

Unexpected Visitors
December 18, 2016
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Luke 1:39-55

One Saturday morning, Clark was home alone when suddenly the dogs started barking like crazy. Now, in our home, that's not too unusual. In fact, every time someone gets within 100 feet of the parsonage, Bennie and Andrei will let us know (imagine how tired they get on Strawberry Festival weekend!)

Since he was upstairs, he really didn't pay them much attention. Until he heard "Hello?" in an unfamiliar voice, coming from the kitchen. That's when he shot down the stairs like a bolt of lightning, turned the corner and found an older gentleman, a stranger, standing in the middle of the room.

As it turns out, the man was looking for the church office. (*Well, friend, it's Saturday so the office is closed*). So he asked Clark if he was the minister (it's a fair question). Clark laughed and answered... "Um, she's out getting groceries". The man didn't seem too disappointed, as he tried to sell Clark a calendar featuring pictures he had taken of various New England churches.

In our culture, we usually knock. You don't expect a random, unexpected visitor to enter your home and hang out in your kitchen. Life in the ministry is never boring, that's for sure!

Luke's Gospel tells the story of Jesus as God's visitation. Through Jesus, God comes to both Israel and the rest of the world. To be God's justice. To make things right again. To rescue all peoples.

As Luke's Gospel opens, the angel Gabriel visits the old priest Zechariah and tells the old man that he and his barren wife Elizabeth are going to finally have a baby. We've heard that story before—with Abram and Sarai, the First Parents of Israel. When God gives Zechariah and Elizabeth their promised son—John, whose work will be to go out and announce Jesus to the world—Zechariah joyfully says: *Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them (Luke 1.68)*.

Zechariah's words set the tone for Luke's Gospel. The story of Jesus is the story of God coming to rescue Israel, and all the peoples of the earth.

Our lesson today picks up the story about six months later. Once again, the angel Gabriel comes bringing news of an impossible birth only this time he comes to Elizabeth's cousin, young Mary. He tells her she will soon give birth to a child named Jesus, plus he shares the news that her dear cousin Elizabeth is going to have a baby too.

For many women, getting the news of a new pregnancy is joyous; for others, it's frightening, and for some it's both. For first-time mothers like Mary and Elizabeth, I imagine they each have mixed emotions.

Mary was already in that strange space of first trimester body changes, when she begins to hear the people of her hometown whispering "*scandal!*" behind her back. They were talking about her, accusing her, gossiping and adding stress to an already tender time.

Mary needed someone who could understand. Elizabeth was also pregnant for the first time. She would also face ridicule, although hers was more like the whispers of "*Isn't she too old to have a baby?*" What both women needed, that they could give each other, was compassion.

The text tells us that Elizabeth was "*righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord*" (Luke 1:6). She had full right to shun Mary, the unmarried pregnant girl. But she doesn't. Instead, she is just plain generous. She gives out of her heart, expecting nothing in return, giving Mary a safe space, providing her a refuge for three months.

Yes, Elizabeth is good... and safe... and perhaps wise.

Wise to the idea that what ordinarily seemed like such a big deal, really isn't that big a deal at all.

Wise to the idea that controversy passes, people get over things, and life goes on.

I think that Elizabeth is also perhaps a bit of a rebel. Her rebellion is that of a Love Warrior... someone who is unafraid to go against the grain and doesn't give a damn about social conventions. It's the rebellion of older women, one that is kind and just.

It is the rebellion that says, *"I'm going to do the right thing, no matter what anyone else says!"* It's a rebellion that greets its neighbor with an embrace, not violence. It's a rebellion that fills up the downtrodden with a nice bowl of soup or a casserole, and helps younger people find their voice and bring new hope into the world. It's a rebellion that is able to hold on to just a little bit of hope that things will get better.

Henri Nouwen reminds us that in times of loss, pain, and confusion those who mean the most to us are *"those who instead of giving much advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share in our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not-knowing, not-curing, not-healing, and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that's the friend who cares."*

Mary desperately needed Elizabeth to care. She found with her the healing power of intimacy, a safe space to be vulnerable. She received at once the gift of excitement, the gift of sustenance, and the gift of calm. After Elizabeth's greeting, Mary finds her voice to praise God in the midst of her hardship.

We tell ourselves that it is our political leaders who will make the biggest difference in the world around us. We tell ourselves it is the Nobel laureates who will write the next chapters in the story of civilization. We imagine that only movie stars have the kind of power to set the world on fire.

But in God's wisdom it is the unlikely heroes like Elizabeth and Mary who really make the most impact. Time and time again, scripture suggests that God prefers to use the gifts of ordinary people. Jesus will grow up to say that God is like a Sower of Seed, and He roams the world throwing seeds around with reckless abandon.

Mary was named after Moses' sister, Miriam. In Exodus 15, it was Miriam who led Israel in songs of praise to God when he rescued his people from Egypt. The child in Mary's womb is coming lead all people and creation itself on an Exodus out of death and into life. Mary knew what a gift it was to be chosen. And so, like her namesake, she sings.

She sings to celebrate God's rescue of his world. She sings to celebrate God's kindness to her—a poor girl no one would ever have noticed, from a

little town no one had ever heard of. And with the baby in her cousin's womb dancing for joy, Mary keeps singing.

Her song moves from God's kindness to her, to God's kindness to everyone who finds themselves lost or forgotten or abused or ignored. Mary knows that this child God has placed in her womb is coming to shake up everything.

God has done great things for his people in the past. And the One growing in her womb is God's promise that all will be set right again. God will lift up the people who've been put down. God will fill the bellies of the hungry. And God's faithfulness to Abraham and his descendants is God's faithfulness to all peoples. Because the promise God made to Abraham was: *in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen. 12.3)*.

There is a movie about the man who cracked the Enigma Code during World War II entitled "The Imitation Game". Alan Turing was the man who realized that the only way to crack the code would be to build a rudimentary computer to run through all the possible combinations of code. Though he was a mathematical genius, his people skills were not his strength. He had trouble communicating or even looking people in the eye.

Shy to the point of reclusive, Turing was often disappointed and frustrated. But at one point in the film, a woman who works with him reminds him of the hopeful truth he has forgotten. Sometimes it is the people whom no one imagined anything of, who actually do the thing no one imagines.

The most hopeful words in our Bible are spoken by a young girl that no one expected, who did the thing that no one saw coming, and gave birth to the child that no one thought would ever come.

Somehow this old story keeps coming back to remind us that hope is always just a whisper away. Compassion stirs in us. We begin to see our neighbors and our world the same way Jesus sees them. And we get busy continuing the work Jesus came into this world to do. We lift up the lowly. We fill empty bellies with good things. Like Jesus, we become God's sign to the world that this bleak midwinter can't and won't last forever. Amen.