

It was right in front of the Post Office just a block away on Main street. A nice summer day – whew – a warm day! Sounds pretty wonderful right about now. Anyway, a woman who looked about my age stopped me in the front of the Post Office door and said, “Mary?” I responded, “yes” assuming she was someone who recognized me from somewhere that I had preached or taught. But to my surprise, she introduced herself and I instantly recalled her name. She was as a woman I knew well in my first two years of college at Madison. After a few minutes of friendly chatting, and sharing addresses, we parted. But, I have to tell you to this day, I did not recognize her face. I have a pretty good memory and ability to remember people, and I don’t know why I did not recognize her? Maybe she had changed so much that my memory of her was different than who I saw before me at the post office. What does it mean “to recognize”? It is defined as: “To show awareness of; approve of or appreciate, To perceive or show acceptance of the reality of.” Therefore, recognition involves three things: Paying attention (perceiving), Putting the face with the name (connecting), Acknowledging or realizing this is who it is (accepting). The Antonyms for the verb to recognize are: forget, ignore, overlook, be unaware of.

Today, our Scriptures draw us to reflect about recognition – about recognition of the Son of God: Jesus Christ. The Gospel today begins three days after the Annunciation, when Mary was visited by the Angel Gabriel and became the Christ-bearer. In fact, this Gospel story starts a cycle of recognition followed by response....a cycle that we are invited to be part of. This Scripture, of which the Song of Mary Canticle we just recited together is a part, shows us God’s capacity to act in a very personal way, and God’s holiness. In it we see the Holy Spirit imparting God’s Word, and preparing the people to see hear and receive it.

The Gospel begins three days after the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary. It begins with Mary at the door of her cousin Elizabeth’s and Zechariah’s home. Set the scene: two marginalized women, one young, poor, unwed and the other far beyond the age to conceive; both pregnant by mighty acts of God. Mary gets to the door, and exclaims a greeting to Elizabeth to let her know she is there (unannounced, for a three-month stay – Oh my!). Elizabeth hears this big hello from her young cousin and her baby leaps! Through the work of the Holy Spirit, she instantly interprets her baby’s dramatic movements within her as paying homage to Jesus. Elizabeth cries out, “***Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.***” Talk about a clear recognition! But wait a minute, this is recognition between one baby in a womb and another baby in a womb – how is this possible? Actually, the Bible contains several instances (in Genesis 25 and Jeremiah 1) where unborn children provide clues to God’s work in the world. This is flesh recognizing flesh. This is one of the most famous “recognition scenes” of all time. There actually were all sorts of recognitions going on here:

- 1st, John recognizes Jesus
- 2nd, Elizabeth recognizes that John’s leap is about the Lord
- 3rd, Elizabeth recognizes that the child Mary is bearing is the Lord, and
- 4th, Mary acknowledges all of this, recognizing that what the Angel told her about Elizabeth bearing John the Baptist is true.

This kind of recognition is about the work of the Holy Spirit and about fulfillment of Messianic prophesies that were well known to both Mary and Elizabeth from the Old Testament. What is God up to here? God is keeping His promises. Words of wisdom and hope pour forth from each of them, all the way to us. Are we able to enter the story, recognize and respond too?

It is one thing to fail to recognize a long ago friend in a chance meeting on the sidewalk, it is quite another thing to fail to recognize the living Lord, the Savior, the Messiah. If you do not recognize a former friend, it’s just embarrassing. If you do not acknowledge Jesus, you miss out on hope, on everlasting love, on true peace, on the truth, on eternal life, on redemption. This recognition is all about God working His purposes through His people. What is God up to here? God is working His purposes in your life too, through Jesus. Yet, all around us right now people are not acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah.

News Flash: a big story about shopping this holiday season is in the media right now....maybe you have heard it. A lot of shoppers have Smart-Phones with an instant bar-code comparison application, and it has changed where they are spending their money. This is how it works: a shopper comes into Wal-Mart, scans the item into his or her Phone, and the phone tells where they can get that item at an even lower price – and many times the lower price is obtainable through the internet. Now, this is the kind of recognition that is receiving attention now: recognizing the best deal for a holiday gift.

Many of you may have come to church today to rest from the gauntlet of holiday preparations that can be so stressful. Here is a poem written by a person who experienced this stress: Louise Teisberg,

“When Jesus called that Christmas week I wasn’t at my best;
And the house was much too cluttered to entertain a guest.
He seemed to notice everything, the card still unaddressed,
The gifts piled high awaiting wraps, the baking and the rest.
His eyes fell on the evergreen and the presents ‘neath the tree.
“It’s my birthday that you celebrate – what are you giving me?”
‘what am I giving him?’ I thought; ashamed no words I found.
So many costly things I’d bought, he looked at me and frowned.
I prayed he’d let the question pass, but when he did persist,
I blurted out the truth at least, “you were not on my list.”

Where is recognition and response to Jesus on your “to do” list right now? Our culture gives us permission not to recognize or respond to Jesus – why, the greeting “Merry Christmas” has even been replaced by “Happy Holidays,” so Christ’s name does not even need to be mentioned! And that unfortunately is not a new thing. We read in the 1st chapter of the Gospel of John that Jesus, *was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him*. People were and are looking for a Savior who is a military leader –not a baby! Anyone who can save the world must have power, and babies do not have power – they are little totally dependent human beings in diapers! God did send a leader to set things right, but this is a new and different kind of ruler. So, Jesus coming as a babe results in lack of recognition and response in many. But John goes on to say, ¹² *Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God-* ¹⁴ *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us...* ¹⁵ *John testifies concerning him. ...*” And, John’s testifying concerning Jesus, happened at that door in the Judean hill country. There, Elizabeth provided us such a good example of the ability to recognize Jesus. When Elizabeth’s baby leapt in her womb at this crazy time when her young cousin popped in for an unannounced three month stay, she was not swept up mentally with all the stuff she needed to be doing (as so many people are now days) – no, she was so tight with the Lord that she was paying attention, recognized the sign, recognized the Christ-bearer in her midst, and responded accordingly, saying “*Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.*”

In a few minutes, we will be praying the Prayers of the People (you can see it on pages 7-8 in your bulletin). The person leading the prayers says at the end of each petition, “**God of love, God of glory**” and the response that we all say is: “**be among us.**” The incarnation, which we celebrate at this time of year, is about God coming to us...that is what incarnation means...*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us*...Jesus came in the form of a human to create a bridge between us and God, so that we could walk across it into eternal life. So indeed, Jesus was and is now here among us – that is a fact, not the question facing us today. The question facing us is, “**Will we recognize that Jesus is among us? Do you recognize that Christ is really here, personally in you, caring for you, intervening in good ways in your life?**”

How do we ensure such recognition? We need to be like Elizabeth was that day, practicing the spiritual disciplines. As we go about our day, be hanging out with God through prayer, expectant for what God is going to do next, watching, listening, awaiting the stirrings of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was mighty in the lives of Mary and Elizabeth, but is also mighty in your life too. C.S. Lewis puts it this way, “**Look further and further in your soul.**” The Magnificat which Mary wrote are the words that came to her heart as she connected to Jesus, as she listened to the Spirit within her.

Advent is the broccoli of the Christmas banquet, what you have to go through before you get to the sweet treats of Christmas. Now, on the 4th Sunday of Advent, our sights are on the desert cart – we are antsy to get there. But hold on, don’t be in such a hurry. This Christmas week, give the best gift you can to Jesus Christ – spend the time to connect with Jesus, recognize Him, and respond to Him as your Messiah. Jesus is here, waiting for your recognition and response.

Amen