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Luke 1:39-45
Advent IV
December 23, 2018

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

Our text, “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!’”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As the days of Advent wane, we’re used to feeling a sense of ‘hurriedness.’ Everyone seems to be rushing here and there, the cash registers seem to be spitting out receipts at record pace, the Christmas songs seem to be speeding up, we’re used to feeling a sense of near panic that not all the preparations have been made... *and*, in the back of our mind, we know we have to hurry to get our end-of-the-year tax credits or medical benefits; And, often, the response from the pulpit comes, “Calm down from this commercialization, this season is all about the birth of the Christ... don’t worry about that other stuff.”

And there’s certainly truth to that – this *is* all about the birth of the Christ. But that’s exactly why Mary makes haste! Did you notice that in the text? Mary arises and goes *with haste* to meet Elizabeth. Why? Because this is all about the birth of the Christ! It’s the same “haste” carrying the feet of the shepherds over hilltop, unto Bethlehem, and (one can imagine) slowing only to quietly creep

close to the manger. Why? Because this is all about the birth of the *Christ*!

And then there's Herod – who (though the Greek word is different) made haste to assemble his men and diligently search to kill all boys two years and under in Bethlehem – why? Because this is about the birth of the *Christ*. And then there was Joseph, who made haste to safeguard his family by fleeing to Egypt... Why? Because this is all about the birth of the *Christ*!

And then there's *us* who, with the psalmist, sing in the liturgy of the church, "Make haste, O God, to deliver me!" – why? Because we have the certainty that God would deliver us because of and through the birth of the *Christ*!

Haste is not a *bad* thing, but – might we say – the *proper* thing when considering that the *Christ* enters the world. (And there's the problem with the world's haste... in its haste, it runs right by the One to whose feet it should be making haste.) And, *we ourselves* all too easily are guilty of that. But it's proper – most fitting – to make haste in anticipation of *Christ* coming into the world. For when he enters, it changes everything. It changes the meaning of life's little annoyances and life's big problems. It changes the sentence of your condemnation. It changes Herod's certainty of his power or the shepherd's uncertain wonder of what they had just seen and heard. And it changes forever the life of a young virgin... *until* that moment,

destined to never be remembered by anyone; but *in* that moment given by God to forever after be called ‘blessed’ by everyone.

So, with news that the long-awaited Christ is not only at the doorstep, but in her womb (!), Mary *makes haste* to the house of Zechariah (Zechariah, remember, being priest in the temple of the Lord – that will come up later) and greets Elizabeth. And at the greeting of Mary, at the coming of the Christ, the baby of Elizabeth leaped in her womb, expressing faith’s joy.

What a blessed reminder in this season in which everyone wants to talk about faith but really has very little concept what it is – that it can supposedly be created by falling snow or a special ornament on the tree or sentimental hearts preparing room – what a blessed reminder that faith is the work of the Holy Spirit! On a morning in which we watch the Holy Spirit at work in the baptism of little David, does not our Gospel reading clearly refute any claims that baptism is invalid until little David is no longer a baby? How much more ‘grown up’ is David than was John when he leapt in Elizabeth’s womb. Truly, this – the creation of faith and faith’s joy – can only be the work of the Holy Spirit!

And not only is the *baby’s* response the work of the Holy Spirit, but so also is *Elizabeth’s*. For doesn’t the text say that Elizabeth “was filled with the Holy Spirit” (not as a matter of some ecstatic condition, but as a matter of faith in the presence of the

Word made flesh), so that she cried out regarding Mary, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!”

And, as *you* share Elizabeth’s sentiment, it’s because you share her *faith*... which is to say, you, too, have been blessed with a share of the Holy Spirit... who works in our hearts that we might rejoice over the news of the Christ child: “*Haste, haste* to bring him laud, the babe, the son of Mary.”

Yes, Elizabeth knows the magnitude of the moment: what is coming to pass is the long-awaited promise of the Christ, and – with him – *her* salvation, and *your* salvation, and *my* salvation. In fact, so aware of this is Elizabeth that she joyfully and audibly delights in the unwarranted merciful kindness of the Lord:

“Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”

Now, we need to ponder this exclamation a bit. We live in a land that is dominated by three basic religions: increasingly, secularist atheism; Roman Catholicism, and American Evangelical Protestantism. The atheists we can leave out of this exercise of pondering because they have no care for the coming of the Christ anyway. But, consider the other two – Roman Catholicism and American Protestantism – and consider how the latter despises anything that looks and sounds as if it belongs to the former... so that, for nearly a hundred years, Lutherans gave up on anything that was labeled as Roman Catholic.

But, here you have the greeting of Elizabeth, in which she rejoices at the greeting of the “mother of my Lord.” We know how Rome would interpret that, with its worship of Mary, and we know how American Protestantism would counter, by trying to explain away the plain words of Elizabeth. But, did we not just sing with the angel regarding the virgin, “Most highly favored lady”?

