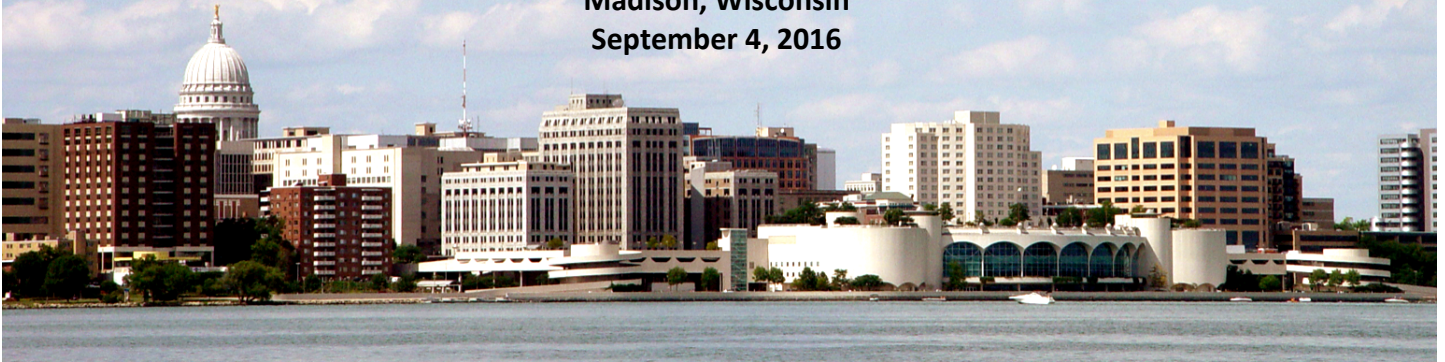


The Visitation: Mary and Elizabeth

LUKE 1:39-45

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This morning I would invite you to turn with me to Luke 1. Luke, of course, is one of the four gospel accounts, and Luke actually writes more of the New Testament than any other writer (the two-volume series of Luke and Acts). And Luke's account is rather unusual. He is not an eyewitness, but he is a researcher. He is a medical doctor who apparently writes his account for perhaps a wealthy donor or sponsor, and so his account (along with the book of Acts) is addressed to someone by the name of Theophilus. And in the opening verses of Luke, you will notice how he starts out by explaining that he ***"investigated everything carefully from the beginning,"*** and his purpose was to write everything out ***"in consecutive order."*** Luke, then, wanted to start at the beginning. And as a medical doctor, Luke, does, in fact, start at the beginning. He doesn't start with Jesus, but he starts by explaining the conception of John the Baptist, the last prophet of the Old Testament and the forerunner of Jesus Christ.

Starting in Luke 1:5, we learn about a priest by the name of Zacharias who has a vision as he serves in the temple. He and his wife are old, ***"advanced in years,"*** as Luke describes it, Elizabeth (Zacharias' wife) is ***"barren"*** (unable to bear children), and yet the angel announces that Elizabeth is about to conceive and bear a son, and that this son will be a great prophet ***"in the spirit and power of Elijah,"*** and that this son (to be named John) will turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children (a clear reference to the last few verses of the Old Testament), the last prophecy from God before more than 400 years of prophetic silence. Zacharias questions the angel as to how this is possible, since his wife is so old, and for questioning God's plan, the angel takes away Zacharias' voice for the next nine months.

Meanwhile, six months into this pregnancy, the angel Gabriel appears to a young woman (a virgin) who is engaged to be married to a carpenter, a young woman by the name of Mary. Elizabeth and Mary are related. Elizabeth is perhaps Mary's great aunt, they live about 80 or 90 miles apart (Elizabeth down near Jerusalem and Mary up in Nazareth), and the angel's announcement to Mary is that she has found favor with God and that she is about to conceive and bear a son who will be called Jesus. This child will be called (in verse 32), ***"the Son of the Most High."*** And like Zacharias, Mary also questions the angel (in verse 34), ***"How can this be, since I am a virgin?"*** The angel explains that the child will be conceived by the Holy Spirit, and as proof, the angel explains that her relative Elizabeth has also conceived in her old age and is now in her sixth month. And that is where we pick up this morning with Luke 1:39-45.

