Sunday, December 6, 1992
A PRE-CHRISTMAS JOURNEY (No. 1 in a Series: Christmas Journeys)
Luke 1:39-56

Is there anyone listening who has not taken a trip sometime, somewhere during the Christmas season? Maybe not this year, but in years past? There's a lot of traveling that goes on this time of year. University and college students want to be home for Christmas. Grandchildren go with their parents to visit their grandparents. Some journeys cover a long distance, and others are short by comparison. We not only visit family, but our friends as well, and if we can't be with family and friends in person, we send a Christmas card or letter. Our correspondence makes the journey for us. It's another way of connecting when we cannot physically be present. Or we make a special phone call. On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, the long-distance telephone circuits will be flooded with calls. There's something about this holy season that prompts us to want to be in touch with one another. We want to be connected.

It has ever been so. In the Bible, the Christmas story is surrounded and filled with traveling. Following Mary's vision with the angel and the announcement that she would be the mother of the Savior, and her discovery that she was pregnant, the Gospel of Luke reports: "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."

In one sense, of course, this is not a Christmas journey at all. It is a pre-Christmas journey that took place eight or nine months before Christmas. Mary went to see Elizabeth immediately after she had the vision of the angel and knew she was pregnant. About nine months later, the baby was born. However, in today's world, especially in our Protestant tradition, we do not commemorate the angel's announcement to Mary. Tradition has it taking place on March 25, exactly nine months before December 25. Today, most of us connect the vision of Mary and the angel's announcement with Christmas.

Earlier in the story, Luke informs us that in the same vision, the angel messenger had not only told Mary that she would be the mother of the Savior, the Son of God, but that her cousin Elizabeth, who was much older, was also with child for the first time and was in the sixth month of her pregnancy. Elizabeth's child was to have a special connection with Mary's son. He would become known as John the Baptist.

A second Christmas journey, and we'll be looking at that one next week, is the one that Mary and Joseph took to Bethlehem, and while there, Jesus is born. A third and short trip is made by the shepherds to the manger. The Wise Men from the east are the main characters in the fourth Christmas journey. A fifth journey surrounding the Christmas event is when Mary and Joseph and the baby go to Jerusalem for the dedication of their first-born child in the Temple. The sixth journey is their flight to Egypt because, in a vision, Joseph has been told the child's life is in danger.

Christmas journeys. In addition to the journeys themselves, thinking of life as a journey is a useful metaphor. When we are born into this world, we are beginning a journey through life and through time. We have our outward journeys as we grow, mature, and move on, and we have our inward or spiritual journeys. Luke says of Jesus at age 12, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor." Like Jesus, our lives are never static; we are always moving on.

So during this Advent and Christmas season, we are going to be looking again at some of the journeys surrounding the Christmas story and what these have to say to us in our own journeys through life, and we will be paying most of our attention to our spiritual journeys.

All journeys have a number of things in common. They are not always smooth. There are delays, stops and starts, holding patterns and detours, unexpected events, and other surprises. We all carry a certain amount of baggage on our journeys, some of it necessary and, at times, excess baggage. In our journey through life, we soon discover that there are some things that we need to take with us as necessities, and there are other things that are best left behind.

Now let's look more closely at Mary's journey to visit Elizabeth and what it meant for them and what we can learn from it about our own spiritual development.

Luke says, "In those days Mary set out and went with haste." She was in a hurry to see Elizabeth. After the vision of the angel, which was an overwhelming spiritual encounter, and then knowing she was pregnant, she had to talk with someone about what was happening to her, and she wanted to do it as soon as possible. When any one of us has something good and overwhelming take place in our life, especially something that has not happened to us before, we want to tell someone close to us. Then we want to compare notes, discuss what happened, consider all the implications, and have someone to rejoice with us.

I remember when we discovered that we were going to have our first child. As soon as the pregnancy was confirmed, we began making telephone calls to both sets of parents, to brothers and sisters, and to other close friends. We wanted everyone to know and take part in our joy. It was 1957, and we were living in Chicago. It was not possible to physically make the trip to Missouri to tell our parents, so we made the journey by telephone.

And when each of our three children was going to be parents for the first time, I remember the phone calls made as quickly as possible after the pregnancies had been confirmed. And when each grandchild was born, a phone call came telling the good news as soon as possible after the birth, and then we did our best to make haste with a journey to see the new baby. Good news demands to be told quickly. Bad news can wait.

Mary and Elizabeth had much to talk about. Both were pregnant, and it was not planned parenthood. Elizabeth was in the later years of her life, and she assumed it was no longer possible for her to have a baby, and Mary, in her youth, was engaged but not married. In each case, the pregnancy was unexpected, a complete surprise, and a miracle. It was almost too good to believe.

