

“And Why Has This Happened to Me?”

Luke 1:39-45

Sermon notes from the pulpit of
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
December 17th 2023, Third Sunday of Advent
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Many of us are traveling or welcoming guests this season. More than once lately I've sung the old lyric: *Over the river and through the woods to grandmother's house we go/ The horse knows the way to carry the sleigh, Through (the) white and drifted snow.* Packages are being delivered from interstate highways. Hostages are—we hope and pray—being delivered from Palestine. Our travels are fraught with some measure of both worry and anticipation. Our plans are sowed with prayer. Some travel for pleasure, for family reunions, for business, and in the case of refugees around the world, for survival. We carry all manner of luggage, sadness, trepidation, and joy. We all hope for a meaningful journey and a safe landing.

May I suggest we be attentive to the people we meet along the way—the ticket-takers and drivers, the people sitting across the aisle, those with whom we are sharing the wide road. What sort of greeting might these fellow travelers bring to us? Could they be angels unawares?

This weekend, Rachel and I met friends in Chicago. Giovanni helped raise our sons, ran our Vacation Bible School, built homes for Habitat. He and his wife join us every year during Advent for a dinner and for a stroll through the Chicago Art Institute. We enjoy catching up. These visits remind me how the ties that bind are so holy. These friends remind me how absence makes the heart grow fonder. They remind me how wide and important the communion of saints is, and how that communion transcends life and death.

What I did not anticipate in our sojourn to and around Chicago was the lovely conversations I had with two Uber drivers.

Zahida drove a red Honda. We got to chatting about Chicago, about our travels, about life. It turns out she's from Pakistan. She grew up in Lahore. She was interested to learn about the Presbyterian Education Board that our world mission team supports. She knew about Sangla Hill. She reminded me how small God's wonderful world is. She does not know our friend Veda Gill, a storied leader at the PEB. Veda is a fierce advocate for the education of girls in Pakistan.

While my Uber driver—my friend Zahida—didn't know Veda, she did know a woman like Veda. When Zahida's father got sick when she was in 8th grade, this woman took Zahida under her wing and made sure she was educated through 12th grade.

God visited me on the way across town with Zahida behind the wheel.

And God blessed me on the way back across town to our hotel with another Uber driver.

Onyeka is from Nigeria and speaks English and Igbo. Until recently, he lived in Champaign. He knows the ministry of our church. He attended the King's Assembly Church across the street from our Neil Street Post Office. Onyeka reminds me our world is small. We need each other. God wants us to know each other.

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In our scripture today, we meet Elizabeth. Until now, we've only heard about her. Today, she leaps off the page. Mary, we learn, has "set out and went with haste to a town in the Judean hill country, entered the house of Zechariah and greeted her relative, Elizabeth." Elizabeth is so happy to see Mary, the child she is carrying in her womb (John, the Baptist) leaps with joy.

"Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and (famously) exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?'"

And why has this happened to me?

But that's exactly the way it happens. By God's grace, the mother of our Lord knocks on our door. Mary shows up in our lives treasuring what God is doing, pondering the amazing, improbable love of God. We bump into Mary and all the rest of these characters.

We read in scripture that Joseph and Mary will be making their way to Bethlehem. They are going to be registered in Joseph's home town, as Caesar Augustus has decreed. Angels fly around celebrating in glorious, seeming confusion. Shepherds tramp out of their fields making haste for Bethlehem (there's a lot of haste in the story), and, later, Magi make their trek to the manger like young scouts learning to use a compass they got at a yard sale. It's a comedy, yes, and it's a tragedy, too, in which *every scene portrays this story as a love story*.

We meet all of these travelers and many more during this season. We stand together with them in lines at the airport. We are shifting from foot to foot, shooting the breeze, making our way through security. They drive our Ubers. We carry their bags. We share a seat on the bus. We help each other with our groceries. Mary the mother of God shows up. Elizabeth. Gabriel. A bunch of shepherds. These agents of God.

They show up in our lives.

Elizabeth frames an important question for us: *Why is this happening to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?* In more general terms, the question is this: Why does God send all of these special people to me. To us? Why does God interrupt our routine with holy grace? Why does God decide, every season, to move into our neighborhood, to jostle us awake from our apathy?

Why has this happened to me?

I can think of at least two reasons: The first is that God loves you, and me, and us. That's why God arranges to bump into us on the road with such a wide cast of characters. That's why God has sent us the Giovannis, and the Zahidas, and the Onyekas. Because God loves us. These little reunions with old friends and with new strangers are a means of God's incarnational grace.

Why has this happened to me? Why has God shown up in my life? Why? This is the answer: God has come loving us in order to remind us to love others.

God is saying, "I love you. Now, go love each other."

And we'll hug their neck. And we'll shake their hand or kiss their cheek. We'll share a conversation while we share a few steps on our journey together. We'll walk together. Mary and Elizabeth. Betty, Gary, Rachel, Judi, Joe. And we'll say, *Thanks be to God.*

AMEN.

Scripture Luke 1:39-45 39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."