Two of our senior saints here at Four Lakes have asked for lessons on Mary and Elizabeth. And this morning, I'd like to do something a little unusual by looking at both of these women at the same time, and the reason we can do this is that their lives overlap in one powerful meeting, a meeting that is now referred to as "The Visitation," the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth. Our member who requested a lesson on Mary explained that Mary is an interesting and inspiring character in the Bible, because of "her complete submission to God's will, even to having His Son." Our member who requested a lesson on Elizabeth explained her appeal, because she "accepted God's purpose for her life, and encouraged Mary, the mother of Jesus." And as we are about to discover, these two women's lives cross, starting in Luke 1:39.

As soon as Mary hears that Elizabeth is expecting, she takes off immediately, I believe, to confirm what she has just heard about herself. To give us some sense of the distance Mary travels, I plugged it into Google Maps yesterday, and the distance from Nazareth down to the suburb of Jerusalem where Elizabeth most likely lived is roughly 95 miles. And to put that in perspective, that would be like walking from here to Racine, from here to Dubuque, or maybe from here to Tomah – 95 miles, on foot, only for Mary this would have involved walking through several mountain ranges, on some very primitive roads or dirt paths, in almost constant danger from various predators, human and otherwise. Google Maps says that this journey takes roughly 32 hours. So here is this newly expectant young mother, perhaps in her early teens, and if she walks for maybe 8 hours a day, that trip takes maybe 4-5 days, and even that is probably rather optimistic.

This morning, then, as we study Mary and Elizabeth, I want us to look at Luke's record of that meeting. Notice, please, the words of Luke, the beloved physician – Luke 1:39-45,

³⁹ Now at this time Mary arose and went in a hurry to the hill country, to a city of Judah, ⁴⁰ and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² And she cried out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³ And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord would come to me? ⁴⁴ For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord."

As we look at this paragraph, as we study these two women, and as I try to share as much of this beautiful artwork as I can this morning (many paintings from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds), I want us to briefly consider four lessons that we can learn from these two women, four things that both of these women had in common.

- I. **And as we go back to this text (and really all of Luke 1), we find that BOTH WOMEN BELIEVE GOD'S MESSAGE – THERE IS SOME FAITH INVOLVED.**

Obviously, in verse 39, we have at least some proof of Mary believing, because she leaves immediately to go see her aunt or great aunt Elizabeth. And again, this is not a trip to be taken lightly. How many of us would allow our teenage daughters to go take off walking from here to Racine? I would feel nervous letting my daughter walk home from worship this afternoon! But Mary takes off because she believes the word of God. She believes this message from the angel. I do believe she is visiting Elizabeth to confirm the message, but the journey itself is motivated by her belief that she is, in fact, carrying the Son of God! Where would she sleep along the way? What would she eat? We don't know, but we know that when she hears the angel's message, when she hears that God is about to do the impossible, Mary leaves to go see Elizabeth almost immediately.

And that is pretty much the definition of faith. As the writer of Hebrews would go on to say later, ***“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”*** (Hebrews 11:1). Mary was assured and convicted of what she could only imagine, of something no one had ever seen, that a virgin would bear a child. And once the angel explains what is about to happen, Mary accepts it. Going back to verse 38, after the message from God, Mary says, ***“Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.”*** Mary believed, and then she rearranged her life to make it happen.

And then we think of Elizabeth. Elizabeth also believed God’s message. Mary had no more than said “hello,” before Elizabeth understood exactly why she was there! Elizabeth knew and believed exactly what was happening here. And this belief is mutual. In verse 45, Elizabeth says to Mary, ***“And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord.”*** Elizabeth blesses Mary for believing.

And the lesson for us here this morning is: It doesn’t matter how old we are, how young we are, how rich we are, or how poor we are, all of us are able to believe the word of God. All of us are able to believe that what God says will happen will actually happen. So first of all, both of these women are examples in that both of them believe the word of God. They hear the message from the angels, and they believe what God is telling them.

II. **There is something else these two women have in common in this passage, and that is: MARY AND ELIZABETH BOTH REACT TO WHAT IS HAPPENING HERE WITH GREAT JOY – BOTH OF THEM SEE GOD’S PLAN AS A BLESSING, AS A GREAT JOY.**

Today, obviously, not all pregnancies are received with great joy. In this case, though, both women are thrilled. Earlier in this chapter, we think of the angel’s message to Zacharias (in verse 14), ***“You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.”*** And then we look at Elizabeth herself. Here is a woman whose friends are probably welcoming their grandchildren into the world, but Elizabeth is getting ready for her very first. But we don’t get the impression here that this is a burden. Elizabeth understands the words of King David in Psalm 127:3 where he says that, ***“Children are a gift from God; they are his reward.”*** This is true quite literally, in Elizabeth’s case. All children are a gift from God, but so much more with her, as she is far beyond her child-bearing years. And what she says shows us that she is bringing God into all of this. What happens in verses 39-45 is a spiritual conversation as Elizabeth praises God for bringing this joy into their lives.

And specifically, she is especially happy about what is happening with Mary. In verse 41, ***“When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.”*** And from there, Elizabeth is overwhelmed with great joy over what is happening here. Mary’s joy is described in the paragraph right after this one, in what appears to be a song, starting in verse 46, ***“My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior,”*** and so on. So, Elizabeth is happy, Mary is happy, and we should also point out that even John seems to be happy here! When John (still in the womb) hears Mary’s voice, Dr. Luke tells us that he ***“leaped in the womb.”***

Maybe you have seen the meme online lately, pointing out that “the first person to recognize Jesus as the Son of God was an unborn child.” And that is absolutely correct! It is unfortunate that any discussion of children in the womb seems to turn into some kind of a political discussion. When we hear about children in the womb, what do we often think about? Abortion. And then the discussion often turns political. What we need to realize, though, is that abortion is not primarily a political issue. Abortion is a moral issue that has been

reabeled as politics. And so of all people, Christians are those who should be the first to acknowledge that life before birth is sacred. And I believe this passage has much to say on this. John, as the last Old Testament prophet, seems to have made his first prophetic statement even before he was born. At six months, little John would have been about 9 inches long and maybe a pound and a half. And even before he was born, when he hears Mary's voice, he *"leaps"* inside his mother! We think back to the call of Jeremiah, where in Jeremiah 1:5, God said, ***"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations."*** Like Jeremiah, John was called as a prophet even before he was born.

What many people don't realize is that in the ancient Roman world, fathers had the power of life and death over their newborn children. A nurse would bring a child to the father and set the child in his father's lap. However, if the father opened his legs and allowed that child to fall to the ground, that child would be set out in the wilderness to either die of exposure or to be eaten by wild animals. As we learned some time ago, unwanted children were often left under bridges, and Christians on their way to worship would often pick up those children, bringing them to the Lord's Day assembly, and various members of the congregation would then raise them as their own. Of course, today, mothers now have the power of life and death over their unborn children. And we now have an entire political system set up to defend her "right" to have her child put to death even before the moment of birth.

While we're on this, though, I should point out that the word *"baby"* in verse 44 is the same Greek word used to describe *"baby"* Jesus in the manger in Luke 2:12,16. Biblically speaking, a baby is a baby, before and after being born. And that alone ought to solve this issue for everyone who has any shred of conscience. This has always been a moral issue, long before it ever became a political issue. Can children hear and even learn to recognize patterns of speech before they are born? Absolutely! And John, filled with the Holy Spirit, recognizes Jesus even before he was born.

So we have a passage filled with joy. And it seems to me that if they were happy, we also should also be filled with joy. What happens in Luke 1 makes our salvation possible. Do you remember the message to the shepherds in the next chapter? In Luke 2:10, the angels announce to the shepherds, ***"Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people."*** We are *"all the people"*! What happens here is for us. And so there is a sense of great joy that comes along with the Christian faith.

III. **As we go back to our text and continue looking for what Mary and Elizabeth had in common, we find not only that they BELIEVE and that they react with JOY, but we also find that both women ACCEPT GOD'S PLAN FOR THEIR LIVES WITH THE UTMOST OF HUMILITY – BOTH WOMEN ARE HUMBLE.**

When Mary arrives, Elizabeth is in no way jealous, but she is amazed, ***"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."*** She then asks the question, ***"And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord would come to me?"*** Elizabeth realizes that Mary is the mother of her Lord! The Bible tells us that Mary leaves home immediately upon hearing that she is about to conceive. Assuming this trip takes a week or two, Mary is no more than a week or two along at this point. Jesus, therefore, is nothing more than a speck! We think back to high school biology, and we realize that at this point, the Son of God is not much larger than the head of a pin. The being in Mary's womb is fully human and fully God – before he is born, before his first miracle, before his first sermon, before he dies on the cross, before he comes back from the dead, Jesus is her Lord. Elizabeth, therefore, in all humility, recognizes Jesus as Lord and Mary as the mother. Elizabeth's own son would be Jesus' forerunner, but there is no jealousy here, only humility.

