

“The First Beatitude”

Luke 1:39-45

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 a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” (ESV)*

This is the fourth Sunday in Advent. Advent simply means, “coming.” We celebrate Advent, the coming of Jesus not only in His nativity or at the beginning of His life but also at the end of all time to come and judge the quick and the dead. If you’re a pastor, there are about twelve different texts that you can preach at Christmas. You have four Sundays times three years, so you have three years worth of stuff, then after that you have to start repeating. There are only so many Christmas stories in the Bible, so if you preach for longer than three or four years you have to keep revisiting them. I’m amazed that every time I preach these texts again, they seem completely different to me.

Today we’re going to look at the story of Mary and Elizabeth. Mary almost only comes up in the Bible around Christmas time. She pops up every now and then, but she’s pretty quiet. The problem with Mary is, what do you do with her? If you’re Catholic in background, Catholics tend to make too much of Mary, quite frankly. On the other hand, Protestants (Presbyterians) tend to make too little of Mary. What should we make of Mary? I’ve thought about this long and hard and it didn’t come to me until between services today. If you want to understand Mary, it helps if you’ve read or seen the movie, “The Lord of the Rings.” And particularly if you want to understand Mary, you have to understand Frodo. The books have been out for fifty years, I think, so if I spoil it, tough. You’ve had time. The whole plot of “The Lord of the Rings” revolves around this ring of power that whoever possesses will have all power, and it’s found by a hobbit named Bilbo Baggins. Hobbits are little, tiny things with hairy feet, and they’re very humble. This hobbit, Bilbo Baggins, finds the ring of power. He eventually passes it on to his nephew, Frodo, and it’s determined by the council of all free peoples that that ring must be destroyed. The ring has to be taken right into the bowels of Mordor which is like hell. Someone has to take that ring into the bowels of Mordor and destroy it because the only way the ring can be destroyed is to be thrown into the bowels of hell. They have a big council, remember, with men (that is humans), elves, and dwarfs, and hobbits. At some point in the council a big fight breaks out over who is most qualified to carry the ring into Mordor in order to destroy it. Should it be Aragorn, the greatest example of man, ultimately, the king? No. Should it be Legolas? He’s the best of the elves. Should he be the one who carries the ring into Mordor and destroys it? How about Gimli, the best of the dwarfs? None of them. Who’s qualified to carry that ring in order that he might ultimately save everybody? It’s Frodo. He’s not the best of men or the best of elves or the best of dwarfs. He’s not even the best of hobbits. Frodo is the least of all. Why is the person who’s the least of all, the most qualified to carry the ring of power into Mordor? For one, he’s pretty humble. He’s less apt to be corrupted by it, but on top of that he’s the least likely candidate. No one suspects that he would be the one. In other words, Frodo is much more able to fly under the radar than any of the other people. So if you want to send someone in to carry the burden and have them fly under the radar, do you pick someone who’s big and famous or do you pick someone who is a nobody? You pick the nobody. That’s how you understand Mary. Mary came from a poor family. She was probably between the ages of twelve and fifteen. Let’s be conservative and say it’s fifteen years old. She came from Galilee, which was “the other side of the tracks.” It was the bad part of town. She’d be the last person that anyone would expect to carry the ring of power. Yet she is the one God chose.

We’re going to look at three things today when we look at Mary and Elizabeth. We’re going to look at a reversal of roles. We’re going to look at a proclamation of joy, and then we’re going to look at the first Beatitude. Let’s look at the reversal of roles first.

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. (ESV)*

We need some back-story in order to make sense of what she just did. If you remember, God has sent Gabriel on this mission and God is putting His plan of redemption into action. He sends Gabriel to Zechariah the priest and Elizabeth. Remember Zechariah and Elizabeth are old. There's no nice way to say that. In the Ancient Near East maybe that means they were forty and back then forty was the new sixty. But relative to everyone around them they were old and Elizabeth was barren. Gabriel comes to Zechariah while he was in the temple and says, "Your wife is going to conceive and bear a child and you'll name him John." And Zechariah was talking when he should have been listening. I say that to my kids every now and then. He said, "I don't believe that. She's old!" Gabriel basically said, "Zip it – for a year. In a year you will have this child then you will be able to speak again." So Elizabeth becomes pregnant. Then Gabriel goes to see Mary.

²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" [\[3\]](#) ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" (ESV)

Her faith isn't a problem. She's asking a question of mechanics. Like, "I've not known a man. How am I going to have a baby?"

