

Visitations

As I continue our consideration of the work and person of the Holy Spirit this morning, I'm taking what some of you may think is an odd turn. I want to focus this morning on the story of the Visitation. Now, depending on whether you grew up in a liturgical church, like my wife, or in an evangelical church, like me, that word is going to have completely different meanings for you. If you came from a liturgical background, particularly Catholic, the word "visitation" will probably take you immediately to the story from the Gospel According to Luke which I just read. This story, with its focus on Mary has been beloved by Christians for centuries. The first evidence of a commemoration of the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth in a church feast day dates back to 1247. The feast has been kept on various days in various countries over the centuries but is now firmly set on May 31, this past Friday, in the Roman Catholic rite.

But those of us who grew up in the evangelical tradition are wary of the charge of Mariolatry often leveled against our Catholic sisters and brothers, so much so that we often give the Mother of Jesus short-shrift in sermons and songs. To me, growing up, the word "visitation" meant two other, very different things. It was the term used for the practice of going to call on an often-unsuspecting neighbor to uninvitedly and unilaterally "share" the Good News of Jesus Christ with them. We also referred to this as "witnessing;" all unaware, apparently, that the witness of our deeds generally preceded the witness of our words and often not only superseded it but contradicted it. The other typical Southern evangelical use of the word "visitation" was applied to the tradition, almost unknown these days in the Pacific Northwest, of gathering with a bereaved family in the day or days prior to a funeral, either at a home, a church or, most likely, a funeral home, and always with the corpse of the deceased present and, if at all possible, on view.

Perhaps I am stretching the point, but I believe we can trace the presence of the Holy Spirit in all of these understandings of "visitation," at least in their intent if not in their incarnation. So, if you'll bear with me, I'll walk you through how I believe we can gain insight into the work and person of the Spirit through these stories and cultural artifacts and I'll also blend in some lessons from the passage I read earlier from the prophet Joel. The Holy Spirit, after all, is not an aspect of God confined to the New Testament.

But before I get all complicated and theological, let's consider the story of Mary and Elizabeth in its most basic human elements. What we have here is a story most of us understand from personal experience: the tale of a visit to family in a town far away. Mary leaves her village near the Sea of Galilee to go and see her cousin Elizabeth. Was it two weeks ago we heard the story of the visiting relatives during Children's Time from Ginny Larson? Here's the Biblical equivalent. From time to time we are compelled to go and seek out those who are close to us in blood relation but no longer close in distance. And although we may develop the habit as we grow up, if we are wise, to go and visit our aunts and uncles, when we are young it is our cousins we look forward to seeing. There has been an internet meme circulating for the last several months with a saying about cousins often being our first friends. I certainly know that to be true. As I've mentioned, we moved around a lot when I was a boy and I made and lost friends with regularity because of our travels. But I always knew that I would be welcomed and included by people around my own age when I got to visit my cousins in St. Louis or Herculaneum or Killeen or Bald Knob. And I'm looking forward to reconnecting with some of those same cousins at the end of this month and the beginning of next when I head down to Southern Missouri and Arkansas after Connie and Colleen and Sean and I visit nearer kin in St. Louis and

Visitations

Louisville. I understand the pull of cousin love that took Mary to Elizabeth's house and I'll bet you all do, too. And, of course, we love as a result and reflection of God's love for and to us, poured into us, as we read last week, by the Holy Spirit. The love we bear for each other is the work of the Holy Spirit, whether we recognize it as such or not.

There's another familiar modern scene that may come to mind for some as you hear the Visitation story. As a man, I'm rarely invited to these particular events but I've been on the fringes of enough of them to know what goes on. I'm thinking of the baby shower – that beautiful time of female bonding with tea and cakes and presents when there always seem to be two or three pregnant at the same time and there is much patting of each other's baby bumps and laughter and tears and sharing of miseries and hopes and dreams... Underneath the formal language and awesome realities of Luke's story, isn't that what Elizabeth and Mary are up to, here? Ladies, can you put yourselves into this story with that perspective? And as you remember the baby showers you've attended, wouldn't you be tempted to link them with that beautiful 60s church song, "There's a Sweet, Sweet Spirit in This Place?" Wherever folks are gathered in that temperament, it seems to me, the Spirit is there.

