

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual nourishment; A River of service in Jesus' Name

The Fourth Sunday of Advent/December 20, 2009

The Reverend E. Clifford Cutler

The Gospel of Luke asks us to think about the push and pull of family today. Mary went with haste to the hill country. One might say she ran for the hills. She had heard the angel Gabriel and discovered that she has conceived a child. The atmosphere is charged with the energy of the Holy Spirit, almost like the air prior to an electrical storm. Imagine her confusion. She feels the normal anxiety at a first pregnancy, complicated by the absence of a father. What did her parents think? She needs some distance and heads for the hills.

Families are like a hearth whose fire one wants to warm up to, but not get too close lest one get burned or even consumed. Finding the right distance is the challenge most of us face with our families. Too close and we become entangled and there is no freedom. On the other hand, too distant and one loses warmth, feels emptier, misses something of the energy of the hearth. It is not always an easy balance to find.

We can look about us at families. Often they are a source of stability. We see parents fueling children's joy at Christmas by being together and enjoying one another. Adult children companion their parents through end-of-life illnesses. One adult child who had achieved some healthy distance said of an impending family gathering, "I love them. They're all screwed up, but I love them." Not exactly a Hallmark card moment, but real and also joyful.

Mary apparently needs to get some distance from her immediate family. This does not imply that there is anything wrong with her parents or siblings. She just needs some space, some freedom to think, to sort things out. A major change and complication has taken place in her life. She goes to her extended family, an older relative, her kinswoman, Elizabeth. Perhaps Mary has just begun to show. Elizabeth is further along in her pregnancy, maybe five or six months – because when Mary

comes to her, the baby quickens within, “the child leaped in her womb.” One can imagine the older woman instructing and assuring the younger. The two almost need each other’s company sharing apprehensions and encouragement, confiding their hopes and learning in the company of women the practical wisdom of birth.

Family can be resilient in the face of difficulties. Like the red anemone flower that pokes through the rocks of Judean hill country. Family answers a deep need for connection. When Mary is in need, Elizabeth takes her in. Another Mary, in Robert Frost’s poem, “The Death of the Hired Man,” takes in the unreliable drifter Silas. Her husband in a gentle, mocking tone says: “Home is the place where, when you have to go there,/ They have to take you in.” Mary adds: “I should have called it/ Something you somehow haven’t to deserve.”

In addition to being taken in, there is the matter of grace – the undeserved welcome. Elizabeth’s life-long attentiveness to the Spirit enables her to recognize that the child Mary bears is of the Spirit. Just to be in the presence of the child Mary carries (that this “has happened to me”) signifies God’s regard for Elizabeth as someone esteemed by God. Elizabeth’s being able to name the grace in her own life prepares her to recognize and name the grace in Mary.

To be in the household of God is to experience God’s faithfulness. There is a fidelity that is integral to all experiences of community and home. That is why infidelity in those settings is such a severe betrayal. In her own home, Elizabeth has experienced God’s faithfulness. She is able to use this trustworthy strength to give courage to Mary. Mary trusts in the fulfillment of what has been told her by God. Perhaps it is her faithful nurture of Jesus that leads him in his adulthood to quote Psalm 40: “I have come to do your will.”

Having received Elizabeth’s companionship, welcome, grace and fidelity, Mary returns home to the family who has nurtured her. She has found new strength and is able to look at the world with fresh eyes. She knows what she needs to do. Both she and Elizabeth nurture the next generation. Elizabeth’s John would prepare the way for Mary’s Jesus.

Mary has found her voice. She sings out: “My soul magnifies the Lord...” God has looked with favor on the lowly and the hungry. Mary and Elizabeth live in a country under occupation by a repressive Roman regime. Mary’s family is poor. They struggle for survival. They hunger in a peasant society where the dignity of

Jesus' story about a widow's giving is eclipsed by the harsh tribute exacted by empire, the client-king Herod and the temple.

Against this Mary leans all the strength of her conviction. "This is not the world into which I want my child to be born." Further it is not God's will for the world. God is at work to exalt the lowly, to raise up those who are on their knees. As clear as was Mary's "yes" to God: "let it be with me according to your word;" so also is her "no" to oppression: the proud will be scattered, the powerful brought down and the rich sent away. The point seems to be that out of strong families in God's household comes the conviction for a just world.

The birth of Mary's child that Elizabeth delighted in, and we celebrate at Christmas, puts us in mind of families and our struggle to find just the right distance, not too close and not too far. We see Mary struggling a bit to find the balance. But when she does, she finds the power that family can give when they take you in. She discovers the undeserved grace that is named there and the faithfulness that provides the secure platform from which to risk and venture forth. Mary sings a song of praise for God's loving-kindness toward herself that expands to include the poor of the world. When we discover the power of family in an atmosphere charged with the energy of the Spirit, we join Mary in her song: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

Amen.