of the Christian community we are called to be, and that we also can know and be led by the Holy Spirit to a deeper encounter with the true spirit of this season of celebration. *Amen.*