

The Work of The Word

Luke 1:39-45

Trinity Lutheran Church

December 23, 2012 – Fourth Sunday in Advent



In the name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Over the course of the past few Sundays Christmas has slowly been creeping yet closer and closer. But how much truer that is this week above all others – for in only a day or two at most we'll all once again be bowing in wonder and awe at the mystery of our Lord's birth – remembering that timeless moment when Christ took upon Himself our humanity to save us from our sin. Advent, then, is a time of expectation – much like a pregnancy, where a mother and father-to-be eagerly wait and watch for the arrival of their new child. And that's an appropriate picture, for throughout the Scriptures God's promise of salvation is also linked to a pregnancy. In Genesis God first promised Eve that He would send a Savior who would come from the seed of the woman. That theme continued throughout the Old Testament – and the testimony of that Word is crystal clear. The world will be saved from sin and death *only* through the birth of this Child from God.

So it's fitting that on this last Sunday in Advent our Gospel tells of the meeting of two pregnant women, Elizabeth and Mary – whose very lives are a testimony to the promise of God that with Him “nothing shall be impossible.” Now the encounter of these two women was a profoundly prophetic moment, for we read that when the sound of Mary's voice struck Elizabeth's ears it caused her baby, John, to leap for joy inside her. Imagine, this unborn child of barely six months, already preaching the arrival of the Christ! Let those who maintain that infants can't believe ponder this event well. What a word of comfort for mothers as they sit in Church, participate in the Liturgy, and eat and drink the Sacrament of Christ's very body and blood. I dare say, these things should be a vital part of every Christian woman's pre-natal care!

Also, consider how much more true it is for the little ones whom God has placed in our care. Do they not also need to hear God's Word even before they're able to know what all the words mean? Do they not also need to rejoice at the sound of the forgiveness of sins, in the syllables of salvation, and in the verbs of God's Word which deliver forgiveness and eternal life? Do they have any less need than you to learn and grow in their knowledge of the vocabulary of God's kingdom?

It's true that if they stay in the faith they'll have an eternity to master it, but would any of you argue that earlier isn't better than later? It's nothing short of sheer rationalism – or worse, perhaps even unbelief – to argue that it's OK to withhold the Word of God from little children simply because they can't understand or fully participate in it – or to deprive a Baptized infant of the very Word that brought it life. How many parents stay home on Sunday morning while their children sit in front of the TV set for hours on end soaking up all sorts of nonsense? Is it not more important that they be filled with the things of God – with the sound of His Word, with the historic hymns of the faith, and with the ancient Creeds and Confessions which have been handed down to us?

The fact is, we *all* need to repent of this notion that because a child doesn't understand, he therefore can't believe – or that because a child doesn't have a big enough vocabulary, he cannot respond to God's Word. I've witnessed enough Christian children coming to the Divine Service week in and week out – even from before the time of their birth – to know that God's Word works in even the littlest of them – a truth attested to a few moments ago in our reading from Luke's Gospel where it's recorded how John leapt for joy at the sound of Mary's voice and the knowledge that his Savior was nearby – even though both of them were yet unborn!

And consider the words and actions of Elizabeth. Though she was considerably older than Mary, Elizabeth still thought it a great honor that Mary had come to visit her – even calling her younger relative “the mother of my Lord.” Which, of course, is why the Church also refers to Mary rightly as the “mother of God” – for indeed, Mary is the bearer of the eternal Word – the door through whom God entered our world – the temple in which our Savior deigned to dwell as an unborn Child – the chosen instrument through whom the Son of God received the very flesh and blood body which He would then later offer up on the cross for the life of the world.

You women – and especially you young women – you have a great role model here in Mary. In our culture – which makes fun of chastity, and where pre-marital sex and living together before marriage is viewed as the norm rather than the exception, Mary stands out as a picture of what happens when God's Word has its way

– for Mary is filled with the Spirit and the Word of God. Believing that Word, her song of praise, the Magnificat, shows that Mary knew Holy Scripture by heart – and believed the Word preached to her by the angel. Trusting that Word, she said “Yes” to God’s plan – and agreed to the impossible task of being the virgin mother of our Savior!