³⁵ And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. ³⁶ And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. ³⁹ In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country . . . (ESV)

I wanted to point out a couple of things to you. Why does Gabriel bring up Elizabeth? Have you ever wondered about that? The answer, first of all, is to encourage Mary because the angel has just told her something that's crazy, frankly. Gabriel, I imagine, said, "Mary, I know this is crazy. You've not known a man and the Holy Spirit's going to come upon you and you're going to conceive a child and He's going to become the king and He's never going to die. He's going to reign forever." Mary had to be sitting there thinking, "Okay. How is it going to happen?" He tells her that she will conceive by the Holy Spirit but he adds, "Even now your cousin Elizabeth is with child. She has been for six months – she who was barren." Then he adds, "For nothing is impossible with God. Mary, as crazy as it sounds, as impossible as it sounds, you need to know by looking at your cousin Elizabeth nothing is impossible. Everyone said it was impossible for her to get pregnant, and now you are going to be pregnant. Believe that. Trust it."

Just a side note I want to give you. There was an older guy I used to meet with when we lived in Seattle. He would always say to me, "Tommy, whatever God has done for someone else He's able to do for you." In other words, if you look and see that God has delivered someone from their sins, God is able to do that for you. God has delivered someone from a calamity, He has ministered to people in the midst of suffering and trial. Whatever He does for other people, He's able to do that for you. He may or He may not but He is able. The question is whether or not you will believe it.

So that leads us into the reversal of roles here at the beginning of this passage. The first reversal of roles that you see in the passage is just this: for Elizabeth to be barren into her old age it would have been the epitome, the ultimate in disgrace in the Ancient Near East. She would have had to cover her face when she walked down the street because by being barren into her old age the people around her would have looked upon her and seen her as being forsaken by God – that God had not ministered to her, God had not taken care of her, God had not shown her grace. When she becomes pregnant with John her disgrace is completely lifted, it's taken away. In fact she says that in verse 25.

²⁵ *“Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.”*
(ESV)

So she says in her pregnancy, “God has taken reproach away from me.” She who was barren and despised and reproachable among people is now exalted and blessed among people. On the other hand, Mary had nothing going for her physically speaking, she wasn’t rich, she was from the other side of the tracks, she was a young girl, she wasn’t in trouble yet (for someone like me, that’s a great blessing – just not being in trouble is a blessing). So Mary was minding her own business and now the angel comes to her and says, “You’re going to have a child. The Holy Spirit is going to do it and you have to trust me on this one.” So in the twinkling of an eye, Mary, who hadn’t done anything wrong, who hadn’t gotten into any trouble, was now going to be the object of scandal and disgrace. The roles are reversed. Elizabeth’s disgrace is taken away, Mary’s disgrace is given to her. Imagine going to Joseph and saying, “Joseph, I have good news and I have bad news. Good news -- I’m pregnant. Bad news – not you. It’s God.” Cuckoo, cuckoo. Who’d believe that? Eventually Gabriel went and had a little chat with Joseph as well, but can you imagine the scandal that it would have been? We know that it was a scandal because Joseph contemplated putting Mary away quietly, divorcing her quietly because of what had happened. The opposite of that is that he could have put her away publicly and loudly. He could have brought charges against her, he could have brought her before the council and had her stoned to death. It was scandalous for Mary to be pregnant. There’s something we should note there as well – that the gospel has always been scandalous. We tend to think about Christmas being the happy, joyous time of lights and what have you, and the cross being the scandal, where the Son of God was crucified. Yet from the very conception of Jesus it was a scandal. Did you ever think of this? If God didn’t want it to be such a scandal (I’ve wondered this before) why didn’t Gabriel just wait awhile and show up on Mary and Joseph’s wedding night? They would have been married and they go into the bridal chamber, but before they do anything Gabriel shows up and says, “Joseph, don’t touch her because the Holy Spirit is going to conceive a child within her.” They would have come out the next day. She would have been pregnant and no one would have thought anything about it. No scandal and it would have been beautiful. They could literally have walked around like a lot of soccer parents and say, “Look at my child. He’s the Savior of the world.” But He didn’t. God could have done this any way He wanted and with any timing He wanted, and instead of doing it in such a way that would take scandal and reproach away from Mary, He did it in such a way that would heap the most scandal and reproach upon her. That would make you humble, wouldn’t it? That would make you fearful. For me, it would make me have to trust God. Sometimes He puts us in positions where we have to trust Him. That’s His plan. Sometimes when bad things happen to us we tend to think God is avoiding us because we’re going through bad things. A lot of things in our lives are hard right now. We think, “Maybe God has just abandoned us and hasn’t thought about us.” It may be that all the bad things are happening in your life – that’s when God is most involved. Look at it from that perspective. So the roles have been reversed. One disgrace has been taken away, one disgrace has been heaped on.

