

“An Amazing Meeting Between Four People”

Luke 1:39-56

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

39 In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, 40 and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, 42 and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! 43 And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be^[g] a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

46 And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

50 And his mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones

and exalted those of humble estate;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things,

and the rich he has sent away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

55 as he spoke to our fathers,

to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

56 And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

What does “Christmas faith” look like?

This time of year, we hear lots of talk about Christmas miracles and the magic of Christmas and even about Christmas faith.

I wonder, if you asked 100 random Americans to define any of these terms, what do you think they would say?

A Christmas miracle is when some unexpected good thing happens for you, right? I could be as simple as a close parking spot at Target or as profound as waking up on Christmas morning to a fresh coating of snow on the ground.

The magic of Christmas is the way the Christmas season is supposed to make you feel – happier, more kind and generous, etc.

And Christmas faith? Well, usually that involved believing really hard that something is real and your faith will make it real. “Just believe” we’re told and things will be good. Several movies teach that Santa Claus is powered by childrens’ faith in him. If you believe in Santa, you make him more real and more powerful.

What does any of this have to do with the real meaning of Christmas, the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago? Very little. In fact, the worst of this trio is “Christmas faith” because it reinforces the idea that the key to faith is the faith itself, the strength and power of belief to create good for those who believe. That is not how the Bible defines faith or what kind of faith pleases God.

Biblical faith, faith that pleases God, takes God at His word. It receives what God has revealed about Himself and His actions and purposes and believes God, giving thanks and living as if God is true and right in all He says, no matter what anyone else says to the contrary.

Last week, we saw the best kind of real Christmas faith in Mary, when she responded to the message from Gabriel by simply saying, “*Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.*”

In today’s passage, we see the powerful reality of faith on display in an amazing between four people, two moms and their two preborn sons.

A. A Hasty Journey and a Simple Greeting

39 In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, 40 and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. – vv. 39-40

Gabriel had just told Mary that her cousin, Elizabeth, widely known to be barren, was now in her sixth month of pregnancy in her old age. When Gabriel leaves her, Mary arises and goes with haste to Zechariah and Elizabeth's house. (The opening phrase of verses 39, translated here as "In those days" could also be translated as "Now at that time")

Luke is emphasizing that Mary is making this journey quickly – with haste or hurriedly. Why? Well, she's just received a pretty unbelievable message, and Elizabeth's pregnancy was offered to her as proof of the validity of God's promise. Presumably, Gabriel telling Mary about Elizabeth means that Elizabeth would be able to relate to Mary, having received amazing news from God. But Elizabeth is older and further along in her pregnancy, so Mary goes to be with her, partially to help her and also to get confirmation.

When we are struggling to believe or to understand how to accept and live in the light of God's amazing promises, it's very helpful to be around other believers who have had similar experiences and who can confirm and strengthen our faith. Mary was eager to have someone she could share her news with, someone who might understand, who might be able to pray with her and offer her wisdom and counsel and encouragement.

So, Mary hurries to her older cousin's house, and when she arrives, she does what would be expected, and she calls out a friendly greeting to her cousin.

B. John the Baptist's Response

What is not expected at all is that little preborn John the Baptist is the first to respond to the sound of Mary's greeting:

41 And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. – v. 41

The very first human being to celebrate the arrival of Jesus in the flesh was John the Baptist when he heard the sound of Mary's voice and leaped in his mother's womb. Months before he was born, John was fulfilling his God-ordained role as the forerunner of the Messiah sent to announce His coming into the world.

We don't know exactly what it felt like to Elizabeth when John leaped in her womb, but she knew it was so much more than just a kick from her preborn son, who was by this time probably about two months away from being born. Our oldest son, Andrew, was probably a little younger than John the Baptist in today's passage when he was born a little more than

9 weeks early. It's just so fascinating to think of such a tiny baby being filled with the Holy Spirit and leaping for joy at the approach of His Lord in her mother's womb.

Elizabeth tells Mary in verse 44: *“when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.”* The word translated as joy here is a very strong word in Greek, indicating exceeding joy or great gladness and almost always associated with the joy of salvation. Little preborn baby John wasn't just a little glad; He was exceedingly glad, and so he leaped for great joy at the presence of his Lord.

C. Elizabeth's Response

It's not just John who was rejoicing at the coming of Jesus. Elizabeth here expresses humility, gratitude, and joy as she is filled with the Holy Spirit and actually makes the first profession of faith in Jesus recorded in the Gospels:

Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, ⁴² and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³ And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” (vv. 41-45)

Elizabeth here speaks profound truth by the power of the Holy Spirit filling her. When Gabriel had greeted Mary, he pronounced her highly favored by God. And now, because of the great favor God has shown to Mary and the great privilege He has given her by His grace, she is “Blessed” or “well spoken of” among women. Mary does rightly have a place of honor, respect, and privilege among all women who have ever lived because she was the mother of the Son of God. She was given this honor by God's grace, and of course, it doesn't mean that she becomes another mediator or a co-redeemer or the Queen of Heaven or any other such idolatrous title. She is, however, the most blessed, most favored, honored, and privileged of all women for the role she was given in bringing God's Son, who is also her Son, into the world,

But as we consider how “Christmas faith” should really be defined and what it looks like, notice how humble and thankful Elizabeth is: *“Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”* In calling Jesus “my Lord,” Elizabeth is making the first Christian profession of faith. She is the first one to call Jesus her Lord. And she says this about a tiny little embryo in the early stages of development. Jesus is so small and so vulnerable, and Elizabeth professes that He is her Lord.

