

Homily, 23 December 2012

**Fourth Sunday of Advent**

Micah 5:1-4a; Psalm 80:2-3,15-16,18-19; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45

*The greeting of Mary and Elizabeth.*



Some years ago I read an essay by a woman about her family gatherings. Although I don't remember the writer's name or where the essay was published, I do remember the essential parts, and can retell it well enough ...

Her family was large and very traditional: lots of aunts, and uncles, and cousins. They lived in the same town ... many of them lived in same neighborhood.

She noticed that after they ate whatever meal brought them together, people would segregate into groups to talk: usually the women, her mom and aunts in the kitchen; and the men, her dad and uncles in the living room.

While she was in high school she thought the men were the more interesting group. They talked about business, politics, and sports. The women, well, they just seemed to gossip: talking about children, family and neighbors.

Then one particular Thanksgiving day, during her freshman year in college, she had an epiphany – because she finally listened to what the women were actually discussing.

The women -- her mom, several aunts, and an older cousin -- they weren't gossiping.

They were concerned about the children, how they were doing not just at school, but in life. They were sharing their insights and wisdom, sharing burdens when there wasn't much else to be done.

When they talked about the neighbors and the people in the parish, it was about helping out when someone was sick or had some other trouble. They coordinated visiting, making meals, watching the house, driving them to appointments.

They also laughed, told jokes, traded recipes, ... but the extent to which they were concerned with the common good and supported each other and their community with works of mercy, that really surprised her. She felt a little ashamed that she hadn't noticed sooner.

As is often the case, she reflected, the presence of God is found in the ordinary, mundane lives of His faithful, ... in the hidden lives of ordinary saints.



*“Thus says the Lord: You, Bethlehem-Ephrathah too small to be among the clans of Judah,”* wrote the prophet Micah, *“from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel.”*

*“And how does this happen to me,”* exclaimed Elizabeth, *“that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”*

On the day that Mary visited Elizabeth, do you ever think about what was going on in the rest of the world?

Tiberus was planning his campaign to quell the revolt in Germania. Ovid was writing his great poem *Metamorphosis*. Quirinius was planning, as instructed, for the census of Judea. What was Herod doing that day, or Caesar?

Did any of them know that the most important meeting that day occurred in a small town in the hill country of Judea, between two ordinary women?

For in the womb of Mary, in that little hidden space, heaven and earth had met. The Word of God had become man.



Who would have imagined that God would use the very human method of pregnancy and childbirth as the way of coming into the world? ... although, it is *his* way! To us, it just seems like a lot of trouble; indeed, he *is* the God of surprises.

Because of our limitations we don't experience God directly. Rather God's approach to us is both incarnational and sacramental. He uses the things of this world, the things of the flesh, to reach out and draw us to him.

He comes as a babe in the manger and in the human words of the scriptures and the prophets.

He shares his life with us through bread and wine, water and oil, the touch of human hands, and the words of solemn vows.

We are drawn to him through sacramental things: candle flames, beads on a chain, wooden crosses, prayer books that fit in our pockets, hymns and carols, green wreaths with red berries.

These things that mediate God's presence for us are often quite plain and ordinary: as ordinary as two women in the hill country of Judea greeting each other with joyful news, or the stirring of a babe in the womb.

It is perhaps most amazing that God is with us today in our ordinary human lives. Although all of us struggle with sin and darkness, if we believe and accept the Faith, the Holy Spirit abides in us: guiding us, consoling us, strengthening us.

So be alert ... God may manifest his presence through the most humble of people: family and friends gathered in a kitchen with a glass of wine after dinner -- discussing the common good, planning works of mercy and doing the dishes.

For the last three weeks we have been preparing for Christmas. It is the season of the Incarnation, of the Word made flesh. It lasts for twenty days, until the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord on January 13<sup>th</sup>.

Don't let it end on Tuesday night. Gather with your friends and family in the coming days and celebrate. Go visiting. Go caroling. Sit up late at night in light of the Christmas tree and just be still.

What season is quite like Christmas? On the calendar it is full of feasts and celebrations; it laden with wonderful traditions of food, and songs, and parties. It is the warmest of seasons at a time when the days are cold and dark. Don't box it up and put it away too soon.

God is with us ... Rejoice!