

God Comes Home 4: *At Home in Our Hearts*

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Luke 1:39-45

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?"

⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Micah 5:2-5a

² *But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.

³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labour has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.

⁴ And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;

⁵ and he shall be the one of peace.

According to biblical scholars, there are at least two primary ways to understand the Bible. One is to see the Bible as a collection of books that emerged out of vigorous fights over ideas and influence at the time of their writing. These biblical scholars probe the history and life-setting of the material when it was written. They explore the text as emerging from a tug-of-war of competing ideologies and sources of power. We see this particularly in Advent's prophecies – the power of God at work against the brutal powers of oppression at a particular time. Other biblical scholars seek to discover a cohesive voice resounding in the deep recesses of the texts, a voice that rises above the historical setting and speaks across the ages beyond the social struggle at the time of its writing. These different approaches may seem to move in opposite directions, according to my old friend and biblical scholar Walter Bruggemann, but he says they actually complement each other. And both are needed. Bruggemann says the first approach is to hear the Bible *in the fray*, while the second seeks to hear scripture *above the fray*¹.

During these weeks of Advent, we have largely focused on the gospel preparing us for the coming of Jesus in the fray. We have listened to the proclamation of old familiar readings by recalling the specific historical setting, noting - for example - Luke's repeated mention of political rulers

¹ Walter Brueggemann quoted in the introduction to *A Surprising God* by Tom Long and Donyell McCray, p. vii.

like King Herod, Tiberius, Pontious Pilate – all of them cruel, power-hungry tyrants. At that fraught moment when Jesus was born, we heard John the Baptist call us to a Christian ethic – to seek and offer forgiveness, to share what we have with those who have nothing, to be alert to the coming of God in the fray of current historical realities. Today, our readings invite us to ponder God’s coming above the fray. These too are texts from a particular time but intentionally speak of timeless truths about God’s involvement with the human race.

Micah begins with a reference to the enduring promises made to God’s covenant people *from ancient days*. The prophet points toward Bethlehem, that little town whose name means “House of Bread,” and uses the time-honored image of God as Shepherd who will feed the flock and lead the people to live in security under a reign of peace. Then Luke takes us into an ordinary living room where two pregnant women do what pregnant women always do. They seek out the company of one another; they share what it feels like to carry a baby; they find in one another’s prenatal waiting the miracle of bearing new life. These readings take us *above the fray*, to that hopeful, holy place of mystery and wonder, of love and joy. The ordinary nature of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth is meant to bring the gospel home to us in a very personal way. The pregnancies of Mary and Elizabeth speak across the ages, beyond the clash of political and social

struggle, to reveal the presence of God in the deep recesses of the human heart. A universal truth of God's love for the world is revealed through the ordinary lives of these women together flipping through the pages of *What to Expect When You're Expecting*.

Luke has made us aware of their difficulties – Mary is an unwed teenaged mother to be, and Elizabeth is way too old to be having a baby. We have already been told they are bearing children who *will turn many people to the Lord* and their sons – both of them – will lose their lives doing it. But before all that high drama begins to unfold we are meant to know that God comes to us in the small details of life, the seemingly inconsequential moments, as we navigate our difficulties and find ourselves longing and hoping for a brighter tomorrow. We are also invited to share with one another these holy moments of welcoming God into our lives and into our hearts.

Biblical scholar, Paul Duke, writes that after Mary's perplexing encounter with the Angel Gabriel, when she consented to the news of her coming child, she had to do something with it. IN her going with haste to Elizabeth to share it, she was - in fact - confirming and deepening the truth of what Gabriel had said. Likening their encounter to the community of the church, Paul Duke observes: "This visitation is the first gathering of

the community of Jesus. It invites us to recall how much we need each other... Both of these women, impossibly pregnant, embody how improbable and how subversive the church can be. When life is hard, we companion each other; we are young and old together nurturing wisdom; we help one another. Paul Duke concludes, “Against all odds amid the challenges we face, we draw fresh courage from each other; and together we celebrate all that we share as bearers of the promise of Christ together.”²

Like Elizabeth and Mary, then, as different as we can be from each other, we find ourselves expecting and rejoicing together. We welcome this timeless good news, that comes to us *above the fray*, that together we may nurture our communal trust that God has come to make a home in the human heart.

Frederick Buechner, Presbyterian minister and writer, was almost seventy-years-old when he wrote a book entitled, *Longing for Home*. The longing Buechner describes does not refer to some physical address, of course, but to a deeper and more profound sense of longing for home... that place where one is most deeply known; and where a sense of peace pervades. In the early pages of the book, Buechner recalls an experience he had in the

² Paul Simpson Duke, *Connections: Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Year C, Vol. 1, p. 61-63.

winter of 1953. He was a young, struggling writer, single, twenty-seven years old, and living in New York City. Though he was not a regular churchgoer, his apartment was next door to Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. So Buechner began attending services there, drawn in by the preaching of George Buttrick. Feeling depressed about a novel he was trying to write and, with time on his hands, Buechner found that Buttrick's sermons possessed what he described as an "oddly ragged eloquence." As a preacher, Buttrick could take words you had heard all your life, Buechner remembered, and make you hear the holiness in them as though for the first time.

One year just before Christmas, George Buttrick told the congregation of overhearing someone else on the church steps the week before ask a friend, "Are you going home for Christmas?" Then, Buttrick paused. And Buechner describes the next moment this way... how the old preacher, his eyeglasses glittering in the pulpit's light, then peered out at the people listening to him. In that large dim sanctuary, he asked the question again: "Are you going home for Christmas?" Buechner said, "He asked it in some sort of way that brought tears to my eyes." The question was about something deeper than boarding a train, or plane or packing up the car. By the way Buttrick said it – he understood that there is a *home* for all of us. That home is where Christ is. He was asking them: "Are you going *home*

to the manger in Bethlehem, the place where at midnight even the oxen kneel.””

Reflecting on that moment long before, then at the age of seventy, Buechner recalled the unexpected places and people his searching for home, of being with Christ, of being in Christ, had taken him over the years. There were times along the way when he was able to “be Christ” or at least lend the light of Christ, to others. And times, too, when someone else or some place else offered that same sense of *home*, where the light of Christ shone for him. From those uncertain young adult days, Buechner carried that old formative question, “Are you going home for Christmas?” for the rest of his life and wrote about it so many years later saying: “I believe that it is when God is alive in me and through me that I come closest to being truly home, come closest to finding or being found by that holiness that I have glimpsed. I cannot claim that I have found the home I long for every day of my life, not by a long shot, but I believe that in my heart I have found, and have maybe always known, the way that leads to it. I believe that the home we long for and belong to is finally where Christ is.” He concluded: “I believe that home is Christ’s kingdom, which exists both within us and among us as we wend our prodigal ways through the world in search of it.”³

³ Frederick Buechner, *Longing for Home* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 23-24, 28.

Friends, because God so loves the world, God has made a home in the fray – amid the historical, political, social realities of our days. And because God so loves US, God comes home above the fray in a living room where two pregnant women speak in hushed tones about the coming of the Lord into the human heart. By the Baby growing in Mary's womb, at whose prenatal meeting, John the Baptist leaped for joy, By the gift of the Christ child, Welcome Home!