I wanted to relate the work of the Spirit to these common, humdrum, earthly things this morning because an important aspect of the work of the Holy Ghost is in the incarnation of Christ Jesus. An important part of the Good News from and about Jesus is in the incarnation, isn't it? In the act of God becoming human, of the Word becoming flesh, the truth of Immanuel, God-With-Us, is raised to a new level. God draws so near to humankind that the Creator becomes one of the Created and all that is part of Creation, all that is human, is drawn into the Creator. There is no fear, no sorrow, no pain, no joy or triumph that we can experience that God in Christ has not experienced as well. All of our human experience, from the messiness of birth to the earthiness of a wake or a visitation, is blessed in a new way through the incarnation. And we remember, indeed I could have read, had I started just a few verses earlier, that Mary starts out on her journey to Elizabeth within days after hearing from the angel Gabriel: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God." This understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in the incarnation is also found in the Gospel according to Matthew: "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit... an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.'"

I want to return for a moment to that wonderful description of the Holy Spirit as "the power of the Most High" that "will overshadow" Mary. Dr. Molly Marshall, now President of Central Baptist Theological Seminary and Professor of Theology and Spiritual Formation there, spends some time on the concept in her book, which I've previously cited, [Joining the Dance: A Theology of the Spirit](#). She points to the usage of the word "overshadow" in the Bible as "convey(ing) the idea of an intensely powerful experience of the presence of God," while also noting its connotations as "comforting, evocative presence," or "forbearing power." "Overshadowing," she points out, "is not unilateral divine action; God's creative movement accords with the receptive participation of the human partner." Specific to the event which propels Mary out of Galilee and down to the hill country of Judea, seeking her cousin's

Visitations

company, Dr. Marshall writes, “overshadow... (is) a description of how the Spirit will empower Mary to bring forth the very Son of God. Reminiscent of the Spirit’s beginning creative work, bringing form out of the void, the Spirit calls forth life from the emptiness of Mary’s womb... The conception requires both the Spirit’s fecundity and Mary’s fruitful yes.”

Back to the Visitation. Here we have, then, these two human cousins, both pregnant through the miraculous intervention of God, in one case having conceived of the Holy Spirit and in the other having conceived by human nature but at a time of life when it should not have been possible. Both of these women are empowered by the Holy Ghost in another way as well: both of them prophesy. I don’t mean by this that they are telling the future but that they are telling God’s truth. Elizabeth recognizes the truth of what has happened to Mary, that she has been blessed by God with a very special child, the Messiah. Mary recognizes the truth of what has been begun in her, the overthrow of the current world order. As online commentator Mark Davis wryly remarks, “Elizabeth displays a lot of insight into what God is up to among them. Perhaps that is primarily what it means to be filled with a holy spirit.”

As I was considering this passage this week and the roles of Elizabeth and Mary as prophets of God, I realized that the story of the Visitation is Luke’s incarnational tale of an important pneumatological concept about which Peter preaches in Luke’s other contribution to our Bible, the Acts of the Apostles. You may remember that on the Day of Pentecost, three weeks ago, I read to you part of Peter’s sermon, delivered on that same day nearly 2000 years ago. In Acts 2:16-18, Peter says, “this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.’” In Luke’s Gospel, we see this lived out: God pours out God’s Spirit upon Mary and Elizabeth and they prophesy.

It’s very fitting that, after the angels, Mary and Elizabeth should be the first prophets in Luke’s vision of the world as the Kingdom of God breaks in. In the Gospel that bears his name and in Acts, Luke highlights the contributions of women to the ongoing ministry of Jesus and the Holy Spirit in a way that sets his work apart from the other Gospels. Luke seems determined to be sure that his readers understand that gender is no longer a barrier for ministry. The vision given by God to Joel of both the sons and the daughters of God’s people prophesying has come true. He echoes as well the words of his old friend and travelling companion Paul: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” I find it unconscionable that after nearly two millennia of Christianity, some followers of Jesus refuse the liberating truth of Joel and Peter and Paul and Luke. The Spirit bloweth where it listeth and the Spirit touches both men and women, sons and daughters, fathers and mothers. And yet the opportunities for women in ministry continue to be for far fewer positions and at less pay than for their male counterparts. I will tell you quite honestly that I sometimes feel guilty for having taken Good Shepherd Baptist from the roster of churches with women pastors. I’m very grateful to you all for taking a chance on a relatively untried pastor like me and I love being your pastor but I get a twinge of conscience sometimes nonetheless. Let’s be sure that we continue to encourage our young women by giving them role models in the ministry whenever possible.

