

Homily for December 19th, 2021 – Fourth Sunday of Advent

When we want to find prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), it's not a bad idea to turn to the Prophet Isaiah, who lived some 700+ years before the birth of Jesus. But apart from



major prophets like Isaiah, Elijah, and Jeremiah, God also uses minor prophets, like Micah, whom we heard from in that first reading. And then, as if to make the point that anyone and everyone—prophet or not--can be used to bring about God's Kingdom, God used the elderly Elizabeth and the teenager Mary. Then it gets even more bizarre—God uses you and me in real time. Why? Because the revelation of God's Kingdom and God's love still needs to unfold for our wounded and hungry world. This gospel story, that we traditionally call the Visitation (Mary visiting Elizabeth), has a lot to teach us, but let's just look at a couple of features. Let's go back in time, though. Micah, who also lived some 700+ years before the birth of Jesus, speaks of Bethlehem as **a little clan of Judea**. From this town, of no significance, the Messiah will be born. He not only **will be great and bring peace to the ends of the earth, he will be peace** itself.

Now, let's go back 1000 years before the birth of Jesus. God chooses a shepherd boy--of all people, named David--to be his choice for King. Again, God delighted in choosing the underdog, and to this day, the game plan has not change. As king, David inherits the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, written by the finger of God and passed on to Moses, 300 years prior. When presented with the holiest relics of the Jewish faith, the Law of God on stone tablets, David feels unworthy and says, **"How can the ark of the covenant come to me?"** These are almost the exact words of Elizabeth 1000 years later when Mary visits her. She realizes, in this pregnant teenage, that the real presence of God—flesh and blood, not stones—has come into her presence. So, she says, **"Why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me?"** The Bible, as with present day life, reaffirm the saying: God doesn't call the qualified but qualifies the called.

I like this Visitation story for another reason. It's a story of the birth of the church, although Pentecost is theologians' hands down choice. Mary, immediately after hearing from the Angel Gabriel that she is pregnant, with the Messiah no less, goes with haste to visit the aged Elizabeth. The Angel Gabriel is a name dropper. He has told Mary that her cousin, in her old age, is six months pregnant. Both Mary and Elizabeth, one a virgin and the other too old to be pregnant, have been given a promise by the angel. Each are carrying the promise of God within them. Mary's job is to remind Elizabeth, that come what may, "God's promise will come about in you, Elizabeth, because God is the faithful One." Elizabeth's job is to remind Mary, that come what may, "God's promise will bear fruit in, Mary, because God always keeps God's promises." That's how the Church was born, and how the Church sustains itself to this day. My job is to remind you that God's promise is growing within you, so stay close to it, even and especially on the days you want to give up. And your job is to do the same for me.

Here's a modern-day Visitation story, a true story of kids reminding other kids that there's something more going on than meets the eye. It comes from the late Wayne Dyer whose books you may have read or perhaps you saw him on PBS.

(Chush is a school for Yiddish-speaking Orthodox Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn, N.Y. It caters to children with learning disabilities). At a Chush fundraiser dinner, the father of a Chush child delivered a speech that would never be forgotten by all who attended. After extolling the school and its dedicated staff, he cried out, "Where is the perfection in my son, Shaya? Everything God does is done with perfection. But my child cannot understand things as other children do. My child cannot remember facts and figures as other children do. Where is God's perfection?" The audience was shocked by the question, pained by the father's anguish, and stilled by the piercing query. "I believe," the father answered, "that when God brings a child like this into the world, the perfection that He seeks is in the way people react to this child." He then told the following story about his son, Shaya.

One afternoon Shaya and his father walked past a park where some boys Shaya knew were playing baseball. Shaya asked, "Do you think they'll let me play?" Shaya's father knew that his son was not at all athletic and that most of the boys would not want him on their team. But Shaya's father understood that if his son was chosen to play, it would give him a sense of belonging. Shaya's father approached one of the boys on the field and asked if Shaya could play. The boy looked around for guidance from his teammates. Getting none, he took matters into his own hands and said, "We're losing by six runs, and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team, and we'll try to put him up to bat in the ninth inning."

Shaya's father was ecstatic as Shaya smiled broadly. Shaya was told to put on a glove and to go and play in center field. In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shaya's team scored a few runs but was still behind by three. In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shaya's team scored again, and now had two outs and the bases loaded, with the potential winning run on base, Shaya was scheduled to be up. Would the team actually let Shaya bat at this juncture and give away their chance to win the game?

Surprisingly, Shaya was given the bat. Everyone knew that it was all but impossible because Shaya didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, let alone hit with it. However, as Shaya stepped up to the plate, the pitcher moved a few steps to lob the ball in softly so Shaya could at least be able to make contact. The first pitch came in, and Shaya swung clumsily and missed. One of Shaya's teammates came up to Shaya, and together they held the bat and faced the pitcher waiting for the next pitch. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly to Shaya. As the pitch came in, Shaya and his teammate swung the bat, and together they hit a slow ground ball to the pitcher. The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and could easily have thrown the ball to the first baseman. Shaya would have been out and that would have ended the game. Instead, the pitcher took the ball and threw it on a high arc to right field far beyond the reach of the first baseman. Everyone started yelling, "Shaya, run to first." Never in his life had Shaya run to first. He scampered down the baseline wide-eyed and startled. By

the time he reached the first base, the right-fielder had the ball. He could have thrown the ball to the second baseman who would tag out Shaya, who was still running.

But the right-fielder understood what the pitcher's intentions were, so he threw the ball high and far over the third baseman's head. Everyone yelled, "Run to second, run to second." Shaya ran toward second base as the runners ahead of him deliriously circled the bases toward home. As Shaya reached second base, the opposing shortstop ran to him, turned him in the direction of third base, and shouted, "Run to third." As Shaya rounded third, the boys from both teams ran behind him screaming, "Shaya, run home." Shaya ran home, stepped on home plate, and all 18 boys lifted him on their shoulders and made him the hero, as he had just hit a "grand slam" and won the game for his team.

"That day," said the father softly with tears rolling down his face, "those 18 boys reached their level of God's perfection." The boys reminded Shaya, as he reminded them, that's God's promise was growing within them. It's Mary and Elizabeth, you and I, the Visitation all over again.

Fr. Phil