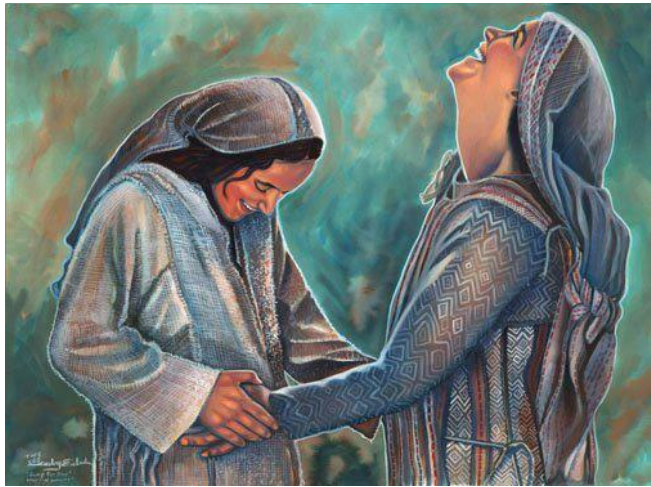


Homily for Sunday, December 22, 2024



Besides having the privilege of being in three of the four biggest museums in the world, I've also enjoyed the gems I've found in many smaller, local museums. Apparently, the most replicated image by far, hanging on the walls of the world's museums, is the image of the Madonna and child,

the mother and baby. I've also seen a ton of images of today's gospel passage, what we traditionally call the Visitation, pregnant Mary visiting pregnant Elizabeth. Myself, I can't draw a stickman without screwing it up. However, not a single portrayal of Mary visiting Elizabeth has done a thing for me even though they were painted by the world's finest artists. I need art that I can get into, art that stirs something deep within me. What we usually get, in its place, is Mary with a halo visiting Elizabeth with a halo. (How they ever washed their hair or got any house work done wearing those halos is beyond me). Mary is regularly portrayed as the perfect flower of God's creation, entertains an angel, learns that she is full of grace, is to become the mother of the Messiah, and in her superb charity runs to her aged cousin Elizabeth to selflessly help Elizabeth in *her* pregnancy. It all leaves me wondering if we haven't done a disservice to Mary, Elizabeth, and to the entire meaning of this wonderful story for our own lives.

Six months prior to Mary visiting Elizabeth, she is visited by the angel Gabriel telling her that she will be the mother of the long-awaited Messiah. We call this the Annunciation. I don't think the Annunciation was an angelic visit to a queen who was kneeling in prayer. Rather, it was probably the unexpected breaking into the life of a teenage peasant who likely was taking out the garbage. Mary might be as young as 14, but she is shrewd. Mary believes the angel, but she still is full of common sense and wants to check her facts. She doesn't run to a scripture scholar or the priest, instead, she makes a beeline to another woman. Only another woman, a pregnant woman, will do.

Mary hurries to Elizabeth and before she can ask the delicate question Elizabeth takes one look at Mary and says, "Before you ask, Mary, I know why you're here. Yes, my dear, we're both pregnant!" Mary now knows it is true and the only thing she can do is break into song. We call that song the Magnificat ("My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord..."). What does she sing about? She sings about God's subversion. She sings about how God absolutely delights in reversing all plans and designs. God chooses the little instead of the big. God chooses the weak over the strong. God chooses the powerless instead of the powerful. God makes fruitful the wombs of both a barren woman and a virgin. Mary and Elizabeth must have cried and hugged each other and laughed ecstatically. By the way, this is the only time in the entire New Testament that there is a dialogue recorded between two women.

Mary knew that she was chosen not because of her purity and goodness—later generations would get sidetracked into that—but because she was nothing. She

was a peasant teenage girl from the backcountry, and *still* God broke into her life. We sing about Mary's maternity because she deserves it. Mary sings about it because she knows she doesn't deserve it. As long as we project Mary as the perfect woman of queenly stature, then we know it's absolutely right that she should be the mother of the Messiah, that the break in of God's word into her life was completely fitting and totally to be expected. She is, after all, a quality person. She is holy, the greatest of all the saints. And what else would a great saintly woman do but forget herself and run to take care of her elderly cousin? The result is that we applaud Mary and go about our business because we are certainly not made of the same stuff as Mary and therefore can expect no breaking-in of God's word into our lives. And Mary weeps over that.

She weeps because we have it all wrong. She didn't sing about herself. She sang about God and how God turns everything upside down—for her, for you, and for me. The Visitation tells us that what God could do in and through a poor peasant girl, God could and would do to all lonely, lowly, broken and insignificant people such as you and me. If you don't believe me, look to Jesus for he is the pattern. He was born in a barn, laid in a food trough for animals, hobnobbed with the poor and destitute, was crucified as a common criminal, and was buried in a borrowed tomb.

The gospels speak consistently about how God's saving word breaks into the lives of little people. It's what God delights in, pulling "fast ones" on people especially those who think they are invincible hiding behind power and money. It's even the basis of one of Jesus' prayers when he says, "***I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven***

and earth for hiding these things from the learned and clever and revealing them to little children. Yes, for that is what your sneaky, subversive, fly-under-the-radar desire likes to do!" Jesus is just as subversive as his Father in heaven. When he sends his Apostles out on a mission he tells them to be "innocent as doves and sneaky as a snake" (Mt 10:16). He doesn't try to change laws or even people's minds. Jesus is more subversive than that...he tries to change peoples' hearts. My favorite prayer comes from St. Philip Neri, the only practical joker the Church canonized as a saint. St. Philip prayed, "Lord, change me for the better, but don't let me know you're doing it!" Don't let me know you're doing it, because if I did know you were doing it, I would probably stop you.

Jesus, the most subversive person ever to live, targets the hearts of the most willing, the most docile and flexible. He starts with the lowly, the people who have few resources in life. These are the people who hunger most for what he has to offer. When you're rich, powerful, and influential, you hardly need God at all. It's only in our poverty, which comes in a thousand forms, do we learn to call on God.

I think in some way, the story of the Visitation, where both Mary and Elizabeth call on each other and, more importantly, call on God, was repeated in Victoria Park in Moncton on Wednesday past. A memorial service was held for the 51 homeless, near-homeless, and addicted people who died in Moncton just in 2024 alone. The tragic number balloons to 128 over the past three years. At this vigil, some community workers shared how these people were not mere statistics recorded at the coroner's office, but they were loved and are missed. They mattered. 60% of them died as a result of accidental overdose; some took their own lives. Despite

their struggles physically, mentally, and socially, they were loved imperfectly by someone and perfectly by God.

Mary and Elizabeth tell us that God's preferred place among us is with the poor and uneducated, the powerless and lonely. Humility seems to be what Christ seeks when he looks for a home in our hearts today. Halos aside, the human Mary and the human Elizabeth have much to teach us about this oh so human Jesus.

~Fr. Phil