

Family Journeys
Micah 5: 2-5a; Luke 1: 39-45
December 20, 2015
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I. Introduction

Over the past week or two, I suspect I've had the same experience that many of you have: I find myself in conversation after conversation with people who ask what I'm doing for Christmas and am I going to see family, and we exchange stories about who's traveling where and catching up with whom, which is always fun because Christmas is sort of the quintessential family holiday. It's a time when we travel and focus on our sometimes nuclear family, sometimes marital family, sometimes families that we've created that gather together on this wonderful holiday. And that's a great gift as we celebrate the incarnation of Jesus through the relationships that we have with each other.

It can, however, be a slightly mixed bag because it is rare that we get families together when there isn't some other undercurrents that are not always quite as positive, right? It's the place where unresolved issues often come floating to the surface or we fall into relationship patterns that are not always life-giving for us or for the people around us. And so, I'm grateful that our lectionary text this morning from Luke is a text about family visiting.

We've been looking this Advent season riffing off of the wonderful Amahl that we had a couple of weeks ago and looking at visitors and how we are shaped by and shape them. And so, we've got this wonderful story this morning about family visits and what they are about, and so we're going to spend just a couple of minutes looking at what Elizabeth and Mary have to teach us about family get-togethers.

II. Expecting the Divine

The first thing to note is that this passage happens immediately after the Angel Gabriel has come to tell Mary that she's about to give birth to the Christ child. And we've got that wonderful passage where Mary, this very fragile, frightened teenage girl, responds to this amazing and intimidating news by saying, "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to Your will." And then Luke immediately moves to this verse that starts off today's lectionary reading where it says that Mary went in haste to visit her cousin, Elizabeth.

Now, I can't help but assume that Luke puts in that word "haste" because in Mary's day, of course, for a young woman to be pregnant out of wedlock was to be subject to stoning, so it strikes me as likely that either Mary or Mary's parents thought it would be a good idea for Mary to get out of town for a little bit. And they've got this older relative who is in the last trimester of her pregnancy and so it's an easy thing to tell the neighbors, you know, Mary went to help Elizabeth prepare for the impending birth. But it's helpful to note that this was not an ideal situation for the family to find itself in. And Elizabeth's response to Mary is a helpful one here because she's got this young teenage pregnant cousin coming to visit her for an extended period and when Mary walks in the home there's not a word of judgment, there's not a word of

criticism, she doesn't express any jealousy or resentment that this young teenager has become pregnant when Elizabeth herself as a respectable married woman had been pleading her whole adult life for a child and was now only at this late stage getting that wish granted. But she engages Mary with this wonderful sense that God is doing something dramatic in her life right now.

And when Mary walks in the door, she starts off saying, "Blessed are you among women," -- well, Mary probably didn't feel very blessed, right? She was probably scared and unsure and not certain what the future was going to bring. And Elizabeth's gift to Mary immediately is to say, "God is doing something in your life that is worth celebrating."

And then there's this interesting shift in the voice of Luke because Elizabeth has been speaking in second person to Mary, she says you, "Blessed are you among women," and then in the next verse she shifts to third person and she says, "Blessed is she who has received the word of the Lord." What Luke does there is invite us into the story which is at that point had been between Mary and Elizabeth, and then Elizabeth sort of pans back to give the bigger picture and invites us all to see the miraculous thing that God is doing in Mary's life.

That shift is an important one for us because I think what Luke is doing is inviting us to look at where the Holy Spirit is going to be at work in places that we don't expect. And dear friends, whenever family gets together, we all bring certain expectations to that encounter, right? We all fall into the same roles that we have been playing sometimes for years or decades or generations, and we never or rarely expect something new to come out.

And what Luke is reminding us is that the person that you saw a year ago at the Christmas family gathering is a different person than he or she was then because God has been at work in their life doing something that you know nothing about. And Elizabeth's invitation to us is can we bring into the encounters that we will have this week a set of eyes that recognizes that God has been at work in my life and I'm a different person than I was a year ago and I know that God has been at work in your life and you're a different person than you were a year ago and I don't have to play the same role, I don't have to fall into the same negative pattern with you. There is an opportunity for a different kind of encounter, maybe a more life-giving encounter.

