

December 20, 2009
Fourth Sunday in Advent

“Reacting to the Presence of Jesus”

Luke 1:39-45

What do you think of if someone tells you that you are about to receive a great blessing? What possibilities run through your head? Maybe it's money. Maybe it's healing of some affliction. Maybe it's a better job. Around this church maybe it's food, but we have that so often it wouldn't be anything out of the ordinary. No, if we try to conceive of what would be a great blessing to us, it would be something that would significantly change our lives. And if such a blessing came along, how would we react?

A lot of us would look to John in our Gospel lesson today as having the proper reaction to blessing. *“In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb.”* He's just six months along in Elizabeth's belly, but John jumps for joy when the newly-conceived Jesus arrives in the room. And I guess I wouldn't be wrong if I went ahead and preached about how we react to Jesus' arrival with joy and celebration. That's exactly what we are going to celebrate this coming Thursday and Friday and it is most certainly the right thing to do.

But clearly the focus of this story is not John. The focus is Mary and the Christ child within her. *“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! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.’”*

Mary is blessed because she has been chosen to be the vessel by which God is born into human flesh to save humanity. I use the term “vessel” because there is a lot of similarity between Mary here and the vessel of the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament. The Ark was where the presence of God manifested in Old Testament Israel. Mary has God in her womb. The Ark was brought by David to Jerusalem amid much rejoicing, Elizabeth rejoices at Mary's arrival. The Ark stopped at the house of Obed-edom in the hill country of Judah for three months—the same length of time Mary would remain with Elizabeth. Obed-edom's house was greatly blessed while the Ark remained there and it sounds like Elizabeth is humbled at the blessing of the presence of Mary's child in her home.

But I think Elizabeth cuts to the heart of Mary's blessing when she says in the Spirit, *“And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”*

At Wednesday night's service we recalled what is so amazing about Mary; it is her response to the incredible announcement by the angel that she, a virgin, shall give birth to the Son of God. *“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”* Mary's first and foremost reaction to the presence of Jesus in her life is faith. She has faith that God will accomplish this impossible pregnancy as He says He will no matter how outlandish it sounds. And Mary is blessed not because she is the vessel in which the Christ is to incubate, she is blessed because she trusts in the promise of God about who this baby is and what He will accomplish.

Mary's song of blessing and joy is a little bit about herself, but it is much more so about God and what He has done for people for generations to come. And notice that she sings about it

in faith as a fate accomplished, something that is done even though the Christ child hasn't even been born yet.

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

Mary knows the promise is true. She doesn't know how God's plan is going to unfold. She doesn't know that the son she will bear and raise and love will someday willingly give Himself up to torture and crucifixion to pay for mankind's sins. But she trusts that God's Messiah will save His people from their sins. The presence of Jesus has confirmed all the promises of God from the angel, back through all the prophets and prophecies, through the biblical patriarchs and all the way back to the words God spoke to Satan in the garden about the progeny of woman, *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”* Her song is praise of God for His triumph over evil for His chosen people.

So how does this blessing and faith and rejoicing of young Mary relate to you and me 2000 years later? The very same blessing that came to Mary had come to you and me; the presence of Jesus Christ in our midst. Just as Mary bears Jesus in her womb, the church bears Jesus Christ to the world. Jesus is right here in the middle of us.

What is it that makes us the church? It's not the building. It's not the music. It's not even Luther's Small Catechism! It is the presence of Jesus Christ! He told us, *“Behold I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* He was talking about those who are baptized into His name. He was talking about us, the church.

A woman once talked about Mary when she cried out to Jesus, *“Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!”* But Jesus actually kind of corrects her and talks about us, the church when He says, *“Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!”* The presence of the crucified and risen Jesus in our midst and in our hearts makes us more blessed than the woman who carried the savior in her womb!

Jesus is here in His Word. Jesus is here in His sacraments. Jesus is here accomplishing all that Mary was singing about. He is here forgiving our sins and establishing us in His kingdom forever and ever.

And how is it that we react to this great blessing? How is it we react to having Jesus Christ in our midst? We react the same way Mary did. First and foremost, our reaction to having Jesus in our life is a reaction of faith. It is a knowing that Jesus has accomplished all that the Bible tells us He has. It is a trust that our Holy Baptism has washed us of all sin and continues to do so every minute of every day. It is a certainty that even though the miracle seems utterly impossible, we somehow receive Christ's body and blood in the bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins. It is the sure knowledge that when I stand and speak the promise of Christ that those who repent and believe stand as righteous before God, I am speaking the truth. In faith we know that we have been blessed by Christ, that He has significantly changed our lives not just now, but into eternity.

Mary knew that not just the Son of God was in her belly. Her song shows that she knew the fulfilled promise of God was inside her. She knew that the reign of God's kingdom was coming to pass, and that His presence was assured for all generations of those who believe. We know this too.

The reign of Christ has begun and shall never end. He is present now and forever as our prophet, priest and king. In faith let our souls magnify the Lord and our spirits rejoice in God our Savior. Let us do this in time in this church on earth with which He has blessed us, and into eternity with Mary and all the saints in the church triumphant forever. Amen.