Having said that, however, we also need to remember that there’s no reason to think more highly of Mary than she thought of herself. We refer to Mary as holy *only* because the Child she carried within her womb, held in her arms, and nursed at her breast – is holy. Jesus *alone* is the sinless One, and Mary is highly exalted and blessed because the Mighty One has done great things for her. To honor Mary is really nothing more than to honor the Incarnation of God who dwelt in her womb – to praise *Him* for taking on human flesh to save us. But I understand that lots of people have difficulty thinking of Mary in this way. Could it be because we have difficulty with holy things in general – that we’ve lost sight of the sacred – and that in our culture *almost everything* is moving toward the generic and ordinary? Our age would prefer *all* Churches to be “comfortable” and interchangeable – the pastor to be “one of the guys” – and worship indistinguishable from the world which surrounds us. Would the world not be thrilled if the Lord’s Supper was treated as if it were nothing more than an ordinary meal – if Baptism were nothing more than just another meaningless religious ceremony – and Mary no greater than any other pregnant teenager?

But consider this. Do you not treat our Church building as holy space? Most of you, I’m sure, wouldn’t dream of stomping in here and making all kinds of noise, as if you were entering a stadium in preparation for a football game. You wouldn’t consider using this sanctuary for a community pep rally. But why not? It’s not as though the carpeting, plaster, wood or the pews are holy. It’s because of the Word of God preached, heard and received here. God’s Word is what makes this space holy. The same is true of me as your pastor. I’m certainly not holy because I actually am holy, but rather because the Word of God which I’ve been called to speak is holy. And what about the bread and wine of the Supper? We don’t throw it away after Communion – or even put it back in with the other bread and wine. Why? Because once it’s been used in the Sacrament, we treat it as holy – the very means through which the body and blood of Christ is given to those who partake of this Meal. Would you not be offended if you learned I was taking these elements home after the Divine Service and using them at our family dinner table?

And so it is also in our consideration of Mary. She is called blessed and holy not on account of her own holiness, but on account of the Holy Child conceived in her womb by the Holy Spirit. Though she is the chosen vessel of God, nonetheless Mary’s soul wants nothing more than simply to magnify the Lord – even as her spirit rejoices in God, her Savior. And so this morning – if Mary was able – she’d no doubt direct our attention to the very same place the angel once directed hers – to her Child, whose “mercy extends to those who fear Him” – that who know Him as the One who overthrows great thrones and puts the powerful in their place.

Our God is mighty to save – a God who lifts up those who are humbled, bowed down and cannot help themselves – whose arms reach out to fill the hungry with good things – who embraces the world with the arms of His Son extended on the cross to save sinners. God alone is the One who keeps His Word and remembers “to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as He spoke to our fathers.” The promise God made to Adam and Eve when He cast them from Eden – the promise He made to the Patriarchs and Prophets of Israel – the promise He made to you when you were Baptized – and the promise He renews in you whenever you hear His Word – *this* is the promise He wants you to hear and remember today.

According to that promise, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to suffer, die, and rise under the Law, so that through His dying and rising the world might be blessed with forgiveness, peace, and eternal life. Because of Christ, God has made you, like Mary, virgin pure and holy, washed by the blood of Jesus that cleanses every sin. Because He has purified your heart with His Word, He now deigns to dwell inside you, make you His temple, and be conceived and born in your heart. Through faith, like Mary, you also are now able to magnify the Lord and rejoice in Him who is your Savior. The Mighty One has done great things for you. His arm has worked great deeds – keeping the Law in your place, dying for you, rising for you, Baptizing you, preaching to you, and filling you with His sacrifice – His very own body and blood, given and shed for you to eat and drink for the forgiveness of your sins and the strengthening of your faith. He has scattered the pride of your sin, and toppled the old Adam from his throne. Because He has kept His promise to you, “Sin will no longer have dominion over you” – even until the day of His coming. And blessed are you who believe that what the Lord has said to you will be accomplished – in the name of our Savior and Sin-Bearer, Jesus. Amen.