

Luke 1:39-56
December 20, '09

“COME TO US, ABIDE WITH US”

A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, I RECEIVED A CALL FROM A LOCAL FUNERAL DIRECTOR, TELLING ME THAT A MEMBER OF THE CONGREGATION I WAS SERVING HAD BEEN KILLED IN A CAR ACCIDENT JUST AN HOUR EARLIER.

THE POLICE HAD ASKED HIM IF HE WOULD BREAK THE NEWS TO THE MAN'S WIFE & HE WANTED ME TO ACCOMPANY HIM.

OF COURSE I AGREED & QUICKLY DROVE TO THE HOUSE.

WE MET OUTSIDE & WALKED UP THE SIDEWALK TO THE FRONT DOOR.

JUST AS WE STEPPED ONTO THE PORCH, DICK SAID, “HOW ARE YOU GOING TO TELL HER?”

I SAID, “DICK, WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? I JUST SAID I'D COME ALONG. I DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING ABOUT BEING THE ONE TO TELL HER.”

HE LOOKED AT ME WITH TERROR IN HIS EYES, SAID, “I JUST CAN'T DO IT” AND THEN PROCEEDED TO RING THE DOORBELL.

WHEN THE MAN'S WIFE OPENED THE DOOR, SHE MADE WHAT SHE THOUGHT WAS A HUMOROUS COMMENT – “THIS DOESN'T LOOK GOOD WHEN THE FUNERAL DIRECTOR & MINISTER COME TO YOUR HOUSE LATE AT NIGHT.”

I GOT THROUGH THE HEARTBREAKING NEWS & MADE SOME CALLS TO OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS.

THE FUNERAL DIRECTOR LEFT & I JUST SAT WITH HER UNTIL OTHERS ARRIVED.

OURS WAS AN UNEXPECTED VISIT THAT WOULD CHANGE HER LIFE FOREVER.

THIS PASSAGE IN LUKE'S GOSPEL IS ALSO AN ACCOUNT OF AN UNEXPECTED VISIT.

IT'S THE UNEXPECTED VISIT OF MARY TO ELIZABETH – A VISIT THAT WOULD ALSO CHANGE ELIZABETH'S LIFE FOREVER – NOT TO MENTION THE LIFE OF THE ENTIRE WORLD.

THERE IS AN OBVIOUS & ENORMOUS DIFFERENCE, THOUGH, IN THE TWO VISITS.

IN THE FIRST – MY VISIT TO THAT HOME – IT WAS TO SHARE THE WORST NEWS IMAGINABLE.

IN THE SECOND – THE VISIT OF MARY – IT WAS GOOD NEWS BEYOND COMPREHENSION.

THERE IS, THOUGH, A SIMILARITY IN THE TWO VISITS – A SIMILARITY ASIDE FROM THE SURPRISE THAT ACCOMPANIED BOTH OF THEM.

IT'S A SIMILARITY THAT I HAVE ALWAYS WONDERED ABOUT IN MARY'S VISIT TO ELIZABETH.

AFTER BREAKING THE NEWS TO THAT MAN'S WIFE, I HAD NO IDEA WHAT ELSE TO SAY.

I WAS JUST THERE.

LOOKING BACK ON IT, I THINK THAT'S ALL THAT MATTERED.

I WAS THERE & THAT'S WHAT WAS IMPORTANT.

I THINK THAT'S WHAT IT WAS WITH MARY & ELIZABETH.

ELIZABETH WAS THERE FOR MARY.

WHEN WE LOOK AT THIS STORY IN LUKE'S GOSPEL, NOTE HOW LONG MARY STAYED.

THE LAST VERSE SAYS, "MARY REMAINED WITH HER ABOUT THREE MONTHS & THEN RETURNED HOME."

THREE MONTHS!

CAN YOU IMAGINE THAT?!

SHE DIDN'T STOP IN FOR COFFEE.

THIS WASN'T AN OVERNIGHT STAY.

SHE WAS THERE FOR THREE MONTHS – AN ENTIRE TRIMESTER OF HER PREGNANCY!

CAN YOU IMAGINE WHAT THAT WAS LIKE?

CAN YOU IMAGINE IF THE TWO OF THEM HAD KEPT DAILY JOURNALS?

WHAT WOULD THEY HAVE INCLUDED?

WHAT KIND OF CONVERSATIONS WOULD HAVE TAKEN PLACE IN THAT HOUSE?

NOW IF YOU RECALL, WHEN ELIZABETH & HER HUSBAND, ZECHARIAH HAD RECEIVED THE NEWS THAT ELIZABETH WOULD HAVE A CHILD, THEY WERE STUNNED.

