

## **“The Baby Leaped For Joy!”**

**(Luke 1:39-45)**

**The Visitation**

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. We are anxious in a very good way to celebrate the birth of our Savior! Do you remember my dear friends when as a child you counted down the days? I can remember sitting by the Christmas tree and deriving so much excitement from just peering at the lights and the ornaments...and to see *presents* underneath, well, that was almost too much to take in! Christmas is almost here and we can't wait!

But here in our Gospel this morning, there is a special song for us to consider *before* Christmas on the occasion of what the Church calls “The Visitation,” when Mary traveled for about four (4) days to visit her cousin Elisabeth. In this scene there is a kind of Christmas before Christmas. That is, we mustn't forget dear Christians that before the birth of our Savior, there was for Him just like there was for you, a *conception* -- the vehicle used by God to initiate the incarnation insofar as it touches our lives in this world -- God taking upon Himself human nature; true God becoming also at the same time, true man nine months before His birth. True God became your brother, a true human like *you* and was therefore able to be *your* human representative and human substitute to save you from your sin and to save you from death. As the great Athanasius wrote, “This He did out of sheer love for us, so that in His death all might die, and the law of death thereby be abolished because, when He had fulfilled in His body that for which it was appointed, [the law of death] was thereafter voided of its power for men...[and I especially love this part]...Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire (*On the Incarnation*, 34).”

We see that Jesus is God even at conception! Pieper wrote, “Not only as a man (Matt. 16:13-17; 26:63f.), not only as a boy (Luke 2:49), not only as the child in the manger (Luke 2:11), but already as the child in His mother's womb He is [The Lord], the Lord God, called that by Elisabeth (Luke 1:43). He was then already received into the Person of the Son of God (Volume II, 79-80). The Augsburg Confession summarizes exactly what the Word of God is presenting us through the conception of Jesus: **“Also they teach that *the Word*, that is, *the Son of God*, did assume *the human nature* in the womb of the blessed Virgin Mary (Trigl. 44, Art. III, 1).”**

So much for our doctrinal review for this Sunday, but there is much more to this text. We have to consider that this great miracle of Christ's coming is presented in connection to the most humble of circumstances and characters in the narrative of The Visitation. Why is this important? Because sometimes we are tempted that on account of our humility, our weakness, our inability, our insecurity, that God can seem very far away. Not so. God comes to the humble; and God comes to the weak. Consider first of all Mary.

Mary was very young, just a little older than my youngest daughter Katherine. Consider how well you would do at age 15 if the angel Gabriel came to announce to you that you would be as an ark or tabernacle, a carrier of the Living God in order for the world to receive Him and be saved by Him! Mary is quite simply an example of faith to us all, *but* it took a little bit to get there: “At first Mary was disturbed (vs. 29), then she expressed incredulity (vs. 34), but, finally, in vs. 38 she expressed submission according to what the Lord said (Buls, *Exegetical Notes: Gospel Texts Series C*, 10).”

I hope that these facts are an incredible source of encouragement to you dear Christian. When you are going through a hardship, and the Word of the Lord is first given to you, what is your initial reaction? Is it always instantaneous faith and obedience? Is it automatic joy and eagerness? No, and the Lord knows that you are only a poor sinner which is why He needed to be conceived to begin with. Often we are disturbed when the Word comes and to say that we are “challenged” by it is an understatement. But even then the journey does not soon become easy. We may move like Mary from being disturbed to being incredulous -- not quite believing and still having doubts -- but the greatest saints described in the Bible are described as wrestling with doubts. We say like Mary did, “How will this be?” (Lk 1:34)

But pause here. Do these traits thus far describe in your opinion the ideal candidate for God to use for His high purposes? There is a part of us that wants to say, “No way!” But consider again...the process did not end there for Mary. In Elisabeth’s chanted song she calls Mary “blessed” that means “blessed by God out of grace (Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 73).” This is the reason for you’re being blessed dear Christian. The original word at Lk 1:42 – *eulogeo* – describes the benefits received from God who speaks those blessings into being. God speaks His love and mercy upon you in Jesus and now you are “blessed”!

So like Mary we know what it is like to be disturbed and to be incredulous...skeptical, doubtful, questioning...”How will this be?” we ask God! We can only see our sin and how unworthy we are! But by God’s grace, He speaks to us in love and we’re blessed! He gives us His very Word and faith is created within us as a gift. Now we know why Rm 10:17 says that faith comes by hearing the Word of Christ! What is that Word? It is a Word of welcome, a Word of forgiveness, a Word of restoration, a Word that breathes new life into us...a Word that does not hold your weakness and sin against you, but a Word which covers all the bad; it is a Word that makes you new. He speaks to us so that He blesses us and we become blessed ones! That is what you are heading into Christmas! Thank God!

But if we remove the Word from our lives, then our faith can easily die, but if the Word remains our lives, then our faith remains! It is that simple. And with that Word given to Mary, her state of being disturbed and her state of incredulity was replaced by a state of faith, so Ambrose wrote:

*“You see that Mary did not doubt but believed and therefore obtained the fruit of faith, “Blessed...are you who have believed.” But you also are blessed who have heard and believed. For a soul that has believed has both conceived and bears the Word of God and declares his works (Ancient Christian Commentary, New Testament Volume III, 22-23).”*

Mary bore Jesus within her according to the flesh, but since you too have received the Word of God, you bear Jesus within yourself according to faith...yes, even you with all of your disturbances and incredulity, God has chosen to give you faith through His Word! And even if your faith is extremely weak this Christmas, rejoice, because the power of faith does not come from itself, but from the strength of the One faith holds on to! You are strong not for the strength or for the weakness of your faith, but on account of the One your faith holds onto and won't let go of! Jesus! He is the One who transfers our disturbances of soul and our incredulities of mind into the strength of faith. Thanks be to God for this example of Mary!

