

“THE MOMENT YOUR GREETING REACHED MY EARS” (Lk 1:44)

Luke tells us in the Third Gospel that Mary “set off in haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth” (1:39-40). We can close our eyes for a moment and picture the scene. Mary has traveled a long way and is tired. Tiny beads of sweat, mixed with dust, have formed on her forehead, on the end of her nose and above her upper lip. Her feet are the color of the dusty earth and she longs to wash and cool them off with fresh water. Even though she still has a bit of fruit and dry bread in the bag hanging on her shoulder, she is hungry, but that can wait.

First things first. It is good to see Elizabeth, and Mary greets her with utter joy, throwing her arms around her shoulders, feeling the pregnant belly of her kinswoman push into her own belly -- almost as if the children they were both carrying in their wombs were kissing each other. Mary cannot believe that at last Elizabeth will have a baby. Who would have ever thought! The hug lasts a long while, and soon tears gather up the dusty beads of sweat, intermingling and flowing together like a great river of gratitude down their faces and deep into their hearts.

“When Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit...” (v. 41). For us preachers this is a key point of the text: *When Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary*. Mary speaks to Elizabeth, and does so in such a way that Elizabeth is filled with the Spirit and experiences in her very body the presence of God’s saving love. It is the combination of greeting and embrace, Word and gesture, that communicates the grace of the Holy Spirit to Elizabeth. Word and gesture are for the preacher what canvas and paint are for the artist.

Mary is a preacher, and as preacher she uses the gift that God has given her, the Word she bears, to artfully share her gift with her kinswoman. The gift does not belong to her alone. She, better than anyone, knows the sheer gratuitousness of God's mercy. "Freely you have received; freely you are to give" (Mt 10:8). The Word is pure gift, and the preacher is sent from the very moment that he or she says *yes* to receiving the gift to craft this gift in a way that others can receive it, as well. To preach is to be called to be a seed of life which freely gives itself away by being sown in the fertile ground of the *other*.

Mary's hasty visit to the home of Elizabeth certainly was not unrelated to her own life and difficult predicament. Mary's life was in danger in a society that stoned adulterers and marginalized prostitutes (Her pregnancy would have been seen in this light as soon as the "news" broke back in small-town Nazareth.), but she did not think only of herself. She was aware that Elizabeth had suffered long years of rejection due to her barrenness, and wanted nothing more than to be with her at this moment of mystery and grace. Elizabeth needed her and would, at the same time, understand her. Although she arrived exhausted, the very first thing that Mary did when she arrived at the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah was to *greet* her beloved kinswoman. The Word she carried in her womb danced off of her tongue and raced through her embracing arms. Mary's greeting was a perfect expression of prophetic compassion, the fruit of a preacher whose words and gestures make palpable the saving balm of the Good News.

It was Mary's first *real* public preaching, her *debut*, and Elizabeth's response witnesses to the power of the preached word: "Why should I be honored with a visit from the mother of my Lord? Look, *the moment your greeting reached my ears*, the child in my womb leapt for joy" (Lk. 1:43-44). Is preaching not about serving as an instrument for the healing, loving *greeting of God* to reach the ears and hearts of God's people? Elizabeth experienced -- tangibly -- in her womb and

in the depths of her whole being the inexpressible joy of the miracle that God was working in her life. Mary had literally poured herself out, giving away the very Word which God had given to her. *This* is the self-revelation called for by the artist, a paschal self-giving which the preacher accomplishes by mixing an array of colors on the palate of Word and gesture.

It is not that Mary *gave* God to Elizabeth in her preaching. Preaching is not about *handing out God* to those who do not have God. Mary spoke and reached out in such a way that Elizabeth *knew* that God was already with her. Mary's greeting served as a mirror, reflecting the indwelling presence of God in her beloved kinswoman. This is an important aspect of the grace of preaching. Our words are not *God*; they are only mirrors, works of art which reflect the light of God already present in the other. Mary's words awakened Elizabeth to the miraculous joy of her own child leaping within her, and because of this, Elizabeth knew that the promise of God had been fulfilled in her very own life. Like Mary, she, too, experienced God as Savior, as *Emmanuel*, God-with-us.

For too many centuries there has been a burdensome understanding of preaching as *giving God to others*. Preachers were expected to *deliver*, to *give* (or worse yet, to *sell*) something to the people. After awhile, the preacher begins to believe that he or she really *is* the source of the Good News, and the listening community a group of passive recipients. The result is disastrous for the whole church -- cheap art produced for mass-marketing. This supply-demand model of preaching strips preachers of their own humanity and artistic creativity, and forces the "listeners" into a subservient role, denying them the experience of discovering for themselves the indwelling presence of God. Certainly *not* what happened that dusty day in a town in the hill country of Judah.

What transpires between Mary and Elizabeth in the beginning of Luke's gospel is as beautiful as two figure skaters skating in tandem; it is what good

preaching is all about. It is a mutual sharing in the Word as illuminating power, a communal experience in which everyone sees him or herself mirrored in the Word, discovering through the preaching event the saving presence of God. Mary *greet*s Elizabeth with words that reflect gospel light back into the heart of Elizabeth, freeing Elizabeth to discover, literally to *un-cover*, the God-presence within herself. In essence Elizabeth experiences that she, like Mary, is *Mother of God*, for she touches deep within herself the presence of God. As Meister Eckhart, the medieval Dominican mystic, says so poignantly, “What does it avail me that this birth [of God’s Word in the soul] is always happening, if it does not happen in me?” Through Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth experiences the birth of God’s Word in herself.

And then a very remarkable thing happens. In response to Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth, in turn, assumes her role as preacher. It is her turn to speak: “Why should I be honored with a visit from the *mother of my Lord*?” Elizabeth does exactly what Mary has done: with her own words she reflects light onto the God-presence within Mary, calling Mary *mother of the Lord*. Perhaps it is only at this moment that Mary actually awakens to the full reality of her *yes* to bearing in her womb the Word of God. Elizabeth’s words pierce Mary’s soul with a light so marvelous that Mary sees for the first time the gift that she carries within. She who is preacher *par excellence* hears the Word and she responds magnifying the Lord, rejoicing in the God who saves.

Mary and Elizabeth are just two women in the long history of preachers of the Good News of Jesus Christ. But their example, the *first* Christian preaching, lays the foundation for all subsequent preaching. Both women speak words filled with light, truly *Good News*, awakening one another to the indwelling presence of God. *This* is true preaching.

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