

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Advent 4, Series C
Sunday, December 23, 2012
Sunday, December 23, 2018 (Reprise)

Sermon: Blessed by Belief

Text: Luke 1:39-45

Focus: God blesses us through his Word.

Function: That they would believe God's Word about Christ and be blessed.

Structure: Story-Applied

Locus: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord..." (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen. "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is it granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:42-43, ESV).¹ These are Elizabeth's words to Mary when her little cousin comes to visit her. In her old age, Elizabeth is pregnant with John the Baptist. In his great mercy, the Lord takes away her reproach and gives her a child (Luke 1:25).

Mary is engaged to be married to Joseph the carpenter (Matt. 1:18; Luke 2:5). She is a virgin who has never been with a man (Luke 1:34). And yet by the miracle of God's Word and the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary conceives a child, the incarnate Son of God, God in the flesh, "God with us" (Matt. 1:23).

The joyful reunion of these two cousins, Elizabeth and Mary, is more than a family get-together or a baby shower. It is a celebration of the way that God showers his people with blessing! As Mary sings in the *Magnificat*: "The Lord... has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:47-48).

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

We do not know what to do with these two women: a pregnant virgin and an old lady with child. No one would believe them if they tried to explain it. Even less do we know what to do with their unborn sons: Jesus and John the Baptist. All of it goes against reason—against science! Their growing fetuses are the very definitions of miracle! (Of course, every baby’s life is a sacred miracle and gift [Ps. 139:14-16; Jer. 1:5; Gal. 1:15]). But no child’s conception was ever more miraculous than that of John or Jesus).

These two pregnant woman prove that the Lord fulfills his Word and keeps his promises. His life-giving Spirit is entirely unpredictable (John 3:8)! God creates life where science says life cannot exist. God says, “Let there be light!” and there is light (Gen. 1:3). God says, “Let there be *life!*” and there is life! As the angel told Mary, “Nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37).

And faithful Mary replied, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Mary believed and obeyed the Word of the Lord. Luther calls her the first Christian because she was the first to believe the Good News of God’s Son.

And Mary is also the first Christian missionary. She runs “with haste” to tell Elizabeth what God has done for her—what God is doing *in* her!

Elizabeth also has Good News. So when the two women meet, Betty’s baby leaps for joy, sensing beyond all reason that the Savior is at hand. As Elizabeth embraces Mary, she declares, “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?” (Luke 1:42-43).

Mary is blessed because her Son is blessed. He comes to bring blessing to all who believe and receive his name: Jesus. Ultimately, the story of the Visitation is not about Mary,

Elizabeth, or even John the Baptist. The Visitation is about *Jesus* and how “God has visited his people” (Luke 7:16) in the womb of Mary, in the flesh of Jesus Christ.

Eve’s womb brought death and sin into the world. “In pain shall you bring forth children” (Gen. 3:16). Mary’s womb brought the sinless Son of God into the world. For we “will be saved through childbearing—if [we] continue in faith...” (1 Tim. 2:15).

For 9 months Mary’s body became God’s temple, with the incarnate Christ growing and being knit together in her womb—this is a profound mystery! “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4-5).

Mary does not ask us to praise or worship her. Yes, she is the mother of our Lord, the *Theotokos* or “God-bearer,” as the Early Church confessed. But she is not a goddess; nor is she the “Queen of Heaven.” That Mary is “the mother of my Lord” (Luke 1:43) says more about the unborn Jesus than it does about Mary. Mary’s Son is Mary’s Lord. She is only “the handmaid of the Lord,” a servant girl, a slave (Luke 1:38, KJV). And she is blessed because she believes God’s Word, spoken to her by the angel Gabriel. “Let it be to me according to your Word” (Luke 1:38, ESV). As Elizabeth declares, “Blessed is she who believed... what was spoken to her from the Lord” (Luke 1:45).

Many years later, as Jesus taught the crowds, someone in the crowd would cry out, “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!” (Luke 11:27). (In other words, “Jesus, your mother must have really been *something!*”) To which Jesus replied, “Blessed rather are those *who hear the Word of God and keep it!*” (Luke 11:28). God pronounces blessing on those who hear and keep his Holy Word.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “Only those who believe obey,” and “Only those who obey believe” (*The Cost of Discipleship*). Obedience and belief belong together. The Christian cannot have one without the other. Works without faith cannot save you—indeed, good works can *never* save you (Eph. 2:8-9). And faith without works is dead; it is not real faith (Jas. 2:17).

Mary heard the angel’s Word. She believed and obeyed. And so she is blessed. And everyone who receives such a believer is blessed as well. “Why is this granted to me...?” (1:43). Mary is not the only one who is blessed. Elizabeth is blessed too! “Blessed is she who believed... what was spoken to her from the Lord” (1:45). How blessed indeed!

Yet what is said of Mary is said of all who belong to Christ Jesus. We are full of grace and blessed because God shows us favor when he speaks his Word to us (cp. 1:28, 30). “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life... we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:1, 3).

God chose to redeem us through the flesh of his Son Jesus, Immanuel, “God with us” (Matt. 1:23). And now, God *in* us. “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you...?” (1 Cor. 6:19). The same flesh of Jesus is offered today at this altar in the bread and wine, which are the Body and Blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins. That’s what Jesus tells us in his Word (Matt. 26:26-28).

God spoke his Word through Gabriel and Elizabeth and Mary. God spoke his Word through John the Baptist. “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...” (Heb. 1:1-2). God still speaks to us through his Son Jesus. Christ speaks a Word of blessing and mercy, forgiveness and

favor. He beckons you to believe his Word of Gospel and obey his Word of Law. Blessed are you who believe that there will be a fulfillment of what is spoken by the Lord (cp. Luke 1:45).

Let it be done to us according to his Word (1:38). In Jesus' name. Amen.