

Advent 3C 2018, Luke 1:39-56, December 16, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

We arrive at the third Sunday in our four week tour through the first chapter of Luke's gospel. We are reading this chapter in its entirety this year to better understand the account of Jesus' birth which we'll hear at Christmas Eve worship. Luke chapter 2, the birth of Jesus, is so much better when you've also heard Luke chapter 1. So, just as a quick review, what have we heard so far?

We first encountered Zechariah, an elderly priest in the Temple of Jerusalem, and his wife Elizabeth. While Zechariah is performing his duties in the Temple and angel named Gabriel appears to him. The angel says his wife Elizabeth will conceive and bear a son. This son will be named John and he will grow to become the messenger to Israel preparing them for the coming of the Messiah. Zechariah finds all this a bit implausible, if not impossible, and the angel shuts Zechariah's mouth. Zechariah, now mute, finishes his temple duties, and returns to his home where, just as the angel said, Elizabeth becomes pregnant.

Next, this same angel appears to a young woman named Mary. He announced that she too will become pregnant. But this will be no ordinary pregnancy conceived in the ordinary manner between man and woman. Her pregnancy will be due solely to God's agency so that the child born to her will be called "Son of God." This child will be the long-awaited Messiah, whose kingdom will stand forever. The angel tells Mary that her family member, Elizabeth who we heard about earlier, is also already six months pregnant. Mary concludes the visit with the angel Gabriel by declaring her utter and complete trust in God's word, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word."

So what have we seen and heard so far? A couple of things stand out. One is that God is about to do a new thing. Yet this new thing isn't unexpected. Quite the contrary. God's people had long expected and waited for the coming Messiah. It has been hundreds of years since prophets like Isaiah and Micah, Jeremiah and Hosea promised God's Messiah to restore the kingdom to Israel, a kingdom of peace. Maybe some had already given up hope. But people like Zechariah and Elizabeth and Mary hadn't given up. They waited. To them came the announcement that God was doing a new thing.

Second, we've seen how God comes to ordinary people going about their ordinary tasks. Zechariah was just one among dozens of temple priests, doing his duty. Mary is a young girl traditionally depicted as performing quite ordinary activities when the angel appears. The Almighty God chooses the ordinary and the humble to bring about his kingdom of love and peace in the world. Which means that God is always able to use us as well. We are the servants of the Lord's work in the world.

Today's gospel reading tells us of Mary's visit to her relative Elizabeth. She goes, "with haste" to see her. First Mary greets Elizabeth, we don't know the words she uses. But Elizabeth's greeting to Mary is nothing less than prophetic and points at all times to the power of the Holy Spirit. First, the baby that has been gestating in Elizabeth's womb for six months leaps. Never having been pregnant I can only imagine how that must have felt to Elizabeth. It was nothing less than a Holy Spirit moment for her, though. She cries out, "blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Now go back to the greeting of Mary by the angel Gabriel, "Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you." Older translations said, "Hail, full of grace." Put the two greetings together and what do you have? Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus." If you were Roman Catholic you recognize this as the first half of the Ave Maria, or Hail Mary. The second part includes a prayer to Mary asking for her intercession on behalf of sin and at the hour of death. But the first part, the greetings of Gabriel and Elizabeth are right out of the Bible. It's why Martin Luther included this part of the Hail Mary, the greetings in a little book of prayers he wrote. Luther was quite devoted to Mary as an example of faith and trust in the word of God.

But Elizabeth's greeting of Mary doesn't end there. Elizabeth has recognized that Mary has been chosen by God for this unique and special purpose to become the earthly mother of God's Son. But the real blessing of Elizabeth to Mary comes at the end, "Blessed is she who believed there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." The great miracle is not simply what God has done for both Elizabeth and Mary, but that both Elizabeth and Mary believed the word of God spoken to them.

Mary's joy at being chosen to play such an important role in God's plan causes her to erupt in song. The Magnificat, as call it and which we just sang ourselves a moment ago, interprets for us how and what God will accomplish through the child she now bears. We can think of it as the overture to musical. It announces for us all the themes that will appear later in the story. Here is a God who reaches into the lives of the ordinary and humble. The story will be told from one generation to the next. God will reverse all of the injustice, all of the exploitation that wealthy and powerful people exact upon those they consider poor and expendable. If your bellies are full, they'll soon be empty. If they are empty, they'll soon be full. Jesus himself will preach such a message and we'll hear these same words from his own mouth in chapter 7.

We aren't quite at the end yet; we still have another week to go. Remember old mute Zechariah? We still have to find out what happens to him. Tune in next week. But for now let us think of Mary. She heard the word of the Lord and she believed it. Such faith is an example for us, trusting in the promise of God though

it seems impossible. God reminds us that with God nothing is impossible. But let us also see that Mary interprets this word. She tells us what God will accomplish, for her and for the world. God is on the side of those who are low, who are oppressed, who the rich and powerful see as somehow undesirable and unwanted.

So, we need to ask ourselves, “what do we believe happens at Christmas?” How are we to interpret with our own lives the announcement the Savior is born? What kind of savior is he and from what does he save us? Or better yet, for what does he save us?

Like Mary we hear the word and believe it, we trust in it with our whole lives. We are called to proclaim that word with our lives, in actions that show the love and commitment of God for those who struggle with loss, those who are bypassed by the wealthy and powerful. The Nativity of Jesus brings more than just a warm glow of peaceful feelings, though he does bring that as well. No the birth of the savior brings the mighty outstretched arm of the Lord reversing all that is wrong and unjust, filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty. Amen.