

Luke 1: 39-45 "Coffee Chat" Rev. Janet Chapman 12/19/21

There is a church I heard of that started meeting together in a coffee shop of all places. The minister would show up around 10:00 every Sunday morning and just started chit chatting with whoever was there. He made a point not to interrupt those who looked like they were working and he never said anything about church to anyone. He just visited about the weather, the local happenings, inquired about families, how folks ended up in the area, and so on. People found him easy to talk to and they opened up about their lives, not completely, but usually about something that was weighing on their mind at the time. When they got around to asking about the minister's life, he would state that his work was his life and vice versa. He told them that one of the joys of what he did was in the simple act of conversation, like neighbors used to have with one another across the back fence, at the playground, or around a dinner table. That is when he would say that after a really good conversation, he felt like he had been to church. This, of course, caught the listener off guard wanting to know more. That is when he would explain that it took a lot of practice, but if one set their mind to it, they could be in worship 24/7, because God meets us not just in the sublimely holy but in the common, everyday moments of living.

There is no place in scripture where that is so aptly portrayed than in the birth of Jesus. True, it is that ultimate story of God's love for humanity, but it is acted out in field where shepherds watched their flocks and in a manger cave near a first-century inn. It is the eternal moment when the Word became flesh and lived among us but it came to pass through a teenage girl from an insignificant village. And part of it happened in a coffee shop, well not exactly, although Starbucks would love that wouldn't they? But figuratively speaking, it was a

coffee shop or maybe a back fence or around a kitchen table. What I am saying which first originated with Ellsworth Kalas is that Christmas shows us that no part of life is unimportant to God, and that none of it is beyond God's interest. And if that is so, not one of us is beyond God's care and concern. The nativity story we will hear once more Friday evening dramatically reveals that God is not a far-distant, inapproachable object of worship, but one who chose to come into our world and live in our midst – and to do so in the most ordinary of circumstances.

So I'd like to take us to one of those common settings, a kitchen table. If Christmas can come to a manger, it can just as easily come to a kitchen table. Mary has just been given a beautiful but overwhelming message that she is going to have a baby. "With haste", the Gospel writer tells us, she heads for the hills, not slowing down until she reaches Elizabeth's home. She doesn't isolate herself or keep it a secret; she doesn't try and play Lone Ranger and go it alone but seeks out a fellow-traveler. She finds someone with whom she can talk, someone compassionate enough to listen, wise enough to understand what you're saying between the lines, and loving enough not to judge but rather to nourish. Debie Thomas prophetically asks, "Could there possibly be a better job description for the church, a better prototype for Christian community? What would it be like if we sought each other out with the trust and openness of Mary? What would it be like if we, like Elizabeth, receive with tenderness the marginalized and vulnerable people who dare to come to us, seeking refuge and nurture? What would it be like if our communal worship echoed the full-throated call-and-response of these two kinswomen who find themselves caught up in God's bold, risky, world-changing work, and decide to find strength in each other's company?" We imagine Elizabeth embracing Mary as she arrives and moving her to the kitchen table, giving her a cup of coffee, and sitting down with her in

gratitude. With that common, everyday action, Luke essentially describes for us the first Christian worship service ever in history. Mary and Elizabeth – the young and the old, the unmarried and the married, the socially established and the socially vulnerable, one who has lived a long life of disappointment and one who faces a life of uncertainty– finding common ground in their love for Jesus as they sit at the table. As Henri Nouwen describes it, “God’s most radical intervention into history was listened to and received in community.”

Mary had done no more than call out a greeting to Elizabeth when the child, who was to become John the Baptist, leaped in Elizabeth’s womb. Elizabeth was in her 6th month of her pregnancy, and when she saw Mary, it was as if the baby responded with the excitement of holy recognition. The sequel to this scene comes 30 years later, when John the Baptist sees Jesus approaching him and he says, “Here is the Lamb of the God who takes away the sin of the world!” But something more happens here for the text tells us that Elizabeth herself is filled with the Holy Spirit! It is the Spirit that helps Elizabeth give to Mary what she most needs – a reminder that even after the angel leaves, the light fades, and the vision recedes, God’s faithfulness remains. This is the calling of the church as well – to encourage one another when life grows rough which it did for Mary quickly on, giving birth in a smelly stable, fleeing as a refugee to Egypt, then watching her firstborn beaten, mocked and killed. Elizabeth blesses Mary as the church is to bless you and I keeping us aware and grounded in connection to God’s life-changing work within us. Today as the church we are reminded that there is no unjust system, oppressive hierarchy, or arrogant leadership that God will not upend. There is no promise God will fail to keep; no broken or exploited life God will not save; no place or circumstance where God will not be found.

So if you are wondering where you might experience the worshipping church, remember that it is meant to happen where you are; God enters our ordinary days, our routine patterns, sometimes at a coffee shop, a neighbor's fence, or a kitchen table to reveal the glories of Christmas. Our problems erupt when we forget this truth or get misled by our own self-absorbed nature. So here in communal worship we come with haste to be reminded of blessings and perspectives beyond our own. That is the value of community, where we can rejoice in the Holy Spirit as we come to the aid of one another. So hear the words of Elizabeth to you this day: Blessed are you who believe that God will fulfill what God has promised; blessed are you indeed! Amen.