So, consider Elizabeth’s words carefully about “the mother of my Lord.” Truly, Mary *is* “the mother of my Lord.” Another way it has famously been said throughout the ages: God-bearer (Theotokos – the Eastern Orthodox love to claim that as their term, but it belongs to the whole Church... just as Word and Sacrament isn’t Lutheran, but belongs to the whole Church... though not all desire such gifts). God-bearer; mother of my Lord... those are incredible doctrinal truths... and yet, they speak not to the *substance* of Mary (there’s nothing ‘holy’ about the substance/body of Mary), but to the holy *vocation* of Mary... and vocation is given by God who has called each of us into our holy vocations. In short, the titles “mother of my Lord” and “God-bearer” are reason to consider Mary most highly favored – but why? – because of *the fruit of her womb*. In fact, the title “most blessed among women” isn’t even exclusively Mary’s, but was first said of a woman named Jael in the book of Judges. But, now, it belongs to Mary – not because of *her*, but because of *God with her*. Notice how Elizabeth expounds on that in our text: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

It really is all about Christ, isn't it? In fact, Elizabeth even points out that Mary is really the Church's first catechumen! Elizabeth says, "Blessed is she who *believed* that there would be a fulfillment of *what was spoken to her* from the Lord."

Isn't that really the second great and mighty wonder here – not to downplay the incarnation by the work of the Holy Spirit *within* the womb of Mary – but how remarkable that Mary *believed* it... that she believed what was spoken to her! Isn't that what Elizabeth lauds and praises here! Such faith of what was spoken to her of such remarkable things can only be the work of the Holy Spirit!

Now, amid all this, let's not forget the subtle points of Elizabeth's confession and St. Luke's narrative: Elizabeth says, "Blessed is she (Mary) who believed that there would be a *fulfillment* of what was spoken to her from the Lord." Hadn't all of Israel had this same promise spoken to them? – a fulfillment (and the word for fulfillment there is τελειωσις – same root word as Jesus cried from the cross: τετελεσται – "it is finished, accomplished, fulfilled."

That's covenant language, liturgical language, priestly language. Remember, I said at the beginning of the sermon, Zechariah was priest of God – that's the reason (not some male-dominated Scripture writing, as critics suggest) that Luke mentions that Mary goes to "the house of Zechariah"... because this is all about the birth of God's Christ, God's priest! And yet, not priest according to the line of Zechariah. Rather, this priest's mother must

run from afar and come to Zechariah's house, because that which is in her is conceived of the Holy Spirit, a priest forever according to a different line – not that of Levi and Zechariah, but that of Melchizedek... a unique priest-king is this Christ.

Now we understand why the epistle reading for this morning mentions that Christ has been given a *body*; God is not pleased with or satisfied by the sacrifices according to levitical requirement, but “a body have you prepared for me” says the Christ (not just holy vocation, but holy substance)... and *why* this body, “Behold, I have come to do your will” Christ says in true joy.

The fulfillment Elizabeth rejoices over is the promise that the Christ was sent to do the will of the Father, to come and sacrifice himself – His holy body, His holy sacrifice – on the altar of the cross, abolishing the first covenant of preparation and establishing the second covenant, of fulfillment. And, in that fulfillment, he has sanctified us (the end of the epistle reading says) “through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”

So, even from the Christ's conception, St. Luke reminds us, all eyes ought be on the promise of fulfillment, the promise of the coming sacrifice for all, the promise of the priesthood of Zechariah being blessed with the greeting of a priest according to a better line, the line of the priest-king Melchizedek. Indeed, that connection between Jesus in the womb of Mary and yet being a priest-king... that connection is one you've known and sung of for a long time

(even if you didn't recognize it)... because you've been taught it by the hymnody. Consider these words of that well-known hymn, "Savior of the Nations, Come":

"Here a maid was found with child, Yet remained a virgin mild. In her womb this truth was shown: God was there upon His **throne**" (king)

and again, the hymnody confesses:

"The infant **priest** was holy born for us unholy and forlorn; from **fleshly temple** forth came He, anointed from eternity."

Now, honestly, when we think of the angel's announcement to Mary, our minds don't "make haste" to priestly imagery. And, on this day before Christmas Eve, all this priestly language may not sound very Christmas-y. But let's remember that most famous line of the Christmas proclamation: "Peace on earth." Is that peace simply a good feeling between God and man? Is it simply the idea that the world has warfare and 'if only all the nations could get along with one another.' No, it's peace according to the covenant, according to the sacrificial offering... it's the proclamation that your sins are being atoned for... because on the scene is the one and only priest who can actually offer up a sacrifice – His own body – that will please and appease and satisfy God's wrath against your sins.

Thus, with Mary, how blessed are you – perhaps not the Church's first catechumen, but is there really any rank? – how

blessed are all catechumens – whether just having been to the font, or whether at the earthly end of that baptismal life – how blessed are all of you - who, by the work of the Holy Spirit, have believed that there has been – in Christ – a fulfillment of what was spoken to you from the Lord.

In the Name of the Father
and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

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