And the same goes for Mary. Mary seems to be amazed that God has chosen her. We skip down to Mary's praise to God in verse 48, "***For He has had regard for the humble state of His bonds slave.***" We have no indication here, by the way, that Mary is any kind of co-redeemer with Jesus, no indication that she herself was immaculately conceived, no indication that she has the ability to intercede on our behalf before God; instead, Mary is quite normal. Both women, then, are humble. And there's something here for us: We can learn from their humility. When someone is honored more than we are, we can rejoice. And when we ourselves are honored, we can react like Mary did, not in a "what took you so long" kind of way, but with humility, expressing thankfulness for the honor. And especially when it comes to our relationship with God, we need to realize that God doesn't owe us anything. We are God's humble servants. We need to step back and remember that we serve God; it is not the other way around.

IV. As we come to the end of today's passage, there is something else that Mary and Elizabeth have in common – not only do they believe, not only do they react with joy, not only are they humble, but we also find in this passage that BOTH WOMEN MANAGE TO ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER.

Have we wondered why God chose these two women who are related to each other? I kept asking myself that question this week, and then I wondered: Without Elizabeth, who could Mary have talked to for encouragement? Who would have believed her? We don't know about her relationship with her own parents, but can you imagine Mary trying to talk to her friends about this? Imagine being a teenager and explaining all of this to your friends. The story is almost unbelievable.

And so we have Elizabeth – not only fully prepared by God to be John's mother, but she also seems to be uniquely prepared by God to be an encouragement to Mary. Her pregnancy is also amazing, miraculous even, and she is 6 months ahead of Mary. Even today, with all of our advances in medicine, realizing that a baby is on the way has to be one of the most overwhelming and defining moments in a woman's life. For some, it is expected and awesome, for others it might actually be unexpected and terrifying, but either way, I'm thinking that most women probably need somebody to talk to. Here in Madison, we have CareNet, a pro-life group dedicated to saving unborn children. They exist to provide encouragement. And that is what Mary and Elizabeth have in each other. Just as John was to prepare the way for Jesus, so it seems that Elizabeth was able to prepare the way for Mary. Elizabeth, then, was able to say to Mary, "I know how you feel," and she was able to say that in a way that nobody else on earth was able to say it.

And the lesson for us is: All of us also need encouragement. We need to give it. We need to receive it. We need to lean on each other. As Christians, God put us in a Christian family to be together, to get to know each other, to go to each other for help. Obviously, it's not enough to listen to the preacher. But teenagers like Mary need to connect with older Christian women like Elizabeth. Somehow the Mary's and Elizabeth's in the church need to bump into each other. And that goes for men and women. Sometimes as a man, I think, "I don't need friends." But obviously, that is not true. All of us in the church need encouragement, and that takes some effort on our part. This past Friday, I had an opportunity to reconnect with an older Christian friend from the church in Janesville. I baptized this man and his wife. And Friday we got to just hang out for an hour or two and encourage each other. As Christians, we need that. And we see an example of it with Mary and Elizabeth as they provide encouragement to one another.

Conclusion:

As we come to the end of our study this morning, I hope we come away with greater appreciation for Mary and Elizabeth and for what they went through for us. We've learned this morning that these women had several things in common:

- They both **BELIEVED** God's message and acted on it, giving us an example to follow today.
- They both reacted to their rather unusual circumstances with great **JOY**; again, motivating us to be joyful ourselves.
- They were both **HUMBLE** women – we find no hint of arrogance in these two; also a good reminder to us today.
- And finally, we learned that Mary and Elizabeth were both able to **ENCOURAGE** each other; once again, a reminder that we need each other; we need Christian friends.

As we close, we want to at least briefly explain the good news, that Jesus was eventually born, he lived a perfect life, and then he was crucified for our sins, taking the punishment we deserve. Sin separates us from God, but Jesus stepped in and bridged the gap. We respond to his sacrifice by calling on God for salvation. We do this by turning away from sin and by being immersed in water as God has commanded, for the forgiveness of our sins. If you'd like to talk about it, let us know. If you are already a Christian and you'd like to have this church go to God on your behalf, we'd be honored to do that as well. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com