

The 4th Sunday in Advent
December 20, 2009
Luke 1:39-56

Peter K. Lange
St. John's Lutheran Church
Topeka, Kansas

Our text is the Gospel reading for this 4th Sunday in Advent—Mary's Visit to Elizabeth, and Mary's Great Song of Praise, The Magnificat.

There are three aspects of today's Gospel reading that I'd like to consider briefly with you this morning.

- First, that Mary and Elizabeth have something in common in that they both have FAITH in the power and promise of God, against all appearances.
- Second, that John the Baptist—while still a baby in the womb—was filled with the Holy Spirit and responded to the announcement of Christ's presence.
- And third, that Mary's great song of praise teaches us the blessing of acknowledging our situation as beggars before God.

Let's consider first that Mary and Elizabeth have something in common in that they both have FAITH in the power and promise of God, against all appearances.

This fourth Sunday in Advent is a "hinge" or transition between John the Baptist, the last prophet of the Old Testament, and Jesus whose way John prepared. Last Sunday, John the Baptist was prominent in the Gospel reading, as we heard the account of him sending his disciples to Jesus with the question: "*Are you the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?*" And, of course, on Christmas Eve and Day, we will hear the Gospel accounts of the birth of Christ Jesus. And so, again, the Gospel for this fourth Sunday in Advent serves as a sort of transition between the accounts of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. Here, in this Gospel, the infant John, in his mother Elizabeth's womb, meets the infant Jesus in His mother Mary's womb.

And of course, not only are John and Jesus brought together in this Gospel. But so are their mothers, Elizabeth and Mary. Yet Mary and Elizabeth have something else in common, besides the obvious fact that they're both great with child. Because, you see, for different reasons, from all outward appearances, each of these women had no reason to expect that they would give birth to a child. For Elizabeth, it was her old age. Luke chapter 1, verse 7 tells us, "*Elizabeth was barren. And both she and her husband were advanced in years.*" For Mary, it was that she had no husband, and was still a virgin.

But in both cases, God promised them a child, against all odds. And both believed that promise of God. Elizabeth said in Luke 1:25, "*Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.*" And Mary responded to the angels announcement saying, "*Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word*" (1:38). And again, Elizabeth later testified to Mary's faith, saying of her, "*Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord*" (1:45).

Let us learn from this to trust God's promises, no matter what the appearance. *"For with God, nothing is impossible."* And He has given us His Word that He loves us, and that He will work all things together for our good. As Romans chapter eight says, *"He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things"* (v. 32)?

Second, from this Gospel we see that John the Baptist—while still a baby in the womb—was filled with the Holy Spirit and responded to the announcement of Christ's presence.

Luke records about Mary's arrival that, *"When Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb."* And that was no hiccup or mere natural movement of John in the womb of his mother. For the angel of the Lord had said to his father Zechariah that John would be *"filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb"* (1:15). And Luke tells us in verse 41 of today's Gospel that *"Elizabeth [herself!] was filled with the Holy Spirit."* So it is, filled with the Holy Spirit and by the authority of the Holy Spirit that Elizabeth says to Mary, *"When the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy"* (v. 44). This was no ordinary baby movement. Rather, John the Baptist, as a six month old fetus, heard the greeting of Mary who carried in her womb God Himself, and "leaped for joy" specifically in response to being in the presence of the Christ child.

Now there's all kinds of mystery here, to be sure. But if John the Baptist was *"filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb"* according to the word of the angel... and if the unborn infant John leaped for joy in response to a voice he had never heard—the voice of a woman in whose womb was God's gift of His own Son made flesh... if these things are true, then certainly the ability for infants to have faith is far beyond our ability to comprehend! Faith is not synonymous with reason or understanding. Faith is a mystery. It is a gift from God. It is that which receives and embraces the Lord as one's own, and causes the one with faith to "leap for joy" at the gifts God gives through His Son.

Look at what the presence of the Christ child causes here! Look at the effect it has! And consider that this same Christ is present in the flesh with us today, on earth. He who took on our human nature at His conception by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, retains that human nature today. For He who was put death in the flesh on the cross, and whose blood was poured out for our sins, rose from the grave bodily, and ascended into heaven visibly, and has promised to give us His flesh and blood to keep on delivering the forgiveness of sins until He comes again. He has promised to be with us—according to both His human and divine natures—wherever two or three are gathered in His name. Christ is located in His Church today—the Church that He instituted to be His dwelling place on earth—just like He was located in the womb of the Virgin Mary on that day she visited Elizabeth.

So what parent would deny their child the joy and blessing of being in Christ's presence, in the worship of the Church today? What parent could hear this Gospel account and say that their child, their infant, is too young to believe? What parent would not gladly put up with a little inconvenience, and even stress, to have their child in the presence of Christ each Lord's Day?... Christ, whose presence is always accompanied by the Holy Spirit... the Holy Spirit who is able to work faith through the Word of God, at any stage of human life.

And if this is true for John the Baptist, and for infants, what adult Christian would ever think that they don't need worship? What adult Christian could ever go away from the Divine Service or the preaching of God's Word saying they didn't get anything out of it?!? We get Christ for heaven's sake!... with all of the gifts that Christ brings with Him!

Let us learn this lesson of faith and the Holy Spirit and the presence of Christ, on this 4th Sunday in Advent. And let us take it to heart both for ourselves, and for our children and grandchildren... that we may gladly come to His house and leap for joy at the unparalleled gifts God gives!

Lastly, in the latter portion of today's Gospel lesson, Mary's great song of praise teaches us the blessing of acknowledging our position as beggars before God.

We know it as the Magnificat; and we've been singing it each Wednesday evening of Advent. Listen again to these words. And listen to what Mary, speaking by the Holy Spirit, says of the marvelous blessings that God gives particularly to those who are lowly, humbled, and emptied of all self-reliance. Mary sings:

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.*

It is our nature to put our best foot forward, to put on a good face in the midst of trouble, and to try our best to overcome adversity by handling it ourselves. But often, what seems to be merely a laudable, positive approach, can stem from or turn into spiritual pride and a tacit declaration of independence from God our Creator, Lord, and Sustainer. So that we forget that we are mortal creatures, who are dependent on God for every breath we take. And we repeat the original sin of striving to be our own god. We become the "proud," the "mighty," and the self-satisfied "rich" of whom this Magnificat has nothing of comfort to say.

But to you who confess the truth of our beggarly situation before God—especially in spiritual matters... that we have nothing to offer to God to make satisfaction for our sin... To you who repent and confess your sin and throw yourselves on the mercy of our gracious God... to you God comes with His mercy—His mercy which is for those who fear him. It is then that our gracious God can fill us with His good gifts of faith, forgiveness, eternal life, and all the blessings that flow from these gifts. For God’s Son Jesus Christ humbled himself for us, to become incarnate, so that He could live under the Law—and fulfill it perfectly—for us, and take care of the death sentence for our sin on the cross.

Thus, with Mary, during this penitential season of Advent and always, let us not hide our lowliness, or deny our need, or haughtily hold up our works before God. But let us daily repent, and confess our sins, and turn from them, and trust in God above everything else. For He is strong to save. And He wants to help. And He will “exalt those of humble estate” and “fill the hungry with good things.”

The FAITH against all odds, that Mary and Elizabeth shared in common... The FAITH and JOY that John the Baptist demonstrated, even from the womb... And the blessing of spiritual HUMILITY, as Mary sang in the Magnificat... May each of these be yours, in Christ, on this fourth Sunday in Advent, and always. Amen!

Amen.