

4th Sunday of Advent, C

“Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.”

What is that about? Luke doesn't tell us why she went or what she was looking for but maybe we can get a clearer picture of what's going on if we put today's gospel in a larger context. The angel Gabriel has just told Mary that she has been chosen and favored by God, that God is with her, that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her, that she will conceive and give birth to a son, the Son of God, and she will name him Jesus.

That story is so familiar to us that I think we sometimes lose sight of or forget just how strange, unfamiliar, and unexpected that experience was for Mary. And I think it is the strangeness, unfamiliarity, and unexpectedness of what happened that causes Mary to **“set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah.”**

As soon as Gabriel makes his announcement and departs, so does Mary, with haste. She wastes no time. She hits the road and heads for the hills as they say. Maybe she is excited and wants to share this good news. Maybe she wants to celebrate what is happening to her. Or maybe she is afraid and needs a friendly face. Maybe she is overwhelmed and needs someone to talk with. Maybe she doesn't know what to do next and is looking for some guidance. Maybe she wants help in figuring out how to

talk and deal with Joseph and her mom and dad. Maybe she just wants to get away for a little while and try to make sense of what has happened. Maybe she wants to talk with someone who will understand. Maybe it is any one of those things, all of them, or a thousand other things that caused Mary to leave with haste.

Whatever Mary's reasons were, you and I probably know what that is like. Have there not been times in your life when you set out in haste looking for something or someone familiar to stand with you in the midst of the unexpected and unfamiliar? Who has been your Elizabeth? When have you been Elizabeth for another?

Throughout our lives, we find ourselves in circumstances or situations that are strange, new, and incomprehensible. They are beyond our previous experience and often they leave us feeling estranged from ourselves, an alien in our own life. You know what that's like, right?

Maybe it was that first day, first week, first year of being a married person, a divorced person, a parent, a widow, and you didn't know what to do but you knew you had to make room in your life for this new person you were becoming. Maybe it was a time that you did or said something that hurt another and you knew that wasn't really who you are or who you want to be, and you felt estranged not only from the other person but from yourself. A friend of mine took a new job nearly two years ago. He recently said to me, **"I am just now starting to feel like myself again."** Anyone who has lost a loved one knows that feeling of being an alien in

his or her own life. I remember a woman asking me if she was still a mother after her daughter died. I remember looking at myself in a mirror shortly after my ordination and seeing a stranger in a clergy shirt looking back at me and wondering, “**Who is that guy and who am I?**” Maybe someone offered you an opportunity that you had never considered possible. They saw something in you, a gift, a capability, a possibility, that you had never seen or imagined for yourself, and that person they saw was a stranger to you. At some time or another, we have all felt like strangers to ourselves.

When have you felt like a stranger to yourself? What was going on? When has life left you feeling uncomfortable in your own skin?

I wonder if that’s exactly how Mary feels. I wonder if her leaving in haste is the outer expression of her inner estrangement. I wonder if her leaving home reflects that she is not yet at home in herself.

I don’t think Mary is running away from home, her life, or herself. I think she leaves home so she can return, and she knows that Elizabeth is the one who can help her come back to her home, her life, and herself.

Mary doesn’t go to Anna her mother, to Joseph her fiancé, to the local clergy, or a girlfriend around the corner. Not just anyone can handle or be trusted with our estrangement. Elizabeth is Mary’s go-to person; Elizabeth is her older cousin, who is getting on in years, “**who was said to be barren,**” and who is now six months pregnant, just as Gabriel had said would happen.

The trip to Elizabeth's house is not a simple walk across the street or around the block. Our sacred tradition says that Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in Ein Karem, a town just outside of Jerusalem and about 80 miles from Mary's home in Nazareth.

Eighty miles; that's about thirty hours of walking. Mary was surely looking for something from Elizabeth. I don't know what she wanted or needed but I know when I have been estranged from myself I want a place of acceptance and understanding, I want someone who will love me and not judge, someone who will be with me in the beauty, pain, and mystery of what is happening, someone who will encourage and offer hope without telling me what to do, someone who can be present to my reality and speak truth even if it hurts, someone who assures me that I don't have to do this alone, someone who offers her or his faith, hope, and love when mine is in short supply, someone who will remind me that I am ok and I can do this. Isn't that what you want when you feel like a stranger to yourself? Isn't that what you needed from your go-to person, from your Elizabeth?

What I am describing here is hospitality. Hospitality is the antidote to our estrangement. I am talking about the kind of hospitality we receive from another that allows us to be hospitable to and accepting of ourselves. The hospitality Elizabeth offered Mary was more than an open door, a warm welcome, and a place to stay. It was an affirmation of Mary's life. It was a prayer commending Mary to God. It was a blessing that gave Mary back to herself.

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb,” Elizabeth says to Mary. **“And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”**

“Blessed, blessed, blessed,” says Elizabeth. Her words of affirmation, commendation, and blessing will remain with Mary for the rest of her life. They will echo in the silence as Mary ponders and treasures the words of the shepherds at Jesus’ birth. They will ring in her ears when Simeon declares that a sword will pierce her soul. They will call her back to herself when her twelve-year-old son runs away to be in his Father’s house. They will hold her broken heart at the cross. And they will sing with joy at the empty tomb.

That’s how deep and authentic hospitality works. It is not just a word spoken or an action done at a particular point in time. It is an event that stays with us and continues to affirm, commend, and bless. It is an event in which we recognize God’s presence and leap for joy. It is an event that is pregnant with possibilities and new life.

I wonder in what ways you have experienced this Elizabethan hospitality. When has another, an Elizabeth, affirmed, commended, and blessed your life? How is that event of hospitality alive in you today?

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

What is conceiving in you and waiting to be born? **Amen.**