Sermon, December 22, 2024

"The Visit"

Fourth Sunday of Advent

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

Delivered by the Rev. John Balicki

"Santa Claus has the right idea, visit people only once a year" Victor Borge

"If you come at four in the afternoon, I'll begin to be happy by three."
— Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince

"my visits with Morrie felt like a cleansing rinse of human kindness.
We talked about life and we talked about love.
We talked about one of Morrie's favourite subjects, compassion and why our society had such a shortage of it."
— Mitch Albom, Tuesdays with Morrie

Merriam- Webster defines "visit" as

a: to pay a call on as an act of friendship or courtesy

b : to reside with temporarily as a guest

c : to go to see in order to comfort or help

Visit implies some degree of intimacy and familiarity. We don't go to "visit" Walmart or Hannaford.

The noun, "visitation", describes a more formal or official visit, like the city health inspector's yearly visitation to your favorite pizza place.

This is the time of year when we tend to visit more than any other; perhaps we will travel to relatives or friends or they will travel to us or we are more likely to stop over – visit friends, say hello. Our short but power-packed gospel features one of history's most famous visits, so significant it got titled, "The Visitation"

And in our year of featuring Jewish women: Mary Magdalene, the Syro-Phoenician woman with the hemmhorage, Esther, Ruth and the widow who gave her small coin; we come to the end of the year with Mary and Elizabeth. Let's look at what each brings to this visitation:

Mary: 13 and just found out she's pregnant. She leaves "in haste" Why? She didn't want others to know, she needs someone to process this with, she needs a pair of loving, non-judgmental arms? All of the above.

And she travels – By herself? We don't know. It was a distance of about 100 miles and to travel by foot would take a week. She really needed those arms.

What was she processing?

How could this happen?

Am I capable of being a mother?

How can I tell Joseph?

What will he do? Will he tell the elders who have the right to stone me, divorce me quietly, or accept me as his wife?

She was bringing a whole lot to this visit.

But Elizabeth has some issues too:

Pregnant for the first time at an advanced age – will her body hold up through childbirth? Will her body hold up to mother this child, this child who is already so rambunctious he's doing triple somersaults in her womb?

And her husband, Zechariah, struck dumb by the angel Gabriel. Well it is quieter around the house but Elizabeth might like to know what's he thinking about this child on the way. She hopes he's up to being a father.

And over the course of the next three months, they visit numerous times over cups of tea or coffee at the kitchen table and they work these issues out. Mary received the safety, affirmation, empathy, and companionship she needed. Someone who recognized, nurtured, deepened, and celebrated the work of God in her life. Someone who received her, not rejected her. Loved her not judged her. Nourished her, not condemned her.

And then Mary receives Elizabeth's blessing. "Blessed are you among women"

Once Mary receives both community and blessing, she finds her prophetic voice. At the end of our Gospel reading, she bursts into song. Not just any song, but a radical, hope-drenched song that soars with promise for the world's poor, brokenhearted, and oppressed. Mary describes a reality in which our sinful and unjust status quo is gorgeously reversed: the proud are scattered and the humble honored. The hungry are fed and the rich sent away. The powerful are brought down, and the lowly are lifted up. Mary describes a world reordered and renewed — a world so beautifully characterized by love and justice, only the Christ she carries in her womb can birth it into being.

Elizabeth receives Mary's help and support in the last months of her pregnancy and Mary returns to Nazareth with renewed strength to work out the issues with her parents, with Joseph and with her townspeople.

And what about our own visitations as we approach the Christmas season? Perhaps we might need to seek out an Elizabeth, someone to help us process some challenging news that is weighing on our hearts. Or perhaps we need to be an Elizabeth, that strong figure of wisdom with those non-judgmental, welcoming arms for someone who comes to us like a Mary, someone who needs to process a curveball life has thrown them. Perhaps someone we will encounter during our own Christmas visitations.

But can we also as St. Luke's church learn something from this Visitation. Can we be Elizabeths to those in need of strong, non-judgmental arms? More than half of the children born in the US to women under 30 are born to unmarried women. While that stigma isn't as strong as it was for Mary, or even as strong as it was 50 years ago, it hasn't completely disappeared. And there are plenty of others walking around with stigma, modern 13 year-old virgins with child: the mentally ill, the addicted, the domestically abused, the poor, the transgendered. Can we be an Elizabeth here? To those who summon the courage to make a visitation to us here at St. Luke's? To those we know and those we don't. That would truly be a blessing for us and for them.

May all our Christmas visits be fruitful, may all our arms be non-judgmental and may our souls always proclaim the greatness of the Lord.