

## ***We Are God in Each Other* – Luke 1:39-58**

**Rev. Matt Nieman**

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Dr. Christine Hong, professor at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, wrote some commentary on the theme for this Advent series we've been doing, "From Generation to Generation." And surrounding this week's theme, she wrote this:

"My parents are Korean immigrants. My mother used to say that back in the days of their immigration, whoever met you at the airport decided your destiny. In other words, whoever greets you at the threshold as you become a new immigrant determines the direction your life moves."

Whoever greets you at the threshold determines the direction your life moves.

Whatever you think about what's going on at the southern border right now, none of us can deny the reality that somebody is going to meet those thousands of immigrants crossing there and determine how their lives move. Whether it be the border patrol, or social service agencies, or members of churches in all those communities, somebody is going to make an impression on the lives of these men, women, and children who are seeking new lives for themselves in the U.S. And that impression will dictate the lives they lead—in many cases for a long time to come.

Adoptive parents who travel to a new community, a new state and even a new country to meet their newly adopted children have that same impact. They forever change the trajectory of a child's life when they step out of the car or off the airplane and walk into that home, that office, or that orphanage to greet their son or daughter for the first time. And those children, too, change the direction of their new parents' lives upon meeting them.

Who has changed the direction of your lives? We can talk about the people who led us down paths we now regret going. But there's no use in dwelling on the pain and consequences that deny us life. Instead, let's think about those people who have led us down life-giving avenues. Their meeting us at some threshold took us down a path that brought us joy,

maybe. Or, purpose perhaps. Or, if not joy or purchase, then at least some comfort—the comfort in knowing that somebody believed in us and that we wouldn't be alone.

When I came to interview here eight and a half years ago, I distinctly remember the moment I stepped off the plane and walked out of the terminal at McGhee Tyson Airport. And at the bottom of the ramp were Ned Clapp and Sharon Koch. They greeted me at that important threshold—the threshold of deciding whether God was calling me to a new phase in my life and in my call as a pastor.

Their greeting and care in that moment and over the next couple of days reinforced that this was the place to come and to be and that no matter the challenges we faced, I would be okay.

Since then, there have been many good moments and some hard times to go along with them. Yet, on that beautiful spring day in May 2014, I found God in Ned and Sharon. And that equipped me for the months and years that followed.

I'm going to brag on some others in the church, too. Just within the last two weeks, they've been at the threshold of others' lives and have transmitted the Holy through their kindness and actions.

I won't share names so as to not embarrass them, but if you pick up on who they are so be it.

There's a couple right now who, even though they have a family member of their own who they are caring for, has assumed care-giving duties to one of our members who is in need and who's own family is not able to care for her or lives far from here. They've stepped up to take care of some logistical issues and make sure she has everything she needs following a hospital stay. They have met her at this threshold and she's finding God working through them.

Another couple in the church was able to make a trip recently that gave them great enjoyment. They probably wouldn't have been able to take this bucket list journey, however, without their niece and nephew accompanying them. They made their travel arrangements, lined up transportation when they arrived at their destination, and were by their sides every step of the way. That dedication revealed God to them.

And a week or so ago, my boys and I were out to dinner when we saw friends in this church family at the same restaurant. We chatted first and sat down a few tables away. After our meal, when it came time to pay our bill, we discovered that these friends had paid it for us. There, amid the Advent season, this couple revealed to us the power of friendship and generosity, reminiscent of a friendly and generous God.

In those threshold moments, we are God in each other.

In the gospel of Luke, Mary has been told she's going to have a baby, who will be the savior of the world. The angel Gabriel delivers this news and, while skeptical at first, Mary embraces this calling to carry him and deliver him.

For reasons unknown, she then travels to her cousin Elizabeth's house. Had this trip already been on Mary's agenda before the confrontation with the angel? Or did she need reinforcement that what she agreed to do was a task she in fact could perform and Elizabeth was the one to provide that reinforcement? One thinks the latter, because we're told she hurried to Elizabeth's.

She arrived at Elizabeth's door, and upon greeting Mary, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit when her baby leaped in her womb.

She exclaimed, "Blessed is she who believes that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

And with that reassurance, Mary then goes off on this wonderful song we refer to as the Magnificat—glorifying God and praising God who, from generation to generation, she says, has extended mercy to those who fear God.

There's a new book out titled, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us*. In the book is a quote from Arthur Riley, who says, "We need other people to see our own faces—to bear witness to their beauty and truth. God has made it so that I can never truly know myself apart from another person...I want to bear witness to my face, that we could behold the image of God in one another and believe it on one another's behalf."

That quote reinforces the need we all have to be together, that we really can't know ourselves apart from each other, and that in the other we

find God looking at us and telling us that we're okay — that we're going to make it.

That's what Elizabeth did for Mary. And that's what we do for each other when we're together.

As the Covid 19 pandemic erupted in 2020, we all came to rely on virtual connections to take the place of in-person connections that were too dangerous at the time. And the technology we used to maintain virtual connection has ensued. We now use video and social media enhance what we do in person.

However, as L. Gregory Jones and Nathan Jones wrote this fall in an essay in *Faith and Leadership*, "Words on a screen can never replace words spoken from mouths; not only can the tonal ambiguity of text lead to unnecessary conflict, but reliance on virtual means of communication can impair our ability to have profound experiences together in the flesh. At its worst, social technology can serve as a surrogate for embodied relationships, leaving us strangely disconnected from the body of Christ."

On that threshold — that literal threshold of Elizabeth's door — Mary found God in her cousin who reassured her she had what it took to carry out her mission. Mary, in the flesh, as the surrogate mother of God, finds communal solidarity with her older cousin, who, in the flesh, acts as a surrogate mother or guardian to her.

In so many ways, we are God to each other. Technology should not be the surrogate for that. When possible, it should be in the flesh.

Speaking of being in the flesh, that's what God has chosen to be. In the incarnation, God has become flesh to us in Jesus.

The author Parker Palmer speaks to this when he writes:

"As a Quaker who believes that 'there is that of God in everyone,' I know I'm called to share in the risk of incarnation. Amid the world's dangers, I'm asked to embody my values and beliefs, my identity and integrity, to allow good words to take flesh in me. Constrained by fear, I often fall short — yet I still aspire to incarnate words of life, however imperfectly.

"Christmas is a reminder that I'm invited to be born again and again in the shape of my God-given self, born in all the vulnerability of the

Christmas story. It's a story that's hard to retrieve in a culture that commercializes this holy day nearly to death, and in churches more drawn to triumphalism and ecclesiastical bling than to the riskiness of the real thing. But the story's simple meaning is clear to [a] 'beginner's mind,' a mind I long to reclaim at age seventy-five.

"An infant in a manger is as vulnerable as we get. What an infant needs is not theological debate but nurturing. The same is true of all the good words seeded in our souls that cry out to become embodied in this broken world. If these vulnerable but powerful parts of ourselves are to find the courage to take on flesh — to suffer yet survive and thrive, transforming our lives along with the life of the world — they need the shelter of unconditional love.

"For those of us who celebrate Christmas, the best gift we can [give] others — whatever their faith or philosophy may be — is a simple question asked with heartfelt intent: What good words wait to be born in us, and how can we love one another in ways that midwife their incarnation?"

Seeing God in each other only comes when we have in our souls what Palmer describes: nurtured words that become embodied in this broken world. Nurtured words born of our love that are good, and that are embodied in each of us. At each threshold, we await them and cherish them.