

Homily for December 20, 2009 (4th Sunday of Advent, C)
Micah 5:1-4; Psalm 80; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45

As a frequent traveler, I occasionally have to spend the night in hotels and motels. Most are modest, but a few times a year I end up at a fancier place that is hosting a conference I am attending. Besides the price of the room, one of the differences between staying at a cheap motel and a more luxurious hotel is the service.

At the three and four star hotels are bellhops to carry your luggage; a concierge to arrange for your taxi or shuttle to the airport. There's room service if you want to eat a (really expensive) meal; and there are maids to clean your room, make your bed and change your sheets and towels every day....if you let them.

I never use a bellhop; rarely use a concierge; and seldom, if ever, ask for room service. One of the first things I do when I get into my room is put the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the outside doorknob to let the housekeeping staff know that they don't need to bother cleaning my room or changing my sheets and towels for the couple of days I'm there. I appreciate their service, but I don't feel it's necessary.

Deep down, however, I recognize a deeper motivation: I'm embarrassed. I'm not used to having people wait on me, even when I know they're doing it because they're getting paid. I don't feel worthy of the attention; and it causes me to ask, "Who am I?"

So I can relate to the cry of Elizabeth when she was moved to exclaim to Mary, "And how does it happen to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Her son John, still three months from being born, was already so stirred by the presence of the Jesus within Mary that gospel says that he "leaped in her womb."

It was amazing enough that God had given her the miracle of conceiving a son in her old age, when she and Zechariah had all but given up hope of having a child. Now here was God, present in the flesh, within her own kinswoman, who had come to see her. The God whom she and her fellow Jews hoped would again visit his people by giving them a Messiah was now visiting her, personally!

As I reflected on Elizabeth's response to the presence of Christ within Mary, I couldn't help but think of the Eucharist. The Church teaches us that in this sacrament we're privileged to have Christ present in four ways:

- In the word of God proclaimed and preached to us;
- In the gathered assembly, that is the church or the Body of Christ;
- In the person of the priest who leads us in prayer and worship;
- And especially in his Body and Blood in which we taste and see God's goodness to us.

Just as Elizabeth was privileged to experience the presence of Jesus within a poor and humble woman like Mary so we are honored to have Jesus present in such ordinary and accessible ways as books and words, bread and wine, and our very selves!

But that is how God works. As we were reminded in our first reading, God chooses the persons, places and things that could easily be ignored and invests them with a great dignity and destiny.

Bethlehem was, by all accounts, a pretty insignificant place, a backwater where people could buy animals for the temple sacrifice in Jerusalem more cheaply and where shepherds could make a pretty good living, but not much else. Yet God chose Bethlehem, which means "House of Bread" in Hebrew, to be the place in which he would fulfill his promise to give Israel a Savior.

The church is the new Bethlehem. Through the grace of God we are called to be "the House of Bread;" and not only in the sacrament we celebrate but also in the sacraments we are called to be for others. Just as Elizabeth experienced God's presence and grace in Mary, the world must experience God's presence in us, especially as we imitate the self-sacrificing love of Jesus we heard about in our second reading.

To see and feel and hear God living in us and acting through us in ways we could never imagine is a humbling experience. We need not ask, "Who am I?" We only need to give thanks for who the Lord is and for what he does in us, through us, and with us—if we, like Mary, let him. +