

Getting Closer to Christmas

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Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Romare Bearden, The Visitation

Preaching on:

Luke 1:39–55

I didn't grow up regularly saying grace before meals. We were a Christmas-dinner and Easter-dinner grace kind of family. So even today I don't usually say grace before meals. But then Romey, my 2-year-old son, about six months ago or so, invented his own version of grace. At some point, usually at the beginning of the meal, he holds out his hands, which is the signal that we should all hold hands around the table. And then Romey, who is usually making a lot of noise while he's eating, just silently looks around the table and gives everyone their own very intentional, meaningful look. He just looks you right in the eye and holds it. And then looks at the next person and holds it. Isn't that a wonderful way to do grace?

This grace that Romey invented reminds me of this spiritual support group I joined about ten years ago. Every week we opened our session with a ritual which we called the "Left-Eye Gaze." We'd all be

sitting in a circle, and each person would look into the left eye of every other person and hold their gaze for about three breaths before moving on to another person. The reason you gaze into the left eye is so that you don't shift your attention back and forth from eye to eye—you just stare, unblinking and undistracted, directly into another person's eyes, and breathe.

It was an intense experience. It feels like you're totally exposed, and it feels like you're looking into a sacred, almost forbidden place. It's a soul gaze. It felt explosive, like anything could happen. And with practice, the armor starts to fall off. And that ritual of meeting one another with that look was the basis of this deep and intimate connection we were building in this group.

Now, when I imagine what motivated Mary to leave home and to go visit Elizabeth at this point in her life, I imagine that she was looking for something like this kind of intimacy and connection. To everyone else, Mary's assertions that there was an angel and a conception by, let's call it, an interaction with the Holy Spirit was probably a little bit too much—more than they could believe. But Mary might have thought that Elizabeth could handle her story.

Because Elizabeth had never had children and she was too old to get pregnant, but the Angel Gabriel had showed up to her family six months before arriving to Mary. And when the angel showed up, Elizabeth conceived a baby. Now, no one knew about the angel, but because of her Elizabeth's age, Mary (who was related to Elizabeth somehow) must have known that something special had happened to her. And maybe Mary thought about going to visit her, to find out what happened, but Elizabeth was in seclusion while she was pregnant. She put herself in lockdown.

And then six months later the angel shows up to Mary, and she conceives too. Now that inkling in Mary's heart that something special must have happened to Elizabeth becomes this deep need to seek out her cousin, and to be with her, to have the chance to tell her story to someone who will be able to hear and believe it. Isolation be darned, Mary rushes off into the hill country to Elizabeth's house, throws open the door, and calls Elizabeth's name.

And, in my imagination, the baby leaps in Elizabeth's womb, she turns around and sees Mary, their eyes meet—one long intimate gaze in which everything is revealed. And with her child kicking in her belly, Elizabeth opens her mouth with a joyful shout and gives Mary the gift she needed most—affirmation; *Yes, child, I know it's all true, I saw it as soon as I saw you, without you even having to tell me, I know it's true and I'm right here with you.*

Now, there are lots of ways to be together and to communicate with one another. Mary could have written her cousin a letter. She could have sent a messenger. Nowadays, she could have called her up, or more likely just texted her—a bunch of baby and angel emojis. Yes, we're blessed now with technology that helps us to remain closer even when we are isolated, but I think we all know that this moment, this visitation, what happened between these two women, could only have occurred through

an in-person meeting. They needed to be that close.

Mary and Elizabeth experienced what I think most of us know deep down—that we encounter the intimacy of God more fully (at least some of the time) when we're within the intimacy of community. When we can't show up in person, we have options to maintain and even to start new relationships—and that's wonderful! We have members, who we love and are praying for right now, watching in California! But at some point, most of us do desire to get as close to our community as Mary and Elizabeth got to each other.

Nobody needs me to discuss how complicated being together in person has gotten! Nobody needs me to remind them of how hard it is for everybody, or that for some of us it's even harder still. But I do think we need to hear this reminder: Showing up in person is a Christian value. Showing up in the flesh is uniquely, intimately Christian. It's what Christ did for us on the first Christmas! And when we do it for one another, it is a form of grace—a grace we can share with one another, an intimacy that heals the broken and wounded places in our bodies and spirits.

We've gotten used to the safety of isolation. We've adjusted to low expectations for turnout. We've all felt the convenience of a virtual life. But if we lose sight of the undeniable truth that meeting in person is holy, we'll lose an essential element from the character of our faith.

Remember that the little manger where Christ was born was not an isolated cave in the wilderness somewhere. It was inside a small city, right behind an inn overflowing with travelers, and it was soon filled up with a bunch of strangers and their sheep! The desire for Christmas is not just a desire to meet God in the flesh, it's a desire to meet our own deep humanity and to meaningfully connect to the humanity of others. The call home to the manger is a call out into our world, a call to re-connect, and then like Mary does, to sing. And she sings, "My soul will magnify the Lord!"

Because all Christians are called to be magnifiers. In the struggle between the world's darkness and God's light, people of faith need to have the sense to find even the tiniest grains of joy, the weakest gleams of hope, the faintest tinglings of love. And which is the greatest of our senses? Is it sight? Is it Touch? Hearing? Smell? Taste? No, the greatest human sense organ is the vast and sensitive network that is our human community. One person alone doesn't know much, can't accomplish much. But when we come together for the good, we're unstoppable. We can magnify a tiny look across the table into something called grace. We can magnify a short visit into something called affirmation. We can magnify a shoestring budget and a few volunteers into a declaration of love to our community called The Advent Experience. People who just live near each other, we magnify those relationships until we feel like we're all neighbors. We magnify two or three people gathered together into a communion filled with the presence of God, the love of Christ, the power of the holy Spirit.

Yes, beloved, our souls magnify the Lord!

And they do it together!