

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario

Sunday, December 22, 2019

Rev. Dr. David McKane

The Visit

Micah 5: 2-5a.

Psalm 80.

Luke 1: 39-45.

This is my last Sunday with you. I will be here Christmas Eve, of course, but some of you may not, so I would like to say, Thank You. Thank you for these past two months. You are a wonderful congregation, evidenced by the solid years of the ministries of Ed and Andrew and it has been a privilege for me to benefit from their work. I wish you well in your search and look forward to the next chapter in your life as a vibrant congregation in this great city.

Prayer. Visit us with angels, gracious and holy One, angels that touch our lips with song, angels that touch our lives with grace, angels that wrap their little fingers around our hearts, angels that become our heart's delight ushering us into your holy presence. Amen.

To get to Ein Karem from Nazareth involves a long walk over many hills, first to get to Jerusalem, then over Mt. Herzl and down through the woods where the present day Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial sits, down into the coolness of the valley and the little village of Ein Karem. Today it is an artist's colony and the site of the Hadesseh Medical Centre that houses the twelve famous Chagall windows. For a pregnant woman it would have been quite a journey and one can only imagine Mary and Elizabeth sitting under a bougainvillaea tree sharing with one another, neither knowing then what an impact their respective children would have upon the world, never realizing, either in the joy of their pregnancy or in the eager anticipation of their birthing, the pain that each would have to bear in the death of their first born. But that is to get ahead of the story. At this point something virginal is about to happen, someone new is about to be born, a new creation is about to break out of the womb into the dazzling light of a new day.

Luke wants to underscore that. Luke does not want us to miss that and so Elizabeth and Zechariah and their child become his gospel version of Abraham and Sarah and their child Isaac and the covenant God fulfilled through them. Luke hopes that those hearing this story or reading this story will recall God's visit to Abraham and Sarah, God's promise to Hannah and Elkanah, God's visit to Hagar and Ishmael, God's promise to Mary and Joseph, God's visit to us in Jesus. In the telling of our faith story such visits

demonstrate an openness to God's spirit. Such visits proclaim a sea change is about to happen, that a new chapter is about to be written. Such visits are often accompanied by epiphanies and declaratory songs of praise. It's the Bible's way of saying, Listen up, folks! God is about to rearrange the furniture.

To get to Washington, D.C. and the Chair of The Joint Chiefs of Staff from South Bronx involves a long journey over many hills and down through many woods and over one or two obstacles. When former U.S. Secretary of State, Colin Powell looks back on his remarkable life he notes an encounter with a Russian Jewish man, Jay Sickser, who ran a children's furniture store in his childhood neighbourhood. Mr. Sickser offered him a job one day and thus began a seven-year relationship of friendship and mentoring that impacted on Powell's life. The footnote to this story, says Powell, is that Mr. Sickser's son-in-law inherited the store, eventually sold it and retired to Florida. Many years go by but one day the son-in-law opens the paper and sees that Powell has been named national security advisor under President Reagan and says, "Hey, that's the kid from the store." After decades they reconnect and are still in touch. "You never know who's going to touch your life or how," says Powell, "...a teacher, a neighbour, somebody who works hard to support their family, they are all around us."

To get from Stockholm, Sweden to the United Nations in New York city is a journey of 6313 kilometres and to get there by sailboat takes several weeks depending on the winds and the weather but that is how Greta Thunberg got there to remind world leaders and the rest of us the critical nature of climate change. In many respects she is a prophet crying in the wilderness like so many before her, like a young David Suzuki. Time will tell whether or not we are courageous enough to make and take tough measures in the short run that will pay dividends in the long.

Now something like that has happened to each one of us when we take the time to ponder our lives, a chance encounter, a relationship, a career shift, an "aha" moment. A literal child may not have leapt in a literal womb, but something went click, the stars aligned, a piece of the puzzle fell into place, a door opens, an angel visits, opportunity knocks, a crisis confronts. Describe it how you will but something happened that changes our lives for the better and changes our future.

Frederick Buechner in his book, **The Clown In The Belfry**, tells of a particularly dark time in his life. One of his children is sick and in his anxiety for her he was, he says, in his own way as sick as she was. Then one day the phone rings. It was a minister friend from Charlotte, North Carolina, which is about 800 miles from where Buechner lived in

Vermont. "I assumed he was calling from Charlotte," says Buechner, "but he wasn't. He was in an Inn about twenty minutes away from my house. He'd known I was having trouble, he said, and he thought it might be good to have an extra friend around for a day or two. The reason he did not call from Charlotte was that he knew I would tell him not to do anything so crazy so for Heaven's sake he did something crazier still which was to come those 800 miles without telling me that he was coming...he was there for me. I don't think anything we found to say to each other amounted to very much or had anything particularly religious about it. I don't even remember spending much time talking about my troubles with him. We just took a couple of walks....smoked our pipes, drove around to see the countryside and that was about it.

But, says Buechner, I have never forgotten how he came all that distance just for that...I also believe that although as far as I can remember we never as much as mentioned the name of Christ, Christ was as much in the air we breathed those few days as the smoke of our pipes was in the air...I believe that for a little time we both of us touched the hem of Christ's garment, where both of us, for a little time anyway, healed... (p.156)

In the same book Buechner talks of the visit of God at Christmas. Well, "it was thousands of years ago and thousands of miles away, but it is a visit that for all the madness and cynicism and indifference and despair we have never quite forgotten.....this story that faith tells in the fairy-tale language of faith is not just that God is, which God knows is a lot to swallow in itself much of the time, but that God *comes*. Comes here, in great humility. There is nothing much humbler than being born; naked, totally helpless, not much bigger than a loaf of bread...and to *us* came. *For us* came. Is it true... not just the way fairy tales are true but as the truest of all truths? Almighty God, are you true?" Then Buechner adds;

" ...When you are standing up to your neck in darkness, how do you say yes to that question? You say Yes, I suppose, the only way faith can ever say it if it is honest with itself. You say Yes with your fingers crossed. You say it with your heart in your mouth. Maybe that way we can say Yes. He visited us. The world has never been quite the same since. It is still a very dark world, in some ways darker than ever before, but the darkness is different because he keeps getting born into it. The threat of holocaust. The threat of poisoning the earth and sea and air. The threat of our own deaths. The broken marriage, the child in pain, the lost chance. Anyone who has ever known him has known him perhaps better in the dark than anywhere else because it is in the dark where he seems to visit most often. " (p.125)

Ah, Bethlehem Ephratah, out of you will come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel,.... for unto us a child is born...and he will establish justice with righteousness from this time forward....

In this season of Advent, amidst the tinsel and the trees, the frenetic shopping and the over-scheduled day-timers don't miss the visit of the Christ-child. Don't miss it, not for Christ's sake, but for your own!

Amen! And to God be the glory!