Mary and Elizabeth had lots to talk about physically and spiritually. Luke tells us that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months, which means they were probably together until Elizabeth's baby, John the Baptist, was born. We are told earlier that when the angel made the announcement to Mary, he told her that her cousin Elizabeth was already in the sixth month of her pregnancy. She no doubt was a big help to Mary, who was only beginning her pregnancy. She could tell Mary what to expect in those first six months. We can also assume that Mary stayed there through the birth of Elizabeth's baby and was present at the birth. Seeing and experiencing the last months of pregnancy and the birth itself, what could have been more helpful to the youthful, inexperienced Mary?

Equally important, I think Elizabeth became, for Mary, a kind of spiritual director. Mary could talk and pray with Elizabeth, an older and wiser woman, and gain from her a deep knowledge of her own spiritual dimension. She had had an incredible religious encounter, and she needed to check it out with an older and wiser woman. Think of the spiritual journey Mary was embarking on with this pregnancy.

Other than this three-month visit between these two women, we don't know much more about Elizabeth. For example, we don't know if Elizabeth was still living when her son John the Baptist was put to death by King Herod.

We know a little more about Mary. Although nowhere in the New Testament is she physically described, so we don't know if she was tall or short, thin or stout. And we don't know anything about the family she grew up in or whether or not she had brothers or sisters. The Apostle Paul, who wrote most of the New Testament, doesn't even mention her name. Yet we have enough information so that Mary's spiritual journey and her deep and abiding faith in God can help us in our own spiritual journeys.

According to Luke's account, when the angel appeared to Mary and said, "Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you," and told her that she had been chosen by God for a special purpose, she replied — and I paraphrase—"Wait a minute, I want to know more about what this means before I get too involved." It shows, of course, a lot of astuteness in Mary. She was not a passive character. Rather, we see in her a confident, questioning, decision-making human being. We see in Mary an active participant in the drama of God's redemption. She was willing to let God be born in and through her.

As Mary and Elizabeth visited together, both of them came to a new consciousness of God's loving presence in their lives. I'm convinced that they told each other about their own spiritual encounters and how God was working in and through them. That's often what happens when we talk about our spiritual journey with another person who is an individual of growing faith. Spiritual journeys are almost always more fruitful when taken with others. Later in his own ministry, Jesus noted that "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I also." God's Holy Spirit is most frequently encountered where two or three or more are gathered.

Elizabeth and Mary spoke to each other about their trust in God. Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord." That's a big step in one's spiritual journey, to know that one of our main purposes in life is to allow God to work through us, and when we do, we magnify, we make larger, God's love in this world. It's a good test to apply to any of our activities.

Ask yourself this question: Do my activities now, or what I propose to do, magnify and increase the love of God? Think of it! We can magnify God's love. What a wonderful goal in life — to be a magnifier of God's spirit.

Because both Mary and Elizabeth were about to become mothers, I believe they also came to a new understanding of how God is like a mother. Undoubtedly, both knew the Old Testament and were already aware that in the prophet Hosea, God is compared to a Hebrew mother who teaches her child to walk, heals the child's wounds, and feeds the child. They certainly knew that Isaiah speaks of God as having birth pangs and describes God as a mother comforting her children.

In another place in the Old Testament, God's remembrance of Zion is compared to the love of a nursing mother and the work of a midwife.

Mary and Elizabeth came to know that God is like a mother because God is continually giving birth to life. God is continually creating and making things new. Meister Eckhart, a 14th-century mystic, put it this way: "What does God do all day long? God gives birth. From all eternity, God lies on a maternity bed giving birth."

Although the New Testament does not tell us anything about Mary and Elizabeth's relationship following the birth of their babies, I believe they remained close friends and spent as much time as possible with each other as their two sons grew, matured, and traveled their own spiritual journeys. These two mothers gave each of their sons the most precious gift that any parent can give — a vital, abiding, and growing faith in God.

The Gospel of Luke does have a few comments about Mary following the birth of Jesus, which let us know that she continued faithfully on her own spiritual journey. Several times when Luke describes Mary, it is said of her, "Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." Mary pondered over things. She reflected on what God might be doing through her and others. She made conscious connections between God's activities and what was happening in her life and in the world at large. She continued to marvel and rejoice in the goodness of God. We also know that Mary was at the foot of the cross when Jesus died and that she was a leader in the early church following the resurrection.

During this holy season of Advent and Christmas, as you go about planning and making your journeys to connect with family and friends, and as you participate in many Christmas parties, I invite you also to continue your own spiritual journey.

And as Mary came back from Elizabeth's house a changed person who was now much more aware of the goodness and grace of God, I hope that will be your experience too. Amen.