

Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth | St. Luke 1:39-45  
July 2, 2017 | Saude & Jerico Lutheran Churches

**In Nomine Iesu**

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Grant, we beseech You, O Lord, unto Your servants the gift of Your heavenly grace, that, as the Son of the Virgin Mary has made us partakers of salvation, we may daily grow in grace. Amen. (Lindemann, *The Sermon and the Propers*, Vol. III, p. 114)

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)*

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*The sermon text for this morning is taken from the first chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:*

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." (ESV)

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*These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)*

In Christ Jesus, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary to redeem all who have inherited sin from our first parents, Adam and Eve, dear fellow redeemed:

When the committee for Jerico's 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary began its work over a year ago, there was a clear goal in sight. Everything had to be ready by June 25<sup>th</sup>. The closer that date got, the more time and money were spent to finish up projects. Then the day arrived – and what a day it was! Things would have been much different if no celebration day had been set. We might have identified jobs needing to be done, but no one would know when they should be completed. We might tell people to get ready, but they wouldn't know when to come. It is a lot harder to keep the focus on a general promise that something will happen, as opposed to a definite deadline and plan.

This helps us understand how the Israelites struggled to maintain the focus on God's promise of a Savior. Thousands of years passed after the LORD first promised Adam and Eve that a Savior would come. Then at a certain point, even prophecy ceased. The last prophet of the Old Testament, Malachi, concluded the book of his prophecy with these words of the LORD, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction" (4:5-6). This was sometime in the 400s B. C. After this time, Alexander the Great conquered Persia, which included the land of Israel. Following his death, his territories were divided among his four generals. Later on the Israelites won their independence, but in 63 B. C., Israel became a territory of the Roman Empire.

Throughout this time, the sacrifices and ceremonies in the temple continued, and the people studied the Scriptures. They knew the fulfillment of God's promise was getting closer, but they had no idea when it would be. Each young girl could well have wondered if God's promise would be fulfilled in her (Gen. 3:15, Is. 7:14). But why would God choose her? Who could ever be worthy enough to bear the Christ-Child? The people must have imagined that the mother of the Messiah would have to be someone noble, someone great, someone significant.

## I

And God chose Mary. She was not rich or famous, but lived a simple life in the unimpressive town of Nazareth. Luther says about Mary that she was "a poor, lowly, weak maiden whom no one valued and who was perfectly obscure" (*Festival Sermons of Martin Luther*, Mark V Publications, p. 108). The angel Gabriel appeared to her and said, "[B]ehold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Lk. 1:31-33). By the power of the Holy Spirit, lowly Mary would bear in her womb the Savior of the world.

Then the angel told her something else, "[B]ehold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God" (vv. 36-37). Mary could hardly believe it, but she did. She said, "let it be to me according to your word" (v. 38). Now who could she tell? Who would believe her? What would Joseph think, the man to whom she was betrothed? The angel had mentioned Elizabeth. This must be no coincidence. Mary would go see her. So she left Nazareth and traveled south to the hill country near Jerusalem, where Elizabeth's husband Zechariah served as a priest.

Elizabeth had only just begun to venture out in public after five months in seclusion. Who would have believed this old woman if she told her neighbors she was pregnant? But now six months into her pregnancy, her growing belly could not be ignored. Then a surprise guest arrived, her young relative Mary. Mary entered the house and greeted her, and suddenly the child in Elizabeth's womb leaped! Some of you here probably know this feeling. A sharp kick to the ribs probably caused you to cry out, much like Elizabeth did. But it wasn't just the movement of her baby that caused Elizabeth to shout. When Mary greeted her, she was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (vv. 42-43).

Keep in mind that Mary set out to see Elizabeth right after the angel visited her. This means Jesus was no more than a couple weeks old. He was almost too small to be seen by the naked eye. No one could have guessed that Mary was pregnant, and Elizabeth knew she wasn't married. But the Holy Spirit revealed to Elizabeth that what was forming in Mary's womb was her Lord, the promised Messiah. He would not become her Lord when He was born, or when He would suffer, die, and rise again. He was her Lord now, a matter of days into His human development. In the same way, it is true that a baby in the womb is a person not just when it is born or can become self-sustaining, but at the earliest stage of its formation.

With Elizabeth, Mary found someone who understood, who believed. Can you imagine the conversations they must have had over that three-month visit? One woman carried in her

womb the man who would prepare the way for the Lord. He was the “Elijah” foretold by the prophet Malachi. The other woman bore the Christ-Child, conceived in her not by a man, but by God. And nobody else knew, except probably Zechariah. To their neighbors, Elizabeth was just a fortunate old woman, whom God had finally given a child. And Mary was her kind relative who had come to help out until the birth. Who could know that the day of God’s great promise had come? Who could know that these lowly women would be remembered and honored until the end of time?

## II

But then isn’t that how the Lord does His work? In his first letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul wrote, *“For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are”* (1:26-28).

This was certainly true of Jesus. Born of a poor woman in a little town. Raised in Nazareth far from the historic center of Israel. Why should anyone pay attention to Him? But His powerful works and words could not be ignored. His bold teaching of repentance set Him at odds with the self-righteous. They used their high-standing and power to condemn this poor Nazarene to death. He was crucified and buried. It appeared that Jesus would be little more than a footnote in human history. But God chooses what is low and despised, to conquer the high and mighty. By His death, Jesus overcame sin, devil, and the grave and won eternal life for all people.

Consider your own life. What does the world care about you? Even famous people are quickly forgotten after their death if not already before. You, living out your lowly life in northeast Iowa, don’t seem to matter much. You may even find yourself thinking the same thing – “Does what I do really make any difference? Would the community even notice if I were gone?” You may not look like much, both in the eyes of others and even in your own sight. But your value to the Lord is immeasurable.

Before you were born, even before you were formed in your mother’s womb, God chose you to be His own. It was for you that He sent His only Son to be born of Mary. Jesus fulfilled the law on your behalf. He was scorned and abused and nailed to a cross in your place. He willingly offered up Himself as the perfect sacrifice to atone for your sins. If the Lord did not care about you, if He did not love you, He would not have done these things.

Not only does He want you to know and believe His grace in this life, He also wants you to reign with Him in heaven. That is how important you are to Him, how much you matter. And the doing is all God’s. You are not His child because you were somehow more worthy than others, or deserved it because of your troubles. Just as God in His own wisdom and grace chose Elizabeth to bear John the Baptizer, and Mary to bear the Christ, so He has chosen you. He has chosen to lift you up out of your sins and share His own honor and glory with you.

Mary knew that her worth in God’s sight was totally due to His merciful disposition. In her beautiful Magnificat she sang, *“My soul magnifies the Lord... for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.... for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name”* (Lk. 1:46,48,49). The Lord kept His promise, but not in a way that everyone would have expected. He turned a

poor, obscure woman into the mother of God. And He has made you, weak and poor in spirit, into a child of God. **The Lord Exalts the Lowly.**

As you hear His Word with humble faith, Jesus visits you with His blessings. He gives you His gifts of forgiveness and life, so that you also are filled with joy and wonder. And you are strengthened in the faith, so that whenever He does come visibly, you will be ready for His coming. Then you will live not for the celebration that will be sometime in the future, but for the celebration that is.

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.*

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