But there is another example to you and me in our gospel to help us in our pre-Christmas struggles. Let us now consider Elisabeth. She was an older woman who had been barren. Barrenness – to be unable to conceive – was a great shame for a woman in this time and culture. To be barren in the Hebrew mindset was in a way to be cursed. It was a terrible burden. It was like being dead inside.

But Mary was eager to visit Elisabeth because the angel Gabriel had revealed to Mary that besides the miracle that she herself was experiencing by the conception of Jesus in her womb by the Holy Spirit, that another miracle had taken place. The Scriptures record Gabriel as having said, **“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 will be impossible with God (Luke 1:36-37).”**

Therefore with great haste and excitement Mary went to see her cousin Elisabeth. For Mary, the four-day journey must have flown by. She could not wait to witness the confirmation of God's Word with her own eyes! But perhaps just as exciting was what Elisabeth herself had been experiencing. She thought that she had been dead inside, and then the Lord brought life where there was once death. Ephrem the Syrian said, ***“Our Lord prepared his herald in a dead womb, to show that he came after a dead Adam. He vivified Elizabeth's womb first, and then vivified the soil of Adam through his body (Ancient Christian Commentary, New Testament Volume III, 21).”***

That is, John the Baptist had come into the world to announce, to preach, and to herald to people in the darkness of sin and in the shadow of death, that the Light of the World Jesus Christ had come! Elisabeth had in her -- in other words -- a great light inside of her who would prepare the way of the Lord...she had in her womb the greatest prophet who ever lived who would point to Jesus in the flesh!

But not only did this once barren woman carry a prophet in her womb, but in this instance of coming in contact with Mary and the Lord Jesus in Mary's womb, Elisabeth herself was filled with the Holy Spirit (v 41), and she chanted with a great voice (v 42) a prophecy-song that confessed that the Lord-God was in Mary's womb (v 43)! This is astounding! Jesus was no more than a week old...[repeat] no more than a week old! The child conceived in the womb is no glob of embryonic tissue, but a living being...just as this less-than-a-week old Jesus was already known as God in the flesh by Elisabeth!

And this is how the Lord prepares you dear Christian for Christmas. Though in your soul you may know barrenness and deadness inside on account of sin, God sends His Word through what is announced,

preached, and heralded to you. As a result, your barrenness is replaced by the light of the Gospel and you recognize the Christ, the Light of the World through the light that has been given to you by God. You are no longer barren; you are no longer dead inside, because the Lord has given you the recognition that Jesus is Lord who has come to save. This is how we are helped through the example of Elisabeth.

And this leads me to the final example of all of us here today in this narrative of The Visitation...not only is Mary a picture of you once disturbed and incredulous, but now given faith; not only is Elisabeth a picture of you once barren and dead inside on account of sin, but now filled with the Spirit and recognizing the Lord who comes to you; ***but the baby John the Baptist is also a picture of you.***

He is only 6 months old in the womb, not yet born, completely weak, dependent, helpless, and absolutely the picture of total inability right? Not quite! This baby was *leaping*! Talk about the proper response for being on the verge of Christmas. I mentioned at the opening of this sermon the excitement. We can see it in our children's smiles...and if those smiles get amped up, they will translate into what is described in our text as "exultation." To exult is to express joy that causes you to be lifted up! If not simply in soul, but also in body! In Acts 3:8 when the lame man is healed, he goes forth "leaping" (same word) into the temple!

"The fleshly presence of Messiah, the agent of creation, causes great things to take place within God's creation. Already now the new creation is beginning, and a baby still in the womb hails the new creation's inception. In John's leap are foreshadowed the miracles of Jesus, who will cause all creation to leap at his presence: 'Blind are seeing again, lame are walking around, lepers are being cleansed, and the deaf are hearing, dead are being raised, poor are proclaimed the Good News' (Luke 7:22) [Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 75]."

Elisabeth was not the only one filled with the Holy Spirit, so was unborn, baby John (Luke 1:15) and it happened because the baby – yes, the little unborn baby – knew that he was in the presence of Jesus. He was leaping for joy and prophesying through his leaping that Jesus had come into the world; that sinners would be saved; that life was conquering death; that light was invading darkness; that hope was being given to the likes of you and to the likes of me...John the little unborn baby knew – he already knew – that the Jesus he was in the presence of was going to cause all of us to leap!

We leap, though so weak and so fragile like the unborn baby John...we nevertheless leap for joy...we leap because we are forgiven; we leap because we shall live past death; we leap because we shall leap when our tombs are overcome by the trumpet and the voice of the King of Kings...we leap even now because on this Sunday before Christmas, the Word of God has once again prepared our hearts...we leap, because we are ready for Christ to come...and we leap because even as we await for Him to come again, we know we are already in His presence and it is a presence not of judgment and condemnation, but of forgiveness and grace. We leap because in His presence He makes us the very children of God. We leap because we are ready for Christmas!