

December 20, 2009 - Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. [PDF] (Micah 5:2-5a; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45)

Hear again these words from the Gospel according to Luke, "In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.'" Mary, the soon-to-be mother of Jesus, set out and went in haste to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth, soon-to-be mother of John the Baptist. And what we've got here is some good old-fashioned family visiting. Which this week and in the weeks to come many of us will be doing some good old-fashioned family visiting. And many of us will set out and go in haste just as Mary did. But for many of us it may not seem like an occasion of the Holy Spirit.

I have to admit that some of the more tense moments in my life both as a child and as an adult have been spent on the way to family holiday gatherings in great haste and much loud crying going on. And we sit there in the driveway trying to pull it together so that when we go inside we can say, "Oh, Merry Christmas! It's so good to see you. It's been so long. Yes." A far cry from Mary's encounter with Elizabeth where Mary arrives and her greeting causes a stirring. A stirring of the child growing inside Elizabeth and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. Now, I've been to some holiday gatherings where people are filled with spirit -- not that kind of spirit, though. Not the Holy Spirit necessarily. Some loud crying going on, but maybe a different kind of loud crying.

As we prepare for this upcoming Christmas time, as we bring to a close this season of Advent, this time of waiting and watching for the coming of Christ, perhaps we can look a little bit more closely at this encounter between Mary and Elizabeth. Why is Mary going to visit her kinswoman? A few verses earlier you may recall that the angel Gabriel has just announced to Mary that she will bear a miraculous child, the very son of God. And that her relative Elizabeth, who is well beyond child bearing years -- advanced in age the scripture tells us -- Elizabeth too has conceived a miraculous child by the grace of God. For nothing will be impossible with God, the scripture says.

And Mary accepts the angel's message with these humble words, "Let it be with me according to your word." But then she gets up, sets out and goes with haste in a hurry to visit Elizabeth. Even if she gracefully accepted all that the angel said -- "Let it be with me according to your word" -- you can bet that she was dying to talk to somebody about it. You can bet that she wanted to be able to connect with somebody who could help her understand what in the world was happening. And since God has also acted miraculously with Elizabeth, then Mary's in a hurry to visit the one person who might be able to help her sort this out. Mary goes with haste to connect with her kinswoman, to ponder together what God is doing.

In Advent, this season of four Sundays in preparation for the coming of Christ at Christmas, we have posters up that say things like, "Slow down. Be quiet. It's Advent." And we encourage ourselves to slow down. So what are we to make of Mary's haste and hurry? Well, we tell ourselves to slow down, I think, because we are too often in a race. There's not enough time to get it all done. The cooking and the shopping and the visiting and the traveling. We hurry. We make haste because we know we're trying to do too much. We fear that a slower pace will mean we don't complete our list. But for Mary, her hurry is not about running out of time, but about running toward a deeper understanding of God's mystery and miraculous power.

Mary's not trying to reach the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth so she can be on time for dinner. She feels a deep urgency to connect with others who have been touched by God. She's keen to converse with another woman whom God has blessed with a special child and a special mission. Perhaps she just longs to verify that she's not crazy. That this isn't some strange dream. That someone else can say, "Yes, yes, this is God at work. Yes, God does fulfill God's promises."

So Mary's haste is different from our own. Those posters say, "Slow down. Be quiet. It's Advent." And we tell ourselves to be quiet, to listen, to turn down the radio and the Christmas carols for a little while to prepare ourselves inwardly to receive the spirit of Christ reborn in us. And yet here is Elizabeth who filled with the Holy Spirit utters a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women. Blessed is the fruit of your womb." Now, for us our cry may be more like, "Get your shoes on now so we can get to Grandma's before New Year's!" Or "We forgot the crackers for the casserole!"

Elizabeth's cry is not one of frustration, but one of blessing. The cry brought on by the stirring of the unborn child. A cry of recognition, "Yes, God is working here. Yes, God does keep God's promises even to the poor and the powerless." So perhaps we can alter our Advent exhortation "Slow down. Be quiet. It's Advent." Maybe we can change it to say slow down unless you are rushing toward God. Slow down unless you are hurrying to prayer. Slow down unless you are making haste to find someone to ponder God's good news with you. Unless you are rushing to share a miracle. Be quiet unless you are offering a blessing. Be quiet unless you are filled with the Holy Spirit. Be quiet unless you have something to say about the fulfillment of God's promises. Unless you, with Mary in her song, can say, "He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly." Be quiet unless you have good news to share.

For five more glorious days, slow down, be quiet, it's still Advent. But at the same time, be hasty and be loud in the name of God. Be fast and forceful in the name of the Kingdom. And find each other. Let's find each other, brothers and sisters in Christ. Find each other pregnant with the possibility of God's strength and God's mercy. Even in the midst of our own crying and our own hastiness, God's grace is with us. Find one another, brothers and sisters, and greet one another in such a way that the deepest part of ourselves is stirred. Stirred in recognition that God's grace is at work in us for nothing will be impossible with God.