

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Third Sunday in Advent, December 16, 2012

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 74, 78:1, 275, 23, 50.

Lessons: 1 Samuel 1:20-2:10, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24, Matthew 3:1-12.

Sermon Text: Luke 1:39-56

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Mary rejoiced in God her Savior in our text with the words we call “the Magnificat”. In those words she recognized her humble state and praised God for giving her a marvelous gift: She was the mother of the Savior whom Eve had been expecting with her first child. Several thousand years had passed since the first prophecy of the Savior. Far more than a million girls had been born to the believing descendants of Eve, of Sarah, of Ruth, and all the other mothers who believed in God who would rescue them from their sins. And God had chosen Mary, a simple maiden descended from David, now living in Nazareth. When she says “*From now on all generations will call me blessed,*” she is not boasting. Notice the reason people would call her blessed: “*for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name.*” She speaks of God’s grace, love, and mercy: “*His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.*” She reflects on the history of the world, and of his chosen children, Israel: “*He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.*” She acknowledges that God has not just blessed the nation, but he has blessed individuals in that nation. She makes God’s goodness and blessings a very personal thing, something we could even acknowledge in our own lives: “*He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.*” She points to what God has done for his people: “*He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.*” She is mindful of her role in the history of God’s salvation, but does not boast in the least. Today we see that

MARY VISITS ELIZABETH AND BOTH PRAISE GOD FOR HIS GRACE

- 1. Elizabeth greets Mary.**
- 2. Mary praises God for his grace,**
- 3. And Mary makes it clear what God will do through His Son – her son.**

When the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she was to become the mother of a child who was the very Son of God, Mary was also told that Elizabeth, the husband of Zechariah, had conceived a child who would be called John whom we know as John the Baptist. Mary apparently wasted no time but hurried to pay a visit to her aged relative. She traveled from her own city of Nazareth to the hill country of Judah. She certainly didn’t expect this kind of welcome from Elizabeth. We do not believe that she made this visit after she was married to Joseph because she “*stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.*”

As soon as Mary came into Elizabeth’s home, we read “*When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!’*”

Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit filled the soul of Elizabeth and she exclaimed "***Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!***" She goes on to wonder at the great favor shown her that the mother of her Lord should come to visit. The child in her womb who will be named John – John the Baptist – joins the praise by leaping for joy.

Elizabeth especially praises the faith of Mary. Remember that at this time her husband Zechariah was unable to speak because of his unbelief. Elizabeth had good reason to marvel at the faith of Mary. Her husband had been an example of lack of faith.

To honor Mary in the way in which Elizabeth does is certainly God-pleasing. Her praise was motivated by the Holy Spirit. We Christians today will also honor Mary as an example of faith and service. But we will not go beyond that and regard Mary as someone different from us, for she too was sinful. The child to be born of Mary was as much her Savior from sin as he is our Savior from sin.

2.

“And Mary said: ‘My soul glorifies [King James Version: “doth magnify”] the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

Mary had heard Elizabeth praise God. She responds with her own hymn of praise to the Lord. One hymn of praise follows upon the other. But notice how she points away from herself. She had no special merit or worth. She has been favored, blessed, given grace by the Lord and breaks into this marvelous hymn magnifying him.

The word magnify as a verb is not commonly used in our English language today. The Latin Bible translation of the song of Mary begins with the word “Magnificat”. The word means to praise highly, to glorify, to acclaim. The opening word Magnificat has named this song which quite early in the history of the New Testament church found a place in the worship of the church. These are words for every Christian to sing: “I glorify” God, “I praise” the Lord, and they go on to state what it is that Mary praises and glorifies.

“And Mary said: ‘My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name.” Notice how Mary speaks of the personal blessings which came to her. She recognizes her humble status as a servant of the Lord. She will be praised by future generations because of what the Mighty One has done for her. The name of the Lord is holy, not the name of Mary. It is as if Mary foresees the excessive adoration which some would heap on her in the coming centuries and seeks to deflect or remove any such praise. She wants God to receive the praise, not her.

“His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.” Mary speaks of those who fear the Lord. The word fear is a common biblical term, one Luther adopted and placed into his explanation of every commandment. In this text, for example, it refers to the holy awe and respect which one has for the Mighty One of whom Mary has just spoken. Such fear, such honor, such respect will lead to worship and obedience. Mary herself is an example of one who fears the Lord. The Lord’s mercy surrounds those who honor him.

3.

Mary continues by recalling some of the Lord’s great acts of mercy, and how he works in marvelous ways.

“He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.”

The proud he brings down but lifts up the humble. The hungry he fills with good things, but the rich he sends away empty. His mercy to Israel the nation, his servant, goes back to the time of Abraham. The theme of Mary’s Magnificat will be fully developed in the Ministry of her son. In a way that far surpasses anything of Old Testament history, the saving work of Jesus Christ reveals the mercy of God to those who fear him from generation to generation.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months, right up to the time when John was to be born. She was a good companion for her aged relative and would have taken the place of Zechariah in the household conversation. What happy times the two women must have spent together each looking forward to the birth of sons totally unexpected!

Mary was the Lord's humble servant. She submitted to him and to his will for her life. Mary submitted to the Lord now and later, realizing what should be done to Jesus, and what should happen to him. She would be one who submitted to her husband, not usurping any authority over him, but just as she yielded to the Lord's will, we have no reason to think that she was a liberated woman in the sense of a liberated woman of the world in our age. She was truly a humble, believing child of God, a model for all mothers and wives. Elizabeth, her older relative, honored Mary in a way which is certainly God pleasing. Her praise was also motivated by the Holy Spirit. We Christians today will also honor Mary as an example of faith and service. But we dare not go beyond what Scripture tells us and regard Mary as someone different from us, as some humans have claimed, for she too was sinful. She needed a Savior from her sins just as all mankind needs a Savior. The child to be born from Mary was her Savior from sin, too, just as he is our Savior from all our sins.

But we must never forget why Jesus came to earth. He had a hard task ahead of him, this child who would lead a sinless life after being born of a virgin. And his mother would see not only his growing up, his coming of age and his ministry, but also his death.

If we think for a moment about the prophecy of Simeon that a sword would pierce her soul, we are reminded of exactly why her firstborn son came to earth from his heavenly throne.

Jesus came to earth to redeem us from our sins, from death, and from the power of the devil. To do this he had to live a perfect life and then be punished, the innocent one for all the guilty ones. And he died a horrible death, the death of an executed criminal to pay for OUR sins.

Parents are supposed to die before their children. But that wasn't the case when Jesus was crucified in the presence of his mother. And to watch your son die such a horrible death! A common criminal! No, the worst of criminals! Suspended between heaven and earth, not having your feet in either place. But Mary knew the scriptures. She knew why her son Jesus had come to earth, ***"to save his people from their sins."*** (Matthew 1:21) And she would also have been comforted by her son's words for her as he hung on the cross, which John records in this way: ***"When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, 'Dear woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' From that time on, this disciple took her into his home."*** (John 19:26-27)

May we, too, rejoice in recognizing her son, her Savior, as our Savior, too.

Next week we continue looking at this first chapter of Luke's Gospel, when John the Baptist is born and Zechariah, after long being unable to speak is filled with the Holy Spirit and glorifies God. May the Holy Spirit fill our lives, too, so that we may praise and glorify God. Amen.