When Mary hears that she’s going to have a baby and that Elizabeth has been pregnant for six months, what does she do? She “makes haste” and goes to see her cousin Elizabeth. Why? A lot of theologians debate this. People have written dissertations on why she would go to see Elizabeth. Some people say, “Well, the reason she made haste to get out of Dodge and go see Elizabeth was so people wouldn’t know she was pregnant.” It can’t be that because it says later on in the text that three months later she came home. So she would have actually come home just as she was starting to show. Some people speculate, “Maybe the angel ordered her to go, but he just didn’t tell us.” I have my own theory as to why she made haste to go talk to Elizabeth. It’s not rocket science. I think the reason she made haste to go talk to Elizabeth is because she’s a girl. I don’t mean that in a derogatory fashion, I just grew up with all women and I have all women in my household now, and I cannot imagine a woman becoming pregnant and not being able to tell anybody. Nobody. The one person in the world who would understand the situation and who she could rejoice with about this pregnancy was her cousin Elizabeth, and so she bolts down there to see Elizabeth. There we see the other role reversal.

She goes and greets Elizabeth but before Mary can say anything Elizabeth blesses her. This sort of reminds me of the South. Greeting takes a long time. Or back to “The Lord of the Rings,” the Ents would talk for days and they said, “We just finished saying ‘Hello.’” In the Ancient Near East, that’s how they would greet one another. When you go to visit it would be this big thing. And the younger would make a big deal about showing respect

and honor to the one who was older. So as Mary greeted Elizabeth, she should have been the one who said, “God’s blessing upon you” and heap compliments upon Elizabeth, and yet what do you see happen here? The exact opposite.

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? (ESV)*

We’re going to talk about the baby in a minute. Elizabeth hears Mary’s voice, the baby leaps or kicks her, and she is filled with the Holy Spirit and immediately says, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” How does Elizabeth know? And by the way, this is the first time we know that Mary is pregnant. We’re never told that she actually got pregnant until right here when Elizabeth pronounces it. The only way she could have known is because of the Holy Spirit bearing witness in her or someone telling her, which we’ll talk about in a minute. She says, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” What does that mean? Why is Mary blessed among women? Why did God choose Mary? Why is she so special? The answer is that God did not choose Mary because she is special. In other words, God wasn’t roaming the earth and thinking, “Who is the most special, most qualified woman to bear this child?” God didn’t choose Mary because she was special. Mary was special because God chose her. In some sense Mary was no different than you and I. God saw fit to choose her and have her carry the savior of the world, and that is a great blessing. Her blessing comes from the fruit of her womb. The child that she carried, the baby that is within her, that’s the source of the blessing not only for Mary but for all people. Because of that Elizabeth says, “Who am I?” She’s the older, yet she is saying, “Who am I that the mother of my Lord would come visit me?” In a sense, she’s transitioning. What you almost have here is a proxy conversation between John the Baptist and Jesus Himself, but it’s happening between their mothers. That’s true, and that leads us to the proclamation of joy that we see here. Notice what she says in verse 44,

⁴⁴ *For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. (ESV)*

What’s going on here? At the beginning of the passage we heard the baby “leaped.” Now toward the end of this passage she actually interprets the leap for us. She knows the reason for the leap. So when the baby leaped for joy the ministry of John the Baptist began right there. We tend to think it was thirty some years later when he began preaching and calling people “brood of vipers.” John’s ministry started when he was in the womb. When Mary came bearing the baby Jesus, John the Baptist, sensing Him near, leaped for joy so that His ministry began right then. I’ll be honest with you. This is one of the things I saw this week that I hadn’t really thought about before - the importance of this text.

