**St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church**

**Fourth Sunday of Advent**

**Micah 5:2-5a**

**Psalm 80:1-7**

**Hebrews 10: 5-10**

**Luke 1:39-55**

**The Visit**

In the years before COVID-19, we never thought much about the deep value of visiting. We enjoyed a quick coffee or tea break with friends, or making time for an evening out. We never thought much about the value of visiting, or how visiting was such an important part of our everyday. We never considered the impact that visiting had on our mental, emotional and intellectual health and vitality. We just jumped into opportunities to catch up on the latest news about each other’s lives and we moved on. In our fast-paced world, the moments of our visits were like little islands of pleasure in a sea of work, information processing, or world events that continued, and do to this day, to shock, sadden and dismay. We looked forward to these get-togethers, large or small. They kept us vital and we felt alive. Then, the unthinkable happened. Something we thought wasn’t really possible in our clinically managed world, a virus stopped us.

As the weeks turned into months and now move into years, we became used to not visiting, and as we approached Advent and Christmas last year, we were prepared to spend much of what would normally be a festive time with friends and family, by ourselves or visiting in a new way, via Zoom or Skype.

Today we are again at the Fourth Sunday if Advent in 2021. For most of the world, it is a time for decisions to be made about visiting. Even after vaccinations, and easing of restrictions, for most of us, the decision for visiting, whether spontaneously or planned, near or far, isn’t easy. We inform each other about whether or not we are COVID-free, we wear our masks and carry our vaccination card in order to gain entrance to a variety of destinations, and we are struck by this new need to reassure safety.

During this time of pandemic, the disturbing news of a continuing upsurge of the Omicran variant, has everyone, in whatever style of life on edge. Yet, virus or no virus, people the world over, Christian or not, have held on to hope that this Christmas season will afford the possibility to reconnect with those not seen for a long time. But the dilemma remains.

Should we go to see family as we planned or should we stay away to be safe? Are the airline tickets worth it? We haven’t seen Mom and Dad, sister or brother, grandparents and the newborn to enter our family. We want to spend time with our good friends who live out of town. The list goes on and you will have particular people you would love to freely visit on your list. We want to see them all. We want to feel the loving touch of intimacy, even with all the family or friends’ idiosyncrasies we have come to tolerate over the years and which now seem almost irrelevant when compared to the prospect of not seeing them at all.

All that being said, there was a time before COVID, that when we freely arranged visits with friends or family, whether quick or for a longer time, into our busy schedules. We didn’t always find enough time to do much more than skim the surface of what we call love and friendship. We didn’t often find enough time to really find out what lay beneath the surface veneer of the latest developments in the lives of the ones we visited. We didn’t really find the time for in depth visiting. Perhaps it took a pandemic for us to realize the depth of our desire to visit for more reasons than we never took much time to fully understand.

Visiting means going deeper. The verb “to visit” can be translated into a sense of “being concerned about” something and moving closer into it. It means to have purpose and intent, which might hold a need for forgiveness, or a desire to renew neglected relationships during the past year; to air misunderstandings longing for resolution and atonement, or simply to see a dear ones face and to be assured that all is well in their life. To visit, then, means to put into motion some new action, to offer a way toward action, new thoughts and new possibilities.

We hear of God visiting various people throughout the Hebrew Bible, and when God visits, the interaction is not a surface one. Divine visiting, is active, interactive, loving and caring. God “visits” Sarah and she gives birth to a son, Isaac.” (Gen 21:1), Joseph tells his brothers that God will “visit” them and lead them out of Egypt and God promised the exiled Jews, “I myself will look after and tend (visit) my sheep.” (Ezek. 34:11) All these visits empowered the people to whom God came and they made way, or prepared the way for the Lord to enter into their lives in more meaningful and fulfilling ways. Most of the stories of Jesus have reflect his visiting people where they lived, finding them to teach, to heal and to give of himself to God’s people.

This act of giving of ourselves is a reflection of what God wants of us, not just at Christmas time but all the time. We are called to go deeper in our relationships. Called to seek each other out in the same way that God seeks us, holding a continual intuitive awareness of each other’s needs, whether we are fortunate enough to be present to those we love and care about, or whether we have to see and talk to them from afar. Holy seeking and receiving is not just a now and then thing, or something that happens when there is no choice, or when the calendar lends itself to it, but all the time. Holy seeking and receiving is at the heart and soul of intimate visiting. Holy seeking and receiving fills us with joy at the chance to be God’s visitors to others at all times, just as Mary and Elizabeth were filled with joy when Mary came to visit.

It was this kind of awareness that Elizabeth felt when Mary came to visit her. As she heard Mary’s greeting, she felt intuitively that Mary and her child were blessed in a very special way and that Mary was filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth was so honored by her visitor that her own child, leapt for joy in her womb.

Mary’s reply is equally joyous and filled with gratitude. “My soul magnified the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

God wants us to grow our intuitive awareness of how we interact with each other and with God and to be filled with gratitude for the opportunity to serve and love each other as God loves us. Elizabeth was deeply happy to witness God’s blessing on Mary. She did not greet her falsely. She did not greet her passively. Even though she, too, was blessed by God, Elizabeth did not compare her situation with Mary’s. Her joy for her cousin, was real and open, welcoming and unconditional.