THEY WERE BOTH WELL ALONG IN YEARS – FAR BEYOND THE TIME WHEN THEY COULD REASONABLY HAVE BEEN THINKING OF HAVING A FIRST CHILD – OR ANY CHILD FOR THAT MATTER!

ONE OF THE SIGNS THE ANGEL GAVE THEM WAS THAT ZECHARIAH WAS STRUCK DUMB – HE COULDN'T SPEAK UNTIL JOHN WAS BORN!

SO ALL THE CONVERSATION IN THAT HOUSEHOLD OVER THAT 3-MONTH VISIT OF MARY WOULD HAVE BEEN BETWEEN THE TWO WOMEN – TWO WOMEN WHO WERE BOTH EXPECTING THEIR FIRST CHILD IN THE MOST UNLIKELY CIRCUMSTANCES IMAGINABLE!

ONE WAS TOO YOUNG & A VIRGIN TO BOOT WHILE THE OTHER WAS FAR TOO OLD!

BUT IMAGINE WHAT IT MUST HAVE BEEN LIKE FOR THEM TO SHARE THAT TIME TOGETHER.

I HAVE OFTEN MARVELED AT THE RESPONSE OF ELIZABETH TO MARY.

HER GRACE ASTOUNDS ME.

IT ALWAYS HAS.

NOW THINK ABOUT THIS – JUST AT A SURFACE LEVEL.

ELIZABETH WAS ALREADY PREGNANT – PROBABLY SEVERAL MONTHS AHEAD OF MARY.

THIS WAS TO BE HER FIRST CHILD.

SHE WOULD NATURALLY HAVE ENJOYED BEING SOMEWHAT IN THE SPOTLIGHT, WITH ATTENTION FOCUSED ON *HER*.

BUT ALONG COMES HER YOUNG COUSIN, ALSO PREGNANT & NOW ALL THE ATTENTION WOULD BE TRANSFERRED TO *HER*.

NOW ELIZABETH KNEW THAT HER SON WAS GOING TO BE SOMETHING SPECIAL.

THE ANGEL HAD TOLD HER THIS.

BUT WHEN MARY ARRIVES, HER GRACIOUSNESS IS ASTOUNDING.

THERE WASN'T A JEALOUS BONE IN HER BODY.

SHE IMMEDIATELY ANNOUNCES THAT THE BABY LEAPING IN HER WOMB IS ACKNOWLEDGING THAT THE BABY IN HER YOUNG COUSIN'S WOMB IS FAR MORE SPECIAL THAN *HE* IS.

IN A SIMILAR SITUATION, HOW DO *YOU* RESPOND – ESPECIALLY TO SOMEONE IN YOUR FAMILY?

I THINK THERE'S A LESSON THERE FOR US – ESPECIALLY IN OUR FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS.

IT MAY BE FODDER FOR AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT SERMON - A SERMON ABOUT THE LESSON IN GRACIOUSNESS WE COULD ALL LEARN FROM ELIZABETH – ESPECIALLY TOWARD MEMBERS OF OUR OWN FAMILY.

AS WE CONSIDER THE TIME THAT ELIZABETH & MARY SHARED TOGETHER OVER THESE THREE MONTHS, THERE MUST HAVE BEEN SOMETHING VERY SPECIAL TAKING PLACE.

THERE ALWAYS IS WHEN WE FEEL AS THOUGH WE'RE IN THE PRESENCE OF SOMEONE WHO CARES.

OBVIOUSLY THAT'S WHAT MARY FELT FOR ELIZABETH.

WHY ELSE WOULD SHE SET OUT ON A LONG & UNDOUBTEDLY DANGEROUS JOURNEY?

WHY ELSE WOULD SHE STAY AS LONG AS SHE DID?

BARBRA BROWN TAYLOR, IN A SERMON ON THIS PASSAGE, SAYS, "*WHAT MARY DOESN'T HAVE IS A SONOGRAM, OR A HUSBAND OR AN AFFIDAVIT FROM THE HOLY SPIRIT THAT SAYS, 'THE CHILD IS MINE. NOW LEAVE THE POOR GIRL ALONE!'*"

SHE WAS IN A MESS & IT WAS TO ELIZABETH'S HOUSE THAT SHE FLED.

SHE WENT WHERE IT WAS SAFE.

SHE WENT WHERE SHE KNEW SHE'D BE ACCEPTED.

SHE WENT WHERE SHE KNEW SHE'D FIND GRACE.

SHE WENT WHERE SHE KNEW SHE'D FEEL THE PRESENCE OF GOD.

ISN'T THAT WHAT WE ALL WANT?

"COME TO US, ABIDE WITH US, LORD."

