

**THE MIGHTY ONE HAS DONE GREAT THINGS
(AND WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT IT)**

Sermon for Advent 4C: Lk 1:39-45

LPC, 12/20/09

Through the years I've been entrusted with some interesting stories. There is one type of story that is usually prefaced with a phrase like, "I've never shared this with anyone, but ..." I'd like to share some of these stories with you. I've changed details for confidentiality's sake, but I have not exaggerated the strangeness. The stories go something like this:

First story: "I haven't told anybody this in years, but when I was very small, about 2 or 3 years old, I always felt like Jesus was in the room with me: I mean really *with* me in person. It was like I could look up from whatever I was playing with and see him, and he would smile and wave, and I would smile and wave back. This always gave me a deep sense of security."

Second story: "I was alone in pre-op in a high state of anxiety when suddenly I felt this enormous sense of peace. At that point I knew, just knew, that everything would be all right. The odd thing was that I knew that even if I did not survive my surgery, everything would still be all right. It was the most liberating thing I ever experienced, and the sense of it has never left me."

Third story: "I've never told anyone this, but it happened when my grandmother was dying. I was sitting with her in her hospital room and I was so very, very sad. All at once there was this huge, luminous presence in the room, like a giant face that filled the room. It was so real. I was terrified, but then I heard, or rather felt, the words, "Fear not." I was still pretty rattled, but that night my grandmother died and I immediately had the sense that she was finally whole and at peace. I'm sure the two things, my vision, and then my sense of my grandmother at peace, are related."

These are wonderful stories, and I feel privileged to have been party to them, especially since people are reluctant to share them with just anybody. Why me? Well, I am a minister, and people know they can trust me with stories about their supernatural experiences. I can see where people might fear being thought of as crazy if their stories fell into the wrong ears.

I think of stories like the ones I've just shared when I read about the Virgin Mary going to visit her cousin Elizabeth, as we heard this morning from the Gospel of Luke. Elizabeth, an elderly woman past the age of childbearing, is miraculously pregnant with John the Baptist. Mary, a young virgin, is miraculously pregnant with Jesus. Both women have been visited by angels who have told them their pregnancies are part of the mysterious plan of God.

Elizabeth is six months along. Mary is newly pregnant. The Angel Gabriel, who brought Mary her momentous news, has also informed Mary of Elizabeth's condition. So

Mary goes “in haste” to visit this elderly relative with whom she suddenly has so much in common.

Now Mary has been told about Elizabeth’s miracle, but Elizabeth has not been told about Mary’s. Even so, as Mary approaches, Elizabeth, *and* her unborn child, are inspired with the sudden knowledge that Mary is carrying the Son of God, and Elizabeth sings out in joy. For her part, Mary responds with one of the most beautiful songs in the Bible, about trusting in the God who lifts up the lowly.

Mary, upon learning that she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit, clearly felt the need to share her news, the same way people have felt the need to share their spiritual experiences with me. But note that Mary does not go into the marketplace and start blabbing, “Hey! I’m pregnant by the Holy Spirit!” to anyone who will listen. Nor does she blog about it. Instead, she goes to visit someone she knows to be in a similar situation to her own, someone who will understand, someone whom she can trust.

This is why I think people trust me with their spiritual experiences. Most of the stories I told you about were shared after an adult education about prayer or other faith experiences. The context lets people know I understand that these things happen, and will take these stories seriously.

Here is the thing. When I hear these stories I am so uplifted. Something leaps in me and I feel like Elizabeth saying, “And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?” Who am I, that God has chosen to reveal to me this radiant example of God’s goodness and greatness?

The whole church is uplifted by these stories. The church *needs* these stories. Our youngsters need to hear these stories. One of the reasons I think mainstream churches are languishing while evangelical churches flourish is that we in the mainstream are way too reticent about sharing the stories that give our faith life. We are so afraid of sharing our stories inappropriately, that we don’t even share them when it’s appropriate.

It’s true it is risky to share these stories. Mary doesn’t trust just anyone with her story. But here in the church, in the Body of Christ we ought to be able to provide a safe place for the stories to be told. Because these stories are so enriching for the church. In fact I would even say they are necessary for the church to survive.

I’m not suggesting that we have a time of personal testimony as part of our Sunday worship service. I am suggesting that in private moments, at least with our children and grandchildren and closest friends, we can be frank about the wonderful, even miraculous things God has done for us. How else will they know?

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” What a tragedy if that story had not been told! What a blessing that it has been told!