

You'll Never Believe What Just Happened

Luke 1:39-55
December 24, 2006
10:00 a.m.

I.

As we go through the church year we celebrate some dramatic events in the history of humanity. Often they are described by starting with the verbs that tell us what actually happened, and then we add the ending "-ion" to make them into nouns.

Here are seven examples of this. We hear about the Annunciation, Visitation, Incarnation, Presentation, Transfiguration, Crucifixion, and Resurrection

I will be talking about three of those turning points of Christianity within the next twelve hours, and because they are so closely related I believe it could be useful to begin with some brief background about them now.

If you come to the 5:00 service this evening, you will hear about the Annunciation as the children present a brief dramatic production. This is when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, and told her that she would bear a child who would be the Son of God, and who would sit on the throne of David and reign over the house of Jacob forever. This also is where Mary asked how it could be possible since she was a virgin, and Gabriel said she would be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit.

Then, seemingly as an afterthought, Gabriel told Mary that her relative, Elizabeth, who had no children and now was past the normal age of child-bearing, was in fact six months pregnant. Gabriel implied that God also had something to do with Elizabeth because he said nothing is impossible with God.

Or, if you come to the 10:00 service this evening you will hear about the Incarnation, which is the story of Christ's birth nine months later in the manger in Bethlehem, and how the angels revealed this singular event to the shepherds. The term Incarnation is used because that birth was more than just a baby coming into the world. It also was God coming into the world. As we say in the Nicene Creed, the divinity of God became incarnate from the Virgin Mary.

This morning's reading described the Visitation, which occurred between the Annunciation and Incarnation. But it was more than just a simple visit. Mary did not just go over to Elizabeth's to have a cup of tea, or to catch up on the latest gossip. It was an event that set the stage for how the ministry of Jesus would be received, and even today it inspires Christian communities to look to the Holy Spirit for guidance and meaning.

II.

Today's reading begins by telling us that Mary set out and "went with haste" to visit Elizabeth. Why did she do this? What was the hurry? Some theologians have speculated that because Mary was pregnant and not married, she wanted to get away to a safe place. They say that Mary feared she would be condemned by society and would be an embarrassment to her family. As a result, they say that she had to leave.

I don't believe today's reading supports that interpretation. I think that Mary went to Elizabeth because of her joy, and the wonder of it all. In today's jargon, Mary would not have said, "Elizabeth, I'm in trouble and you have to help me." Rather, I think she would have gone into Elizabeth's house with a glow on her face and said "Elizabeth, Elizabeth, you won't believe what just happened!" Or perhaps she might have gone in, pumped her fist, and said "Yesss!"

But, people probably didn't talk like that back then, and so let's look at how St. Luke described the visit. The first things we notice are the parallels and the contrasts.

One woman, Elizabeth, was old, pregnant after her normal hopes for children were gone, and her son John would be the last prophet in the Old Testament tradition. He would proclaim how the old era will end.

The other woman, Mary, was young, pregnant before she ever thought would be the case, and her son would usher in the new era.

Also, both women were miraculously pregnant, and both women were supernaturally aware of the condition of the other. Mary knew about Elizabeth because Gabriel told her, and Elizabeth knew about Mary because the Holy Spirit imparted that understanding.

Finally, for the same reasons, both women knew that Mary's child would be the Lord, the Son of God. Again Mary knew because of Gabriel, and again Elizabeth was led by the Holy Spirit to that knowledge.

As a result, we literally see the embryonic beginnings of Christianity. In a few years a man would walk out of the Galilean wilderness onto the stage of history and proclaim the coming of the Messiah. Not much later, that Messiah would appear and begin a ministry that would offer salvation to the world.

And in today's gospel we hear about their mothers, talking together in the same room, while they still were pregnant with these yet unborn founders of the faith. It also is clear they knew the destiny of their children. Most mothers hope their children will be successful, and might make a lasting contribution to society. But for Mary and Elizabeth, they already knew that would be the case.