Visitations

We see another truth of Joel's prophecy brought to life in the story of the Visitation, as well. The Old Testament prophet said, correcting for patriarchal language, "your young (people) shall see visions, and your old (people) shall dream dreams." In this story of the two cousins, we have an example of an old person prophesying in Elizabeth, who according to Luke was "getting on in years," and of a young person prophesying in Mary, who according to tradition was around 14, and of a very young person prophesying in John, who lacked about two months of being born when he made his recognition of the situation known in the only way he could – he leapt in his mother's womb. Clearly, when it comes to age, God is no respecter of persons. This is another important lesson for us to share with the world. Our senior citizens do not lose their worth as human beings when they retire or when they move into senior housing or at any point. Our children are often more insightful than the world gives them credit for; we must remember to listen to them. The Holy Spirit may open the eyes and the lips of anyone of us at any time in our lives. The Gospel According to Matthew tells us that Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs."

In Elizabeth and Mary, I find another category of persons whom the Holy Spirit does not disdain to touch, to fill and to use. Earlier in the first chapter of Luke, when she realizes that she is pregnant, Elizabeth says, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people." In her society, Elizabeth's childlessness made her a disgrace. We know, too, that Mary, a betrothed woman found to be pregnant before living with her husband, would have been a disgrace, subject not only to gossip and ridicule but quite possibly death by stoning, a fate from which Joseph saved her. It is a reminder to me, my sisters and brothers, that we always need to be on guard against judging whether or not a person is a "fit" messenger of God based on the outward circumstances of their lives. Not only may we not know the history of those circumstances, we cannot know what is in their hearts. Only God can do that. And God, according to Joel, will send the Holy Spirit even to the slaves, the lowest rung of society in that time. Here's another pearl from Joining the Dance by Molly Marshall: "When the Spirit of God overshadows, the improbable, indeed the seemingly impossible, occurs. Dry bones become a renewed people in a flourishing land, a virginal rose blooms with child, and a young man of questionable background is commissioned to the vocation of messiah."

To close, I want to return to another point I touched on previously. In the work of the Holy Spirit, we are not merely concerned with the invisible and interior effects the Spirit has on our lives but also on their outward and physical manifestation. When people live lives motivated by the Spirit, remarkable things happen in the world around them. The work of the Spirit is incarnational and concerned with creation. When the prophet Joel is given the word from the Lord that I read earlier, the blessing that he foresees is a whole package of physical and spiritual blessings. God's people are not only to experience a life rich in the Spirit but also a life in which creation is healed. Paul takes up this theme in his letter to the Romans, writing "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God..." This is also why I changed from my original intent and read to you Mary's beautiful Magnificat along with the story of the Visitation. Like Joel, Mary understands that the work of the Holy Spirit results in changes in the physical order. Alyce M. McKenzie is Professor of Preaching and Worship at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University. She writes, "The Spirit reminds us of the end game.

Visitations

Justice for everyone God has created, which will involve reversals of fortune and status we can either cooperate with or oppose.”

Visitation, as I mentioned to begin with, can be about the story of two ordinary, disgraced but blessed women. It is also about the nitty-gritty of life, dead bodies and grieving people, the kind of story we see in the life and death of the Incarnate One, Jesus the Christ, made incarnate by the joint action of the Holy Spirit and a young girl. And it can be about taking that story of the life offered to us through the life and death and resurrection of that improbable Savior, and offering it to others, hopefully with the wisdom and love that the Spirit gives us. Alyce McKenzie also writes, “even though we have not received angelic visitations or inward leapings, we have a role to play in God’s efforts to redeem the world... We are inspired by the faith and courage of these biblical women, and reminded that we, like them, are blessed. Because, like them, we participate in their mission of conveying the life and love of Christ to the world.” May the Spirit that is in the air of this place and of the whole world grant us the faith, the courage, and the love to follow that calling. Amen.