

Advent 4 C 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

December 19, 2021

Luke 1:39-45 [46-55]

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

John the Baptist makes an uncredited appearance in today's gospel reading. He made a credited appearance on the second Sunday of Advent. And he made a credited appearance on the third Sunday of Advent. But now, on the fourth Sunday of Advent, he is *in utero*, in the womb of his mother Elizabeth. And Elizabeth, six months pregnant, experiences what I have heard some pregnant mothers describe as kicking. The baby moving around inside of her. And today, Elizabeth says, "the child in my womb leaped for joy." That's the uncredited appearance of John the Baptist. He is unnamed. He is unborn. But he's thrashing around in Elizabeth's tummy. Which she declares is his expression of joy.

Joy. There's that word again. It came up last Sunday. *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.* And so we have two pregnant women, relatives— the word "cousin" is customarily used to describe Elizabeth and Mary. Two pregnant women. Mary is *barely* pregnant. But Elizabeth is beginning her third trimester. Mary has Jesus in her womb. Elizabeth has John the Baptist in her womb. And John thrashes, or kicks, or jumps. And Elizabeth says that he is leaping for joy. Because he senses the Messiah in Mary's womb. He has expectations and hopes, already. And ahead of all of the rest of the saints, John realizes what is going on. He's excited. He rejoices.

Today's gospel is sometimes called the story of the Visitation. Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth. It is a significant enough story that Christianity has an entire holy day, May 31, set aside as the Feast of the Visitation. Mary visits Elizabeth. I think it is impossible to overstate the significance of this story. Which is my way of saying it is impossible to do justice to this story with a single sermon. Maybe a series of sermons. I have already preached, in this season of Advent 2021, that the very best thing you could possibly do is to read Luke chapter one, in its entirety. The longest chapter in the New Testament. And you will only wish that it were longer. It is a true pleasure to read. And the more you know, the more pleasure you will take. So I am going to take one verse, a sentence fragment, and unpack what it contains. *In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country.* In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country. Sounds simple.

That sentence fragment contains two phrases that add some majesty to the story. And those phrases come from the King James Version of the Bible. "In those days" is a majestic phrase. And "went with haste" is a majestic phrase. Now in the New International Version, the best

selling contemporary translation of the Bible, it says: *At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea.* Probably a lot easier to understand. “*Mary got ready and hurried.*” But no where near the majesty: *In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country.* That’s just a translation issue. But the more old-fashioned phrasing which our translation preserves (that’s the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible) is both more literal, and more stately, I think.

And that more elevated language suits Mary. Mary, according to Luke, is a stand up guy. Or a stand up girl. That’s the important thing about Mary, according to Luke. Not her purity. Not her perfection. The emphasis is on her courage, her decisiveness, her reliability— she’s a stand up guy, girl. And— something you have to study to understand, unfortunately: her transmission of tradition. That she and people associated with her are important sources of information for Luke’s gospel, and therefore for all of the rest of us. Where do you think the story of Christmas came from? Peter? Paul? They weren’t around. Neither were James and John, or Mary Magdalene, or the other Mary. Matthew talks about the “other Mary.” None of them were there! Who was the only person who was there, and who lived long enough beyond Easter and beyond Pentecost to tell the tale? Mary is significant, and heroic. *Mary set out and went with haste.* I like that better than, “Mary got ready and hurried.” That’s what I do on a Sunday morning. I get ready and I hurry. *Mary set out and went with haste.*

Went with haste. Who else went with haste? That particular phrase means something. Who else went with haste? Have you ever been to church on Christmas Eve? *When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went... WHAT? WITH HASTE and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.* The significance of this, for Luke— and therefore for us— is a response to an angelic message of good news. The angel Gabriel has told Mary that she will conceive, and he also told her that Elizabeth was pregnant. Elizabeth is old. And not only is she old, but she has gone into seclusion. So she’s approaching the third trimester, but nobody knows about Elizabeth. The angel has revealed this good news to Mary. It’s a secret. But then on Christmas Eve, it REALLY happens. *I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.* Many angels, a multitude of the heavenly host. Bible students call this the annunciation pattern. The annunciation to Zechariah, the annunciation to Mary, and the annunciation to the shepherds. It’s a dramatic arc. It’s a crescendo. It ramps up. It’s a model for us. The good news is announced. And we respond. Christian worship usually ends with *Go in peace, serve the Lord.* The mass has ended, go in peace. Somebody needs to say, “Go in haste! God has acted!”

But nobody needed to tell Mary a second time. She’s a standup guy. Nobody needed to tell Mary a second time. Nobody needed to tell the shepherds a second time. They went with haste. On Christmas Eve, we sing *O Come, All Ye Faithful* at such a stately pace: *Come, ye, o come ye, to Bethlehem.* And that has its place. But the other Christmas carol really captures the gospel: *Come to Bethlehem and see, him whose the birth the angels sing.* That’s excited, that’s urgent, that’s going with haste.

On the cover of the service folder is this enchanting portrait of the Visitation of Mary and Elizabeth. I found this this week. This is my new favorite Italian Renaissance painting. And it was influenced by Leonardo da Vinci. In that it has a geometric perspective which compels us to look at these two women, staring into each other's eyes. Piero de Cosimo is the artist. A nearly exact contemporary of Martin Luther, by the way. The cousins meet. And they look into each other's eyes. It's this secret that they both share. This secret of great joy, of this great thing that God is up to, and that only they know about. It's a splendid illustration of Christian fellowship. That we know this thing of great joy. In the painting, there is all of this Christian stuff going on around them. But the painting forces you to look at the two women.

The two cousins. One young, one old. At the center of Christianity is this one-to-one, heart-to-heart sharing of the good news of God. Luke wants us to see that. He wants us to see the intimacy of these two women, these two cousins, these two pregnancies. He wants us to see this. And then on Christmas Eve, he's going to show us the good news *writ large*. We love our nativity sets. With all the shepherds, and the animals, and Mary and Joseph. And later the wise men. *Good news of great joy for all the people*. And all the animals. But there's that 20th century Christmas song, "The Little Drummer Boy." Which ends with those words, "*Then he smiled at me, pa rum pum pum pum. Me and my drum.*" And our own Nativity setting, here at Dove of Peace, has Jesus gazing up at you, making eye contact, his hand in a gesture of blessing. You will feel like the little drummer boy. So in various ways, we try to bring that sense of intimacy, that sense of connection, to the manger.

Of course, the Little Drummer Boy was a creative invention of the 20th century. He's not in the Bible. But Mary and Elizabeth are in the Bible. And this is why Mary went in haste. And in this second Christmas of Covid, you may be deprived of the larger gatherings that so many of us love at Christmas. Large family celebrations, dinner parties, even worship services and holiday music celebrated in person. With no masks. I miss that, too. But there is a quiet joy, an intimate sharing, an exchange of peace that can take place between two cousins, or two friends, or two spouses. And that is just part of the meaning of the Visitation of Mary with Elizabeth. It's a hope worth sharing. It's a joy worth haste. Amen.