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## Sermon

### ***Becoming the Dwelling Place of God***

**Luke 1:39-55**

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Looking for a place to live is a hard task. Some people start looking for somewhere to live, look at possibilities, but can't quite make a decision. Perhaps they are too wedded to the old place. The familiar is comfortable; maybe the new places are too expensive. And how do we know what the neighbours will be like? Nothing is perfect...

So how does a perfect God choose a dwelling place? In our gospel passage today, God has already chosen to dwell in a unique way in Mary, a young teenager from a hick town. Mary goes to see her relative Elizabeth and the Holy Spirit of God comes into Elizabeth! He chooses to show how significant the occasion is, by filling Elizabeth, by coming to dwell within her!

Mary was directed to go to Elizabeth by an angel. This shows the kindness of God, putting Mary in a safe place where she could get over the morning sickness, learn about pregnancy and birth and be supported by a close relative. Did you notice how Elizabeth exclaimed in a loud voice, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear!" That upwelling of words prompted by the Spirit of God probably surprised Elizabeth as much as Mary. It would have been the first time Elizabeth had prophesied. The Spirit of God gave her those words as a sign of the truth of Mary's story. Wasn't God wise to send Mary to someone who also had a miraculous pregnancy, who would understand and believe her?

Mary would be under the protection of Zechariah. People were already probably in awe of Zechariah – he was a not only a priest, but one whom God had specially marked for something tremendously important. Zechariah's protection would make sure she was not stoned for conceiving out of wedlock. Elizabeth, greeting her, said in essence: "Awesome! You lucky, lucky thing! Everyone will be so green and envious of you! You will be SO happy because you put your whole trust in what our faithful God has said."

Two women, two different ways of being indwelt by God. How does their experience relate to us?

**Ephesians 3:16-17** *I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup> so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.*

This is not hard for him! Out of his glorious riches he can supply all we need, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts. It looks as if this may be a key. We can all pray to be strengthened with power through the Holy Spirit in our inmost being. Then Christ can dwell in our hearts through faith. Faith is confident expectation that he will do what he says.

Sometimes we pray for ages for a friend or relative and wonder why they do not ever seem to really come through to knowing Christ. Maybe these verses are a prayer which we can pray with confident expectation. I have noticed that with some people, they need building up before they can grasp the truth and hold onto it. Has anyone besides me prayed for someone who didn't seem changed? We can pray right now for those people. I will pray and you substitute the name of the person you are praying for:

*Lord, I pray that out of your glorious riches you may strengthen ..... with power, through your Spirit in his inner being, <sup>17</sup> so that Christ may dwell in his/her heart through faith.*

So much for individual indwelling. Ephesians 2:22 speaks of the way in which Christ dwells corporately in us as a church. *"And in him, you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."*

It's as we do life together that God builds us together. One of my home group came to help me make jam last night. As a home group, we are becoming a dwelling in which Christ lives by his Spirit. As a church, together we will display God's character and love and power. As we purposefully meet together, we are making opportunities for God to build us up together. So, coming to church even when we don't feel like it, talking and praying with one another at home group, attending events like Promise Keepers or New Wine, in all these things our lives are intertwined with each other's. God is building us into His dwelling place. This is a corporate thing.

We in the West tend to emphasise the individual's responsibility to God. Hebrew thinking has more emphasis on the group or the family. In parallel to Hebrew thinking, sociologists say that we develop in our understanding of ourselves and the world *together with other people*. Children develop their cultural identity in the context of all their experiences, not just out of family life.

As in the natural, so in the spiritual:

**Ephesians 3:17-19** *.. so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, <sup>18</sup> may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, <sup>19</sup> and to know this love that surpasses knowledge--that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*

It is only together with other Christians that we can grasp the width and durability and dizzy heights and plumb the depths of Christ's love. I noticed from the beginning of my walk with God that worship in a group is not just different in quantity, but also in quality. In the context of the body of Christ, we begin to experience His love and to be filled up with the fullness of God.

Have you noticed at Christmas time that you can stretch your stomach to hold more delicious food? In a similar way, our capacity to receive the love and presence of Christ can increase. God makes it happen as we pray and worship together with other Christians.

