

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent

December 22, 2024

St. Luke 1:39-45:

## **How Blessed Are Those Who Believe**

- I. The Meeting Together
- II. The Power of the Word
- III. A Blessed Journey

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St. Luke 1:39-45

Dear Friends in Christ,

Years ago I filed away this story about an atheist who had an old tree in his back yard. One evening, during a bad storm, the tree fell on his neighbor's house. Thankfully, no-one was hurt. The atheist called his insurance agent to see if it was covered. Now, the agent was a Christian and knew about his client's unbelief, so he said to him:

"If your tree fell over because it was dead, we cannot cover the expense; you will have to pay the repairs on your neighbor's home yourself. However, if the tree fell because of 'an act of God' your insurance will cover it. So, which one do you believe it is?"

We're not told how the man answered, but one thing for sure . . .

## HOW BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO BELIEVE

### I. The Meeting Together

Before we look at our text, we want to remember that Mary and Elizabeth were cousins. It was the angel Gabriel who appeared to Zechariah, the husband of Elizabeth, and said to him, "...your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John (Lk.1:13)." And it was Zechariah who prophesied of John, "...you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins. (Lk.1:76b,77)." And later it was the angel Gabriel who said to Mary, "...behold you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus (Lk.1:31)."

And so, our text begins: "At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth (v.39)." She hurried because she was excited. Their meeting is called The Visitation; the Visitation of four of the most important people on the earth: First, and above all, the unborn Christ in the womb of Mary and, the unborn prophet John in the womb of Elizabeth.

Mary and Elizabeth lived around 100 miles from each other. Concerning the visitation, Matthew Henry wrote: "...it is very beneficial and comfortable for those that have a good work of grace begun in their souls...to consult those who are of like mind and heart, that they may communicate experiences one to another...of Christian to Christian (Matthew Henry's Commentary on the whole Bible, Hendrickson Publishers, Vol.5, p.474)."

It's the same with us. As God's people in Christ, we gather together, physically face to face, to receive Word and Sacrament and to mutually comfort and strengthen one another, face to face. I have no doubt that God foresaw that there would be computers and the internet that would cause certain, troubles, some of which would be very serious. But worshiping and receiving the Lord's Supper through a screen is like having a family picnic screen to screen. It's not what the Lord intended when He instituted His Supper. As God's word teaches: "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day (Judgement Day) drawing near (Heb.10:23-25)."

### II. The Power of the Word

With all this before us we're told:

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 come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. (vv.41-44).”

What I'm going to say in the next four paragraphs has been stated before, but it is so very critical for our understanding and for those times when we're confronted by conflicting views.

At the sound of Mary's greeting the unborn John leaped for joy. We know that "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son." With that in mind we recall this from the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word (Jesus)...and the Word was God...And the word became flesh and dwelt among us...(Jn. 1:1,14a)." So, confronting Elizabeth was God the Son who is the Word who was in Mary's womb. Later in life Jesus would teach, "When the Spirit (the Holy Spirit) of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth...for he will take what is mine and declare it to you (Jn.16:14). When the Word of God, Jesus, is present so is the Holy Spirit who works and sustains faith. For us, that takes place through the written and spoken Word and the visible Word of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

This is so critical for our understanding of infant baptism; this from the Apostle Peter: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ (that is, 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 gift is the Holy Spirit, the One who works and sustains faith). For the promise is for you and for your children (the children who were present at that time; children referring to babies on up) and for all who are far off (adults and children of the coming generations, including us...(Acts 2:38,39a)." And we must understand Elizabeth's words: "the baby in my womb leaped for joy." And please don't say, "Well, that was John the Baptist!" True, but it was the Holy Spirit working through the Word.

Everything we've heard draws us to the words of David: "Yet you are he who took me from the womb; you made me trust you at my mother's breast (faith was there in a new-born); on you I was cast from birth, and from my mother's womb you have been my God (Ps.22:9,10)." Some will insist that since babies can't repent and believe they shouldn't be baptized. Really? Where did God say babies can't repent and believe? What was He saying when he told the disciples, "Let the little children (all ages) come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it (Lk.18:16,17)." And that answers the question: "How do we explain all this?" We don't! We simply believe as a little child does! And we remember these words Jesus spoke to the disciples when they asked who's the greatest in the kingdom of God: "Truly, I say to you unless you turn and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of God (Mt.18:3). The faith of a child is the greatest.

Everything we've heard draws us to this Word of God: "Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God (the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity), that we might understand the things freely given us by God (I Cor.2:12)." And what have we been freely given? The wisdom of God. We know Christ! As Paul writes, "...Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God stronger than men (I Cor. 1:24b,25)." And the wisdom of God is this: "...by grace (God's undeserved love for sinners such as you and me) you have been saved through faith (trust that Christ has paid for every sin and delivered us from eternal hell). And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God so that no one may boast (Eph.2:8)." We know all this! At least, we should.

Everything we've heard draws us to this: Whoever believes that Christ has paid for our sin, which brought hardship and dying and death into our lives, will have eternal life! And to believe is by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word. Blessed Are Those Who believe!

### III. A Blessed Journey

Dear brothers and sisters, this was the journey through which God was taking Mary and Elizabeth. Not to a life of luxury and ease; a life without trouble and sorrow. They would experience plenty of that. Real life is about eternal life.

Advent points us to Christ's birth; Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world; Christ Jesus whose name is despised by most of the world, and viewed as just another religious figure by the apostate church.

We need not ask why things are the way they are; why is everything so hard, so difficult? The word God spoke to Adam - to men and women - from the very beginning doesn't even hold a high place before much of the church. Please listen...carefully: "...cursed is the ground because of you (the ground on which you and I live and labor); in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life...By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return (Gn.3:17b-19)."

It is only by the love of God that Christ entered this world. His birth would be our birth into eternal life. His birth, suffering, death, and resurrection lift us to the eternal presence of God who "... will wipe every tear from (our) eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things (the things that caused mourning, crying, and pain) have passed away (Rev.21:4)." They will be gone and not remembered.

This Fourth Sunday of Advent ends our preparation for the celebrations of His birth this coming Tuesday evening and Wednesday morning; namely, our receiving the greatest gift: the Lord Jesus Christ; Heaven - forever! Hope to see you then!

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott