
O Holy Touch, O Holy Community

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Advent 4C
Luke 1:39-56

*"In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.
When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting,
the child leaped in her womb." -Luke 1:39-41*

On this Sunday before Christmas, and in all these days before Christmas, I am touched by the miracle of relationship. I am touched by holy relationships, holy families, holy communities.

It starts with the touch of the gospels themselves. According to Matthew and Luke, the news of Jesus's birth touches families first. The birth of Jesus is announced locally first.

For instance, today, when we hear the story according to Saint Luke, we hear who Mary visited when she learned she was pregnant. She went to visit someone in her extended family: her cousin, her relative, Elizabeth.

Like so many of us, cousin Elizabeth had had a hard time getting pregnant. That experience had been so wrenching for her, and for her husband, Zechariah, that Zechariah couldn't even talk about it. He would be struck speechless, until the day John was born. Then there would be some consternation about John's name (surely many couples know that situation!); Zechariah would not be able to speak until he had named the child, John.

Such is just one example of the tangled difficulties of relationships. This is just one example, from scripture, but we all know others. Family homes can be difficult places. You have all heard my old joke about families; it's actually from my own cousin, who returned from time with his own family one summer. And he asked, "Do you know the biggest oxymoron in the world? The biggest self-contradiction around?" Then he said, "It is the phrase, "family vacation."

Even this time of year, when the world plays out delightful images of happiness and delight, everywhere we turn, we see that times can be tough. Households are arguing, too; and pain and disappointment also raise their anxious heads among us.

This is why I am touched, every year by this day, the Sunday before Christmas. I see how Jesus appears, not just in the miracle of an angel's announcement, but in the miracle of community—in the miracle of relationships—holy relationships.

Let's start with Mary. Mary's journey toward a holy birth is much like the journey of each of us. We are familiar with her demure and deep faith. When she learns that she is pregnant, she is afraid and perplexed. But she finds the faith to reply, "Let it be. Let it be to me according to your word."

Her response is the response of so many women, generation after generation in this world, all over the world. Even unexpectedly, pregnancy happens; and it takes faith.

And this day is about Joseph, her husband. The gospel of Matthew tells the story completely from his point of view. In Matthew's version of the story, the angel appears not to Mary but to Joseph. And talk about fear and perplexity! Joseph, too, ends up having to have faith in something beyond himself. He has to have faith in what is going on inside another person. That is a miracle, too, to have faith in what is going on in another person.

And this day is about still another person in Mary's circle of family relationships: Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary. She is an extended family member; and she, too, is familiar with the miracle of childbirth. She adds her own story of patience and perplexity.

How does it happen? How does the miracle of life happen? Well, it happens in all sorts of ways. In dreams. With angels. In the daylight, in happiness. And at night, when we feel speechless and abandoned. But however conception occurs, however it occurs, it is usually a miracle. Mothers, fathers, lovers, know this. It's a miracle.

The Sunday before Christmas, then, is about miracles. And these miracles always develop out of relationships, family relationships, community relationships. It is not just one woman who carries and bears the birth of Jesus. It is a household, a wider family, a broader community. The incarnation occurs in community.

Each of us needs holy community. Today, what I want the world to know, is that each of us needs holy community. Holy community is where our husband or wife has faith in us. Holy community is where our lover has faith in us. Holy community is where our confused cousin greets us. Holy community is where someone we don't even know, another baby in a womb, leaps for joy at our presence.

And holy community is where we go when the world seems violent and erratic. For instance, last weekend, after the horror of the school shooting in Connecticut, another amazing and dramatic thing happened. It was reported to some extent, but it would have been impossible to report on every detail.

Last weekend, after the shooting, millions of people across our country made their way to holy communities of faith. We journeyed to mosques on Friday, to temples on Saturday, to churches on Sunday. We went to these holy communities out of holy routine, for sure, but we also longed for some word, for some presence, for some holy miracle that would remind us of life even in the midst of death. We wanted to touch each other. We needed to touch life-giving community.

I was not scheduled to preach last Sunday, and I prayed for local pastors and priests and ministers last weekend all over the world. Most of their words will never be reported in the big time press. But their words were where the action was last weekend. Every faithful pastor and minister was leading and comforting a holy community. Personally, I was looking forward to hearing my colleagues; I was needing to hear them! And I was not disappointed; I was proud of them.

I salute every one of those unrecognized and faithful pastors""and preachers and rabbis and imams""who gathered local holy community last weekend. That kind of holy community takes time and patience and strength to develop, and it is a miracle.

Finally, this Sunday before Christmas is also fun for me, because today is a great example of our Cathedral holy community. On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, we will have all sorts of people here. We welcome visitors""and I so like to do that!

But on this Sunday, most of the people here are regular community members. This is like a homecoming Sunday. This is a bit like a family reunion, our household dinner before all the rest of the people show up, where we can hug each other. We're missing some people, for sure, and we do like all the guests who will show up later. But I am touched by something holy and miraculous here now.

This is a holy day. This is a holy community. It began years ago when God dared to touch the world. God chose to be real,

to touch us, to become incarnate. However, God did not touch only Mary. God touched, and became, community. God became family and household member.

God became not just your child, but also your mother and your father, your brother and your sister. God became your cousin and your forgotten friend. God became that stranger who will be sitting beside you in the next few days somewhere.

God is in those neighbors and strangers who are sitting beside you right now. God is touching you in holy community. Today is the Feast of Holy Community, and our souls magnify the Lord. Our spirits rejoice in God our Savior.

AMEN.

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Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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