And then notice how powerfully she encourages Mary: “*And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.*” Here, she has switched from the word that means “spoken well of” to the word that means “well off, favored.” She says that Mary will not only be spoken highly of by people but she us also well off, highly favored, blessed by God. Why? Because she believed that what God said to her through the angel Gabriel, He would actually do.

Faith receives God’s word and believes it. Faith then lives as if what God has promised will most certainly come true, for faith will not treat God as a liar. Faith isn’t trying to produce what it wants; it is humbly and gratefully receiving as true and real what God has spoken, what God has promised.

We can try to force God’s hand to give us what we think we want, but that usually leads to frustration. For Mary, this would have likely been a quiet life with Joseph and a large, healthy family. But God had revealed something different, something far better, and she believed God’s word over her own dreams and aspirations. In other words, faith is not our attempts to tell God what we think He should do but rather believing what God has said He has done and what He has promised He will do.

This encouragement from Elizabeth is exactly what Mary needed. It confirmed, encouraged, and strengthened her faith in the Word of God.

D. Mary’s Response

And how did she respond?

And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ And his mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

*52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55 as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”*

We call Mary’s response of praise here “the Magnificat,” after the Latin translation of the word magnifies. We’re not going to go line-by-line through the Magnificat. I preached a sermon on the Magnificat on December 11, 2016. You can find it on Sermon Audio if you want to hear it.

The heart of Mary’s song of praise here is magnifying the Lord for His sovereign goodness in keeping His promises to His people. God scatters the proud, brings down the mighty, and exalts those of humble estate. He fills the hungry with good and sends the rich away empty. But He exercises His sovereignty, His rule over rich and poor, powerful and humble, “in remembrance of His mercy as He spoke to our fathers” – in other words, He exercises His sovereign mercy to keep His covenant promises to His people.

If God is not sovereignly reigning over all people, He cannot keep His promises, for the world would be spinning out of His control. Yet if God was not committed to exercising His sovereignty for the good of His people in keeping His promises, we would not be able to trust and rely on His sovereign power. God is both mighty and merciful, absolute in both His rule and His faithfulness to keep His promises.

E. The One Who Causes Such Excitement

Well, we’ve seen how Mary’s faith led her to hurry to Elizabeth’s house and then to magnify the Lord for His sovereign and faithful mercy to His people. We’ve seen how little John the Baptist had such faith by the power of the Holy Spirit that caused him to leap for joy in his mother’s womb, calling attention to the coming of his Lord. We heard Elizabeth speak in faith such profoundly humble, thankful, and believing words about her Lord and His mother. She who was in her old age praised the faith of her teenage cousin and professed faith in her Lord who was incredibly tiny and weak.

At the center of all this activity is the One who was then and still is today true God and true man, two distinct natures united in One person forever. Even as a tiny embryo, He had taken on our full humanity, to fully identify with us in our weaknesses and represent us before God as our covenant mediator and Lord. What does this mean? It means that the work of our salvation was underway even in this very earliest stage of the life of our Lord. And once Jesus had entered into our humanity and begun the work of our redemption, He was not going to stop until all was finished, until everything that needed to be done to fully save us was complete.

That's why John could leap for joy by faith, because He knew the One who had come from heaven to Mary's womb would not stop until every promise of God was fulfilled. That's why Elizabeth was not ashamed to profess Him as her Lord, for He had come to set her free from sin and death forever, and she was humbled and thankful that He was willing to come to save her. That's why Mary's soul magnified the Lord, for the tiny One whose human substance and subsistence was being drawn from her body was, in fact, the Lord who had Himself made her and who had come to save her from her sins and bring Him all the way back home to Himself.

What About You?

From the point of view of an outside observer, this scene in a small, simple home in the Judean hill country probably looked very ordinary. A young woman visits her pregnant cousin; it wasn't unusual for pregnant women to welcome visitors who would help them through the end of their pregnancy and through their delivery. Everyone seems happy and excited; again, that's normal enough. After all, the pregnant woman is obviously older and seems past the point of being able to have children. And yet, if you came close enough to hear these words, you would be confused. Why is the pregnant woman calling the young woman the mother of her Lord? What is going on?

This is much like what we could say about the world's understanding of Christmas. They look on from a distance and think it's cute that we celebrate a little baby born in a stable and laid in a manger, a young couple who had to travel far and have their first baby far from home. What a touching story!

And yet, if they come close enough to hear what's being said of this baby and His birth, they get confused: What makes this baby the Son of God and so much more special than

other babies? Why would angels worship Him? Why is He proclaimed as a Savior? What does He save us from? How?

Well, God has clearly spoken to explain all of this to us. He has revealed to us the truth about Himself – He is holy and just and yet also merciful and gracious. He has a perfect standard of love that He calls us to fulfill. He also shows us the truth about ourselves: We are rebels, sinners who resent and resist His rule and want to live for ourselves. We deserve condemnation for willfully rebelling against the good Creator-King of the Universe. But God sent His only Son to become fully human to rescue us from ourselves and the condemnation we deserve and bring us back to God.

The message of the real Christmas miracle is simple enough: For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. The good news of great joy for all the people is that God sent His Son to be born in Bethlehem as our Savior, Christ the Lord.

How are you responding? Are you believing what God has done and receiving what He has promised for all who believe? Are you humbly, gratefully, joyfully responding to God's Word about His Son with "Yes, I believe. Amen. Praise God for His unspeakable gift!?" Or are you still trying to work out your own Christmas miracle on your own terms? Do you realize how much bigger and better God's real miracle is? Will you come and adore Him this Christmas?