Mary’s words were shared and acknowledged by both women, as Mary, speaking of God’s hand in all God’s works, past, present and future, were thrilled for them both and are thrilling for us.

God has moved in the life of their world, and everything that seemed impossible became possible, just has it has always been, and always will be possible. Whenever God acts in the world, an old way of thinking is replaced by the new. Mary‘s song of praise speaks in an Advent kind of way. That God has acted decisively in the incarnation of the Word, and nothing will ever be the same again. It is nothing less than a grand reversal and we are reminded of it, year after year.

Within the grand reversal that Mary joyfully lifts up more reversals as a message of change for us all. The most evident having to do with Mary, herself, a poor peasant girl living in an economically depressed, militarily occupied country. Yet, here she is, in all her humility, chosen as as God bearer..the *theotokos.*

To worship God, is not to worship self and God acts to scatter the prideful, the self-satisfied, the self-referencing gratuitous which is anathema to God.

In the same way, God has brought down the powerful from the thrones of their own making, thrones of pride, of vanity, of judgment and desire to belittle others. And lifted up the hope of those who are humble of heart and oppressed or maligned by the proud.

All the reversals which appear in Mary’s song have to do with our own way of setting ourselves apart from one another, through our words or actions, which too often lead us to take opposing sides, setting us against each other in word and deed.

Mary recognizes that we are, each one of us, made in the image of God and that we are called to recognize God in each other and to say “yes” to God’s call to love one another and to ensure justice prevails in the lives of all God’s people in the world.

It is a powerful message, indeed, that Mary delivers to Elizabeth, filled with the imagery of a just and loving God, and both rejoice in their acknowledgement of God’s actions in their lives and its effect on their relationship.

Their waiting is over and it is to time visit and share their news. For some of us, such a visit is, or will be, taking place just as it used to while, perhaps for many of us, the waiting continues. Yet no matter our circumstances, we can listen to Mary’s song in a new way. We can remember that both Mary and Elizabeth said “Yes!” when God called upon them to enter into the seemingly impossible.

Perhaps, in our waiting God is calling us, as God called Mary and Elizabeth, to be change agents in our own lives and through the pursuit of blessing in the lives of others. God’s call to each of us on this particular Fourth Sunday of Advent, in this world of pandemic, is coming in a new and deeply profound way.

We often think of Mary as submissive, unassertive, and shy. But today, we have heard differently. She is humble, but unafraid to proclaim God’s liberating hand and she says a firm and resounding “No!” to all that would negate God’s purpose in human history. She sings blessings for the oppressed, no matter where or how the oppression is felt, from the over or underprivileged among us. She sings of a “both/and” reality as she exemplifies the polarity of being both virgin and mother, just as we can be people of both the heart and the head, mystic and resistant, contemplative, yet with a call to justice, both spiritually fulfilled and alive as well as socially active in the world.

There is deep and meaningful intelligence in between the lines of Mary’s worshipful praise. She issues God’s own moral warnings against smug pride, vindictiveness which disregards the feelings and welfare of others, or people who eat ignoring those who starve.

Just as God has called Mary to serve, God uses us in special ways, and looks with favor on the humble of heart. When we think about the kingdom of God, we can think about a particular ordering of actions and values meant to raise up and bless those who are poor, weak, and hungry.

We wonder what it is God is asking of us, and we listen as Mary proclaims that God is doing a new thing. Like Mary, we are called to be open to find and acknowledge that grace. As she sings of wrongs to be made right, we think of all the wrongs we have inflicted as the hands of the prideful or the haughty or the powerful or have received from the same.

Elizabeth knew that God’s mercy lifted up by Mary, is available for all people, and that God’s blessings are often unexpected and inexplicable and that the status quo will most certainly be turned on its head by God’s purpose in our lives. Where is God in the midst of your own decision making? What new possibility in your life does God call you to embrace now?

In these last days of waiting for shepherds and magi to visit Mary and Joseph and the infant Jesus, perhaps we can take a little time to examine our own visits and relationships with others. Are we skimming the surface of our relationships or are we lifting each other up with encouragement and gratitude?

What is it about yourself which deserves a deeper study? What growing possibility or miracle is waiting to be born in you or me, just as it was in Mary.

At this waning Advent time ….this Advent to Christmas, let us bring the same kind of joy, for the same kind of reasons, into our visits with each other as did Mary and Elizabeth. Let us bring the same kind of love and healing to each other that Jesus brought to all he encountered.

. Even though there are decisions to make about how, or if we can visit each other this Christmas, one can still sense a glimmer of anticipation of the visit of the Spirit….seen and experienced in many ways.

May we all be blessed with that same anticipation with the confidence of a young girl from Nazareth. God is not just on the way. God is here knocking at our door. He has always been waiting for us to answer his call, from the beginning of time, in this moment, and forever more. God is here. All we have to do is open the door with joyous anticipation to invite our visitor in.

Like Mary, we are all filled with the promise of all things made new and that Christ will come into the world wherever the search for God’s healing grace is found. Knowing that, we too, are called blessed. We are alive. We are here, and we are uniquely and beautifully made. No matter in which way, how or where we make it happen, the time has come for us to greet each other with delight and joy, to share the Good News of God’s blessed grace in our lives with all those who invite us in to share our song.

Amen.

Written to the Glory of God

E. J. R. Culver+

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