WHERE IS IT THAT YOU FLEE TO IN TIMES OF TRAUMA?

WHERE DO YOU GO TO FIND SAFETY, ACCEPTANCE & GRACE?

WHERE DO YOU GO TO FEEL GOD ABIDING WITH YOU?

I TRUST THERE ARE PEOPLE THAT ENABLE YOU TO EXPERIENCE THOSE THINGS – THOSE WHO ENABLE YOU TO FEEL THAT GOD IS ABIDING WITH YOU.

I HOPE YOU HAVE AN ELIZABETH TO WHOM YOU CAN TURN WHEN THINGS GET TOUGH.

AND I HOPE THAT YOU, TOO, CAN BE AN ELIZABETH FOR SOMEONE ELSE – OFFERING ACCEPTANCE, SAFETY & GRACE & ENABLING THAT PERSON TO FEEL THAT GOD HAS COME TO THEM & ABIDES WITH THEM.

I BEG YOUR INDULGENCE FOR A FEW MINUTES THIS MORNING, BECAUSE I'M AFRAID I MUST TELL YOU THAT THERE'S SOMEWHERE ELSE I WISH I WERE ABLE TO BE THIS WEEKEND.

ANYONE WHO HAS KNOWN ME FOR VERY LONG HAS HEARD ME MAKE REFERENCE TO A MAN I REFER TO AS "MAC" – THE REVEREND DR. HAROLD HARPER MCCONNELL, JR.

I WORKED WITH MAC FOR 8 YEARS IN TWO DIFFERENT CHURCHES.

IT WAS MAC WHO URGED ME TO ATTEND SEMINARY & EVEN SUGGESTED WHICH SEMINARY I ATTEND.

IT WAS MAC WHO GAVE ME MY FIRST CALL AFTER I WAS ORDAINED.

IT WAS MAC WHO WAS PRIMARILY RESPONSIBLE FOR MY FIRST CALL AS A SENIOR PASTOR & IN A ROUNDABOUT WAY, IT WAS MAC WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR ME ENDING UP HERE AT EASTMINSTER.

WITHOUT THE PRESENCE OF MAC IN MY LIFE, I WOULDN'T HAVE GONE TO SEMINARY, I WOULDN'T HAVE MET EMMA SUE & THERE WOULD NO DEREK, DREW, DAVID OR DYLAN.

MAC WAS MY MENTOR, MY ROLE MODEL AND, FOR MANY YEARS, MY VERY BEST FRIEND.

FOR ALL THE HORROR STORIES YOU MIGHT HEAR ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PASTORS & ASSOCIATE PASTORS, OURS MADE UP FOR THEM ALL.

THE REASON I SAY THAT THERE'S SOMEWHERE ELSE I'D RATHER BE THIS WEEKEND IS BECAUSE MAC DIED THIS WEEK & A SERVICE OF WITNESS TO THE RESURRECTION IN MEMORY OF MAC WAS HELD YESTERDAY AT THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN NEW BERN, NORTH CAROLINA.

EVERYTHING OF VALUE I HAVE EVER DONE IN MINISTRY CAN BE ATTRIBUTED TO MAC.

THERE ISN'T A DAY – NOT A SINGLE DAY – THAT GOES BY THAT I DON'T THINK OF MAC – OFTEN IN A WWMD KIND OF WAY – "WHAT WOULD MAC DO?"

MIND YOU, MAC WASN'T WITHOUT HIS FAULTS.

IN FACT, A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, I WAS INVITED TO PARTICIPATE IN A ROAST OF MAC, ATTENDED BY HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE WITH WHOM HE HAD WORKED OVER THE YEARS.

I WAS ONE OF THOSE INVITED TO ROAST HIM AND, AS IS OFTEN THE CASE, NEARLY EVERYONE ELSE BAILED & JUST SAID NICE THINGS ABOUT HIM.

BUT I WASN'T ABOUT TO FALL INTO THAT TRAP.

MAC HAD BEEN A COLONEL IN THE ARMY, SERVING AS A CHAPLAIN IN WORLD WAR II & I SAID, "MAC, YOU'RE LIVING PROOF THAT THE TERM 'MILITARY INTELLIGENCE' IS AN OXYMORON."

THE PROBLEM IN SAYING THAT IS THAT IT WAS PROBABLY TRUE!

HE WASN'T AN INTELLECTUAL GIANT – BUT HE COULD CONVINCING YOU THAT HE WAS.

THAT'S ONE OF THE GREAT LESSONS I LEARNED FROM HIM.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE SMART.

YOU JUST HAVE TO MAKE PEOPLE *THINK* YOU ARE!