Now I say that with some cautiousness because there may be some of the old patterns and some of the healthy boundary-setting that we have done is still going to be appropriate. But what I want to suggest is the eyes that we bring to that encounter are going to shape what it looks like, and as we meet our families, assuming that they're exactly the same as they were a year ago, nothing has changed. And you know what, it has, because God has been at work. God is always at work bringing new life and new possibility to each of us. So, where is God at work in the lives of those family members that you might have an opportunity to celebrate and to engage with in the new way? Maybe there's an opportunity for you to talk about what God has been doing in your life that is new this year and that has changed who you are.

They are not the same people that they were and we don't need to fall into the same patterns, and when we do, we limit both who we are and who they can be. There's that wonderful

moment in Amahl, Jennifer, when you were singing to Amahl in fear because Amahl was about to give away his crutch. You only know Amahl with the crutch, right, and you don't want to give that up. But then when Amahl is able to give up the crutch, that's when the miracle happens. We all limit ourselves and the people around us by the vision that we bring about who they are and who we are, and Elizabeth's invitation is a reminder that God is always at work.

III. Engaging with Humility

Now part of being able to engage in a slightly different way is the product of being to practice one of our least appreciated spiritual disciplines which is humility. You can laugh, it's okay. This is not a big town for humility, all right? But humility is the ability to acknowledge that I don't have all of the answers and that there are things going on that I don't know about and it implies a certain openness to where the spirit may be leading. Humility is acknowledging that we don't have the corner on the market on knowing where God is at work and that even folks that we know really well can surprise us.

Elizabeth models this wonderfully because Elizabeth is in the socially superior position in this dynamic with Mary. Elizabeth is older in a culture that reveres age. She's married. She's married to a priest, Zacharias, so that she is at the upper echelon of her social class. And her niece is a poor, unwed teenage mother. But Elizabeth brings this wondrous spirit of humility to this engagement and she says to Mary, "How is it that I am so blessed and fortunate that you are here visiting me, the mother of my Lord," and in that process invites Mary to be all of who she can be as it allows Elizabeth to hear Mary with different ears. Humility, dear friends, is a hard discipline for us because we are all the star of our own show, amen? And it is very easy to fall into patterns of believing that I have great insight into how you operate that you may not bring to me. And humility is the reminder that we all have something to learn from each other.

The Venerable Bede teaches that Elizabeth's great gift to us is teaching us humility, the recognition that the person in front of us is a person through who the Holy Spirit is at work, whoever that is, and that we have something to hear. This is important for us particularly who are parents or grandparents because we have been in the teaching role with our children so often that we naturally assume that we are purveyors of wisdom.

IV. Born into Family

But those of you who are parents and grandparents are keenly aware that very few people have as finely tuned an eye to our foibles as our children do. And when our children share those with us, we can react defensively and angrily or we can in gratitude absorb the wisdom that they are sharing with us, because the Holy Spirit is speaking through everybody or can speak through everybody if we bring a listening ear.

Dear friends, none of us has perfect families. They are wonderful gifts but they can also frustrate us at points. Sometimes they have wounded us and sometimes they wounded us badly. And yet, into the messiness that is family life, God has become incarnate. That's the message of Christmas, that Jesus was not born into a perfect family either, and that for good and ill, all of the quirks of that family shaped who Jesus was. It is a great comfort to me to see

Jesus' parents wrestle with how to deal with a child that they don't understand and sometimes make some fairly significant mistakes, like losing him in the temple for three days. It's the classic gas station story, right, where you drive off and you've left your child in the bathroom of the gas station. Jesus' parents did that. Jesus' siblings undermined him in his ministry. And there's that wonderful scene where they tried to drag him away from his preaching because they don't think he has anything worthwhile to say.

V. Conclusion

We all have to deal with family stuff and what the message of the incarnation is that through all of that stuff God is at work shaping who we are and who God wants us to be. So, I hope it's a glorious week for you. I hope you get a chance to come to some services because they're going to be wondrous, or services wherever you happen to be, and I hope you have a chance to celebrate with people who have known you a long time and loved you a long time and that in the midst of all of that each of us is able to keep mindful of the fact that in every moment of each of those lives, the Holy Spirit is at work and moving, teaching us and leading us to be the people that God wants us to be.

Amen.