Some might say “Well, it’s easy for *you* to try to become the dwelling place of God – you are married to the vicar and he must be so holy! And I am sure it has rubbed off on you!” Well, those who have been here for the past 6 years know that we are normal people, just as liable to mistakes and problems as you!

What made Mary so lucky, so blessed, so fortunate and to be envied? How could I ever be so lucky as to be chosen by God for such an awesome task? Should I pray and fast and memorise scripture and try to be really holy? Too hard. Mary seemed to joyfully accept the pregnancy. It would almost certainly mean she could expect to be rejected, shamed and punished, possibly even stoned to death for adultery.

If we glance over to the verses after today’s gospel reading (p993) in Mary’s song of greeting to Elizabeth, she never boasted of how virtuous **she** was. She boasted in God and how wonderful **He** is. It was an amazingly risky thing God did, to entrust Himself to a young, inexperienced peasant girl. But

**1 Corinthians 1:25-29** ... *the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.* <sup>26</sup> *Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.* <sup>27</sup> *But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.* <sup>28</sup> *He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are,* <sup>29</sup> *so that no-one may boast before him.*

If we look at the greeting Mary gave to Elizabeth from v46 on, we become sure that Mary was not chosen because she was perfect. She says “My spirit rejoices in God my saviour.” If she had been perfect, she would have had no need of a saviour. So we can see how Mary can be an example to us, a role model. Her attitude is not unreachable for any of us human beings.

If you ask him to, God will come and dwell in you by His spirit. You might think, “How could I be so lucky – the God who fills the universe, dwelling in me?” That is an everyday miracle that you and I can participate in. And the blessing comes to those who believe – look at v45 – “Blessed is the one who has believed that what the Lord has said will be accomplished!”

If you allow yourself to relax into believing that he will do what he promises to do, it will happen. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock,” Jesus says. Just open your heart. Let me in.” We open the door, but Jesus does everything else – “Lest anyone should boast.”

This is the last Sunday of Advent and tomorrow we will be into the Christmas season, when it is right and proper for us to make room in our hearts. Don’t wait for Christmas, or even for New Year’s resolutions - let’s prepare ourselves now to be the dwelling place of God? Jesus said “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hear my voice and open the door, I will come into him and dine with him and he with me.”

How can Jesus dwell in an already full life? De-cluttering might come first - realize that each step towards God will be a process of saying yes to “making space for God” and saying no to “those things that crowd God out.”

Making space for God to dwell might be as simple as getting up ten minutes earlier than normal and opening the window, pausing for a few moments and opening our ears to listen. How might God speak to you?

As you hear the sound of the birds, He might say, “I know when any one of them falls to the ground, but you are worth much more to me than these.” He might draw your attention to a marching line of ants and say, “They get a lot done, but they never pause to attend to me. I like it when you attend to me.” Or perhaps a deliberate silent pause before attending to the

pile of papers on your desk would signal to God that He comes before and into everything in your life.

As I thought about preparing for the in-dwelling of God, I remembered clearing out the under-stair cupboard. Out went the vacuum cleaner – still very new, but it had a broken motor. Out went a picnic mat I had two of. Out came the fans we use in the hot weather. Now I had a useable cupboard space, not a junk heap.

The song he reminded me of was “I want to be your number one.” Out go all the things that are second best! Out go all the things we have kept but no longer need: the grudges, the anger, the need to punish someone, the obsession with things.

I can imagine Jesus looking at this crowd of people. In amongst the big crowd are you and me. Some of them not necessarily high-born or super-intelligent. Some recognise their own need. Jesus pushes his way through the crowd, almost like a homing pigeon, like a heat-sensing missile, sure of his target, drawn by the longing he senses in you. He pushes past people who don't think they need God's grace or a saviour. He pushes past those who think they are as good as the next bloke and perhaps a little better.

Then at last he finds you – your hands are empty and you know it. You are just waiting there, eyes scanning the crowd for Him, knowing the good things you have done are like dust on the scales, weighed against God's goodness, but hoping against hope that the Lord will choose you. And he stretches out his arms wide to you and says “Here's where I want to be. Here's where I feel at home. With you and in you.”

Today is the day to reach out to him and to let go of the things that keep the space inside you too cramped for God to dwell in.