I REMEMBER THE NIGHT OF THAT ROAST I ALSO SAID, "MAC, YOU HAVEN'T CHANGED A BIT SINCE THE DAY I MET YOU. YOU LOOKED 90 THEN & YOU STILL LOOK 90!"

HE DIDN'T QUITE MAKE IT TO 90.

HE WAS 89 WHEN HE DIED.

MAC WAS MY ELIZABETH.

HE ACCEPTED ME FOR WHO I WAS.

HE ALWAYS MADE ME FEEL SAFE.

HE WAS THE PERSONIFICATION OF GRACE.

AND HE ALWAYS OFFERED THE ASSURANCE THAT GOD WAS ABIDING WITH YOU.

THAT'S WHAT ELIZABETH DID FOR MARY.

DURING ADVENT THIS YEAR, WE'RE LOOKING AT PARTICULAR LINES FROM SOME OF OUR FAVORITE CHRISTMAS HYMNS.

MY PERSONAL FAVORITE HAS ALWAYS BEEN ONE THAT WAS WRITTEN BY THE GREAT 19TH CENTURY PREACHER PHILLIPS BROOKS.

BROOKS WROTE ABOUT HIS HORSEBACK JOURNEY FROM JERUSALEM TO BETHLEHEM, WHERE HE ASSISTED WITH THE MIDNIGHT SERVICE ON CHRISTMAS EVE, 1865.

HE SAID, "*I REMEMBER STANDING IN THE OLD CHURCH IN BETHLEHEM, CLOSE TO THE SPOT WHERE JESUS WAS BORN, WHEN THE WHOLE CHURCH WAS RINGING HOUR AFTER HOUR WITH SPLENDID HYMNS OF PRAISE TO GOD, HOW AGAIN AND AGAIN IT SEEMED AS IF I COULD HEAR VOICES I KNEW WELL, TELLING EACH OTHER OF THE WONDERFUL NIGHT OF THE SAVIOR'S BIRTH.*"

THE NEXT YEAR, AT CHRISTMAS, HE WROTE A POEM AS HE REFLECTED ON HIS EXPERIENCE IN BETHLEHEM.

LEWIS REDNER, THE ORGANIST AT THE CHURCH BROOKS SERVED, SET IT TO MUSIC THE FOLLOWING YEAR & THE CHILDREN'S CHOIR OF THE CHURCH SANG IT FOR THE FIRST TIME THAT CHRISTMAS EVE.

THE REASON "O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM" IS MY FAVORITE CHRISTMAS HYMN IS BECAUSE IT EVOKES ONE OF MY VERY EARLIEST MEMORIES OF LIFE.

IT WAS A CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE IN ST. PAUL'S LUTHERAN CHURCH.

I VAGUELY REMEMBER MY CLASS OF PROBABLY 3 & 4 YEAR OLDS GOING TO THE FRONT OF THE SANCTUARY FOR OUR PART IN THE CHRISTMAS PROGRAM & THEN RETURNING TO OUR PEW AS THE OLDER CLASSES TOOK THEIR TURN IN THE PROGRAM.

I DON'T REMEMBER ANYTHING ELSE IN THE SERVICE UNTIL I WAS AWAKENED BY THE SOUND OF THE ORGAN & ALL THE PEOPLE STIRRING AROUND ME – STANDING TO SING "O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM."

EVERYONE, THAT IS, EXCEPT MY TEACHER, BECAUSE I WAS SLEEPING ON HER LAP & SHE LET ME STAY RIGHT THERE WHILE WE SANG THE SONG.

AT THAT MOMENT, SHE WAS MY ELIZABETH.

RESTING IN HER ARMS, I FELT ACCEPTANCE, SAFETY & GRACE.

AND I THINK, THAT NIGHT, FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE, I KNEW THAT GOD HAD COME TO ME – TO ME – AND THAT GOD WAS ABIDING WITH ME.

ISN'T THAT OUR MOST EARNEST DESIRE DURING THIS SEASON?

WE LONG TO FEEL THAT GOD HAS COME TO US & ABIDES WITH US.

THERE ARE THE ELIZABETHS OF LIFE WHO ASSURE US THAT IT'S TRUE.

IT'S TRUE THAT GOD HAS COME TO *YOU* AND ABIDES WITH YOU.

AND THE CHALLENGE TO US IS TO BE AN ELIZABETH FOR SOMEONE ELSE – ASSURING THEM THAT GOD HAS NOT ONLY COME TO THEM BUT ABIDES WITH THEM.

WITH PHILLIPS BROOKS, WE CAN SING, “COME TO US, ABIDE WITH US, OUR LORD EMMANUEL.” AMEN.

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