III.

How did these two women respond in that situation? What did they do? Let's start with Elizabeth. Mary probably walked in the house, unannounced, and at that moment Elizabeth did not know. But the baby John leapt in the womb when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting. As I said earlier, the Holy Spirit then filled her and allowed her to know what had happened. Elizabeth blessed Mary twice, and recognized her as the mother of the Lord. This had to have been the first Christian confession of faith.

And then Mary offered the feelings of her heart. The reading states that she said these things, but in other places her words are described as a song. These words have since become known as the Magnificat, or the Song of Mary, and they are in the Book of Common Prayer as one of the canticles along with the Songs of Isaiah, the Song of Simeon and the others.

If Elizabeth's blessings were the first Christian confession of faith, then the Song of Mary had to be the first prophetic revelation that God's kingdom actually was about to be known on earth.

Mary, who probably was not more than fourteen or fifteen years old at the time, spoke with the unique insight of someone who had just encountered an angel. She now knew that God was about to change the world, and her song told what it would mean.

Her words presented God in two ways in today's reading. One was as the sovereign Lord who would scatter the proud and boastful, and deliver his people. The other was as the merciful God who would lift up the lowly and needy, and give them hope. This prophetic oracle of Jesus' mother before his birth foreshadowed his own teachings after he began his ministry.

So, with this Fourth Sunday in Advent we finish the preliminaries. We began Advent by anticipating Christ's second coming in power and glory. We end Advent by Christ's first coming in the cold and lonely manger. And if you come to the 10:00 service this evening we will see Mary again, not in the comfort of Elizabeth's home but in that manger where God actually came into the world.

This morning's story of Mary and Elizabeth revealed what we celebrate this evening. It told how God's plan for his people was coming to pass. With the birth of Jesus the Kingdom of God began on earth. And since that time his kingdom has been developing and unfolding, and will be complete when we see him again on that day and hour known only to God.

IV.

But this story of Mary and Elizabeth is not just background. It can stand alone with its own unique meaning. It can give us guidance today as to how we live our lives in anticipation of that momentous day when our Lord appears in the clouds.

What does the Visitation mean to us? Well, Mary went to Elizabeth to share her joy, to seek comfort and support, to extend her love to Elizabeth, and to proclaim the coming of salvation.

We do the same thing today. We share our joy, seek comfort and support, extend ourselves to others, and through our faith we live in the sure and certain Christian hope of salvation

But there is a difference today. Certainly, we can go to our friends and relatives as Mary did, but we also can go to the church. Today's church did not exist in first century Palestine, but now it does. It is the Body of Christ that he left behind, and it is here to serve as the path to salvation that Mary proclaimed in that small Judean town described in Luke's Gospel.

Through the church we can know the Holy Spirit that came upon Elizabeth, and we can be led by the Spirit in the paths of righteousness. Through the church we can extend ourselves to others as Elizabeth blessed Mary. Through the church we can sing God's praises as Mary did so long ago. And through the church we can realize God's promises to us as believers just as Mary lifted up God's promises to Abraham and his descendants.

V.

Many great ideas, or important movements in history, or dreams that changed the world got their start in someone's living room, or their kitchen, or their garage. In the same way, today's Gospel gives us a snapshot of how that worked in Elizabeth's house two thousand years ago.

In that time two women, servants of God, by their example and their faith, helped establish the foundations of Christianity. Through obedience they received God into their lives and were transformed, and the world was changed.

In the same way we can receive God in our lives with the same transforming effect upon us. We can care for each other and extend ourselves to each other here at St. Thomas in the same way that Mary and Elizabeth cared for each other and became a model of Christian faithfulness.

Today, I pray that we also can be examples of the Christian community we are called to be, and that we also can know and be led by the Holy Spirit to a deeper encounter with the true spirit of this season of celebration. *Amen.*