

Luke 1:39-55 Blessed
2:1-20
December 22, 2024

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear.”

Such is the greeting of Elizabeth, when Mary came to visit. The following is the response of Mary at the news of the angel and at Elizabeth’s greeting:

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.”

These are the voices of the women in the story of Christ, on the occasion of the births of their sons, John, the one called the Baptist, and Jesus. They speak on our behalf. The first thing to notice about their exclamations is they seem to understand that something bigger was happening than a run-of-the-mill birth, not that birth is ordinary.

It is always miraculous, but it is also a part of everyday life. Presently it is estimated that human birth happens somewhere in the world, about 370,000 times a day, which is pretty routine for something so extraordinary.

But the birth of Jesus is one of a kind, and it marks the dawn of something new, something so different that it not only changes the lives of the parents and immediate family, but the life of humanity throughout

history and eternity as well. Thus we pause before it with heightened attention.

We have read the Magnificat this morning, the exultation and praise before the Lord because of the birth of this one child, that came to this one young woman, who in some way knew, though her situation was very modest, that this child, *this birth*, was not ordinary. Her praise reaches a higher height than other kinds of praise.

She knows that the birth of her son is the *beginning* of something among human beings. And it *has* turned out to be something. For the child to whom she gave birth, by any measure, *has* become the most influential person in human history. Yet, it is not the historical value that elicits her praise. It is the spiritual significance of his life and teaching, his death on the cross, and the corresponding resurrection.

For, in the events of his life, the will of God has been revealed; to claim a divine responsibility and a divine love for a broken humanity. And this revealing not only *points* to God’s decision and actions, but it was, and *is*, God’s decision and action. What was born into the world that night in the was itself, the reconciliation of the world to God.

As we are reminded each year in the Advent sequence of Sundays, the world itself has not come to this fulfillment, that is, Christmas is more meaningful for those who believe and have accepted that the world

needs to be reconciled to God. Though the promise has been announced, it has not been fulfilled.

We live in the time between the announcement and the consummation, a time when by grace God allows, for the sake of the people whom he has called, the world to continue its journey, passing away, is the way John puts it in the First Letter of John, even while its redemption from sin and death has been made secure.

Thus we live in a world stained by sin and injustice, and violence and destruction, as well as excess and greed; you know the dark litany, but it is also marked out for the faithful with hope and peace and joy . . . sacred waiting . . .

And love, the Advent theme for the day. The love we celebrate, before it is any other kind of love we know, is God's love for the world. It is a strong and persevering love that wills the best and highest life for everyone.

When we are not lifted up, or when the ways we are lifted up are not very accessible, or when they are based on the false premise that the source of our access to the heavens is some kind of human ability, life always ends in disappointment, despair, a lack of trust. In other words, it doesn't lift us really. The message of Christmas is that we have been lifted up. It tells Mary that she, of all people, is blessed.

I would *like* to say that the Christian gospel is thus set against the spirit of the age, which is hopeful about human capabilities, and confident in an essential goodness in human nature. It is sometimes even called, "humanism," and some people claim to be humanists, to indicate their faith in the human spirit. It is, however, more accurate to say that the gospel of Christ is set at odds with the spirit of every age. This aspect of life has never changed. It is part of the story, the tragic part.

As a matter of fact, even among believers it is very tempting and common to proclaim an acceptance of the gospel while holding back, preserving a space for the competence of humanity. When we are told that there is nothing we can do, somewhere deep inside there is often a barely audible, "yes . . . but." Sometimes we, each us, if we are honest, desperately cling to the, "yes . . . but." Thus, even with good intentions, we stand in the way of the gift, for which which have been told, instead, to prepare the way.

But not today. Not at Christmas, when we contemplate the meaning of Christ's birth. It is three days short of Christmas, the last Sunday before the great celebration of this great birth, which tells us not only that there is nothing we can do, but that God *has* done *for us*, what we cannot do.

God has accepted us as we are, in our weakness and smallness, in our arrogant pride and overconfidence, and has healed our infirmity, cleansed our hearts, forgiven our sin, and liberated us from the necessity of

a moral perfection or a miraculous accomplishment of some kind, not within our capacity.

Part of that acceptance (redemption, salvation, reconciliation) not even the first part, which was in God's decision from the foundation of the world, but a significant part, nonetheless, is the birth of the Holy Child.

And the birth meets us in a way that gives us permission for this brief time each year we call Christmas, to consider it and to be thankful and full of praise like Mary was, without yet having to do more than keep in the back of our minds everything that comes later. We are allowed to Magnify the Lord.

But just to bathe ourselves in this happy time, to accept the giftedness of it with joy, and peace and hope, and love for each other and for the world of people all around, that flows out of God's love in the gift. Words cannot carry the freight of meaning that is this event, but there are some suggestions:

Blessed
Sacred
Beautiful
Majestic

And while we are lifted up in these heights, let our good will for one another and for our neighbors, friends and enemies alike, be as full and free as the love of God, given to us all. Amen.

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