Everyone has strong opinions on the issue of abortion. I’m assuming. As I was reading this passage it struck me that the ministry of John the Baptist began when he was in the womb! His ministry began when he was in the womb. And in fact, earlier in the text in verse 15 the angel Gabriel tells Zechariah, “Your son John will be filled with the Holy Spirit from the time he is in the womb.” So while he’s still in the womb he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. What struck me even more powerfully is that Mary, assuming that the Holy Spirit made her pregnant soon after Gabriel spoke to her, can only be four or five or six days, maybe a week pregnant at most. We have debates and arguments about when life actually starts. Luke’s telling us with Jesus it started at conception. John has this ministry where he recognizes Jesus as Jesus is in the womb and between them both they’re incredibly important. So woe to us if we don’t think the same thing. We ought to consider that. You’ve heard me mention this before on things like adoption. It starts from the very beginning.

There’s this proclamation of joy. John the Baptist has started his ministry, and his first preaching, if you will, started with a kick. Mary walks in and he kicks his mother and says, “That’s the guy right there. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and He’s really a lamb. But He is the one.” And Elizabeth is overjoyed. The last thing she says is the first Beatitude in the Gospels. It comes from the mouth of Elizabeth. You’re familiar with the Beatitudes in Matthew and Luke? “Blessed are the poor in spirit because theirs is the kingdom of God.” “Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.” “Blessed are the poor in spirit” isn’t the

first Beatitude. It's the first Beatitude in that section. The first Beatitude that you see in the Gospels is right there in verse 45 of this text.

⁴⁵ *And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.* (ESV)

A Beatitude basically follows a certain formula. Blessed are you (third person) because of this. "Blessed are the poor in spirit – they will inherit the kingdom of God." She says, "Blessed are you (Mary). Blessed are you because you believed that God would fulfill what He said He would fulfill." Have you ever heard any language like that before? If you read the Bible you have in the Book of Romans. Elizabeth just gave the very definition of faith. In the Book of Romans chapter 3, how do we know that Abraham believed God and exercised his faith? Because he believed God was able to do what He promised He would do. That's what it means to have faith. What it means to have faith is not take a big leap into the unknown. What it means to have faith is to believe the promises of God. God has made Mary a promise about this child Jesus and Mary has believed it. And Elizabeth says, "Blessed are you because of this." For all of us here, blessed are you if you believe as well. Do you believe the promises of God? Do you believe that He promised that this child will live the life you should have lived and die the death you should have died and that He will rise again from the dead, and do you put your faith in Him? Do you trust Him? He will take away all your sins and grant you all the righteousness of His Son. Do you believe that? Blessed are you if you do. He's telling Mary to attach doctrinal significance to the events that are happening. You could have just had a baby and He'd have said, "You know, it's going to be rough and at the end of it everything works out for a reason." But even her pregnancy and all the way through the life of Jesus there is significance attached to these events. Do you believe not just in Christmas? I love Christmas specials as much as anybody, or more. But people say, "Do you believe in Christmas? Do you believe in the power?" I don't believe in that Christmas. I believe in Jesus who made Christmas possible. Are you attaching the significance to the right place and to the right objects? When you look at the manger is there significance there, or is it just a feeding trough with hay that a kid lay in?

Have you ever seen the movie, "The Straight Story"? It came out in 1999, put out by Disney. It was a movie about two brothers, Lyle and Alvin Straight. It's a true story, by the way. Alvin was 73 and Lyle was 75. They hadn't spoken for about ten years or more – completely unreconciled, wouldn't even speak to one another. Alvin lived in Laurens, Iowa, and Lyle lived in Mt. Zion, Wisconsin. They were about 500 miles apart. On a snowy night Alvin got news that his brother had had a stroke and they didn't know if he was going to live. Alvin determined that he was going to go see his brother. The problem was, besides a lot of health problems, he had poor eyesight. No one would give him a driver's license, so he used the only means possible to go see his brother, and he drove his 1966 John Deere lawn mower 500 miles to see his brother. To give you some perspective, the top speed on a John Deere, even a 1966 sweet model like that, is five miles per hour. A good part of the movie is about the people he meets along the way because it took him six weeks to get there. When he finally gets there, he goes and sees his brother. They sit on the porch together, sitting there sort of quiet with his brother staring at the lawn mower. Lyle says, "You came all the way here on that thing just for me?" Alvin didn't even need to say anything. Reconciliation happens. When you look at the manger that's what you need to be thinking. "You came all the way here in that thing just for me?" You look at the cross and say, "You went all the way to that thing just for me?" These objects are important and the question is, "Do you believe it?" If you're a Christian, do you believe it? If you're not a Christian, have you ever believed it? That's what Christmas is about: the fact that God sent His son to give His life for you. Think about that.