

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 19, 2021

St. Luke 1:39-45:

“Preparing for Christmas Is ... To Receive”

- I. Of All the People.
- II. The Presence of The Word.
- III. What We Receive.

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St. Luke 1:39-45

Dear Friends in Christ,

Most of you know that Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, were cousins. In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy the angel Gabriel announced to Mary, "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus." (Lk. 1:31) The angel then informed Mary, "And behold 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 is impossible with God." (Lk. 1:36-37) *Nothing is impossible with God* was in response to the fact that Mary was a virgin and Elizabeth was, as Gabriel said, "in her old age."

Edward Gibbon was an 18th century English historian. He is noted for his work, "The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire." Though we're still a handful of days away from Christmas, Gibbon wrote:

Of course God might have chosen other methods. He might have sent forth His son trailing clouds of glory from opened heavens with a legion of angels for his bodyguard... He might have heralded His coming with earthquake, tempest, or the voice of thunder. But no! A baby is born of a humble girl in the outhouse of a crowded inn, and Love has set forth on His mighty mission.

This last Sunday of Advent we consider that preparing for Christmas is . . .

TO RECEIVE

I. Of All the People.

I'm sure a number of us are familiar with these lyrics from the song "New York, New York": "I want to wake up in a city that never sleeps. And find I'm A number one, Top of the list, King of the Hill, (and again) A number one." Well, isn't that what many want out of life? To be somebody of importance to someone?

And there they are, of all the people in the world of that time, Mary and Elizabeth. Unknowns. As far as the world was concerned, nobodies from anywhere of importance. God confounds the way the world thinks, doesn't He? I know these words have appeared here many time, but I must confess that I think of them "many times" in light of the fact that we are mostly seen as nobodies from anywhere of importance. These words:

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, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (I Cor. 1:27-29)

The 17th-18th century Welsh commentator, Matthew Henry gave this insight concerning Mary's visit with Elizabeth:

"...it is very beneficial and comfortable for those that have a good work of grace begun in their souls...to consult with those who are (of like mind and heart), that they may communicate experiences to one another...of Christian to Christian." (Matthew Henry; Commentary on the Whole Bible, Hendrickson Publishers, Vol. 5, p. 474)

Mary and Elizabeth might be nothing to the world, but what happened to them and the sons they were carrying in their wombs would far surpass everything this world sees as important. Elizabeth would give birth to John who would prepare the way for Jesus. Mary would give birth to

Jesus, God in the flesh who comes to give new birth into eternal life for those dead in trespasses and sins.

II. The Presence of The Word.

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 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." (vv. 39-44)

An unborn child, very much a living person, in the womb of Elizabeth leaps for joy as a result of the presence of the Word, Jesus who is God made flesh, who is in the womb of Mary. And whenever and wherever the Word is present so is the Holy Spirit. That means that every time we read or hear the Scripture, every time we remember our Baptisms, every time we receive the Lord's Supper, the Holy Spirit is there to strengthen our faith, assure us that though we are sinful and struggle with sin, because of what Jesus did for us we are forgiven and have eternal life. Sometimes the words sound too wonderful: "...the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom 6:23) Those words are wonderful because Jesus is "**Wonderful!**" (Is.9:6)!

Our Lutheran Confession state the following, and what is stated is so very important for us:

Accordingly, we should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil. For even to Moses God wished to appear first through the burning bush and the spoken word (Ex. 3:2,4), and no prophet, whether Elijah or Elisha, received the Spirit without the Ten Commandments. John the Baptist was not conceived without the preceding word of Gabriel, nor did he leap in his mother's womb until Mary spoke (cf. Luke 1:13-42). St. Peter says that when the prophets spoke, they did not prophesy by the impulse of man but were moved by the Holy Spirit...(II Peter 1:21). (Tappert, p. 313.10-13)

III. What We Receive.

And this brings us to the final words of our text, Elizabeth's statement to Mary: "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." (v.45) What was spoken to Mary from Gabriel was the Word. Again, the baby in her womb is the Word! And once again, where the Word is so is the Holy Spirit. Where the Word is there is life - forever!

I'm thinking of these words of the Apostle Peter, words we have also considered here a number of times, but easily pushed aside when overwhelmed, as I believe most are, by so many struggles with life.

And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ (that is, the Baptism that Jesus commanded; to be baptized with water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit) for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (the Holy Spirit who works and sustains faith, as He does through the visible Word of baptism). For the promise is for you and for your children (the ones of any age who were present at that time) and for

all who are far off (the coming and distant generations), everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” (Acts 2:38,39)

Indeed, this Word of God impresses upon us the presence of God we receive through Word and Sacrament, but can be easily pushed aside when overwhelmed by this world's constant turmoil. But what's new? It's always been that way. How could we even grasp what Mary endured as she witnessed the great love for her Son by many, and the great hatred for her Son by many, those who nailed Him to the Cross?

And the point of all this? Well, the point is that Elizabeth and Mary were marked by God to know His love, forgiveness and the promise of eternal life, to be His servants. To know that left alone, apart from God's love in Christ, all they would have are a few years of scraping whatever they could out of this world only to have it taken away forever. Without God's love in Christ, life is nothing more than a trinket that will have no meaning or comfort in everlasting torment.

So, there they are, two unknown, insignificant people as far as the world is concerned, but known to God. And here we are, unknown and insignificant people as far as the world is concerned, but known to God. Do you ever mind the repetition: “God chose what is foolish...God chose what is weak...God chose what is low and despised...(God chose) things that are not ...?” God chose you. God chose me. To be His forever! To be His servants while on earth.

This last Sunday of Advent 2021, in the midst of stomach churning uncertainty and ugly darkness, we are confronted with what we have received from God, what we will celebrate in a handful of days: the birth of Christ Who won eternal life for us. And with that the promise of His return. Hopefully, very soon.

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott