

THE VISITATION:

SIDETRACKED BY AN ASIDE

4th Sunday of Advent – Year C

Micah 5:1-4a
Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19

Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-45

When we think of people who have had visions of Heavenly beings, we usually think of saints like Bernadette Soubirous, Juan Diego or the three children of Fatima, and the very public nature of their visions of the Blessed Mother. The events and sites of these visionaries continue to draw much curiosity and devotion. In the case of another visionary, St. Catherine Laboure, her vision of the Immaculate Conception led to the widespread devotion to the Miraculous Medal. Catherine, however, remained very private about the vision, sharing it only with her spiritual director. She finally revealed to her superior, *forty-five years later*, that she was the sister who received Mary's instruction to foster the devotion. Even today, popular devotion is fraught with visionaries throughout the world who claim to have had visions of heavenly beings, some of whom receive pilgrims who gather around them, hanging on their every word!

While the Blessed Mother seems to be the most popular figure of popular devotion emerging from visions, have we ever regarded Mary, Herself, as a visionary? One need look no further than the Gospel of Luke.

As the prototype of Christian discipleship, the Virgin Mary received a message from a Heavenly being, the Angel Gabriel. The message she received would echo throughout history, heralding the end



of the reign of sin and the beginning of the Messianic era; when David's family would be restored to the throne of Israel in a reign that would never end! This new era would have its origin's in the womb of Mary, Herself, impregnated by the power of the Holy Spirit, as she bore, and gave birth to the Son of God! As proof, to alleviate any doubt, Gabriel pointed out that Elizabeth, who was thought to be barren, was six-months along in her own pregnancy, likewise brought about by God's will! So

The Visitation

important was the message Mary received from her angelic visitor, that all other stories of visionaries throughout the Church's history pale in comparison!

How did Mary respond to this heavenly message? She did not run to her local rabbi to share the story and the message. She did not go into seclusion, to take care of herself during that first trimester. She did not "hold court" by receiving visitors who came to hear the story of her message from God. She in no way fixated on her new role in God's plan, nor did she focus, in any way, on herself. Rather, she focused on a side comment made by the Angel -- Elizabeth is with child, in her sixth month. Mary focused on a mere footnote to Gabriel's overall message.

No sooner did Gabriel tell her of Elizabeth, than Mary gave her response. After the Angel departed, Mary traveled "in haste" to be of service to one who was in need of her presence and assistance. Even

when she received the greeting of Elizabeth, "blessed are you among women", Mary responded as only Mary would -- "*My* being proclaims the greatness of *the Lord!*"

If you were to have a vision of a Heavenly being, how would you react? Yet, Sunday after Sunday, as we joyfully await the coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, we have exactly that! Yet, it is not just a "vision". We see the Risen Jesus Himself as He becomes present to us in the sacrifice of the Eucharist. It is not an Angel, but God Himself who speaks to us through His divine Word in the Scriptures. It is God who calls each of us, nourishing us with the grace of the Sacraments, to go forth and play our role in His continuing plan, to proclaim the greatness of the Lord, and to go "in haste" to serve those in need.

Fr. Bill Nicholas
Catholic San Francisco
December 21, 2012