

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
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The Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 20, 2009
Luke 1:39-56

“An Advent Visit”

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

In the next days there will probably be millions of people preparing to make trips leading up to Christmas. There will be countless visits that will take place between relatives and friends. Some will see people that they have not seen for years, others will be visits very close to home. It is true that the Christmas season is a time for visits. How many Christmas cookies or stollen or other goodies will be brought over and shared in the coming days? The Gospel lesson for this day gives us an opportunity to explore a visit that has great significance in our understanding of the real meaning of this season. And as we look at the events there, we can most assuredly see the work of the Holy Spirit, the fulfillment of the eternal plan of God and the grace of God at work for our salvation. Let us then consider “An Advent Visit.”

I. Prologue

The words of the Gospel relate a familiar story: The visit of Mary to her relative Elizabeth. In fact, in Biblical history it is called the Visitation. But before we can understand that visit we must remember another visit that took place just before. The visit of the angel Gabriel to a young virgin in Nazareth whose name was Mary. That visit was unannounced and startling. The message that Mary received was unbelievable. You will conceive and bear a son and you will call his name Jesus. The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you and the child to be born will be called Holy, the Son of God. And while Mary had definite questions for only she would be aware of the fact that what the angel was telling her was a biological impossibility. She was a virgin. But she believed the word and simply stated, “I am the handmaiden of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word.” And so it was. In the midst of the conversation, the angel had told her that Elizabeth her relative was also expecting a child though far advanced in years for with God nothing is impossible. And on the basis of that word, Mary decides to make an Advent visit.

Not Two But Four!

And so the Gospel lesson for today simply states, “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.” Here is our Advent visit described. Mary leaves Nazareth and travels to the hill country of Judea, probably south of Jerusalem and goes to the house of her relatives. But if we closely look at this text, there is a vital point to be made. It was not a visit of two people, but of four. Listen to the words of the text: “And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. 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.'" Do you count the four? There is Elizabeth and Mary and John, the baby in Elizabeth's womb, and there is the Lord. The Lord? Yes, note specifically the words of Elizabeth. The mother of her Lord had come to visit.

There is a lot to be said about this passage. It is I believe one of the most powerful pro-life passages in the Scriptures. The baby in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy. It is a baby. Now we know that Elizabeth was in the sixth month of her pregnancy and so most would understand that. But it is the other child that must draw our attention. It was very early in the first trimester of the pregnancy of the virgin Mary. And the Lord was there. The child in her womb was the incarnate Son of God. This was no "fetal tissue" as the double speak of so many today would suggest. It was the Lord. It is was not without great wisdom that the early Greek church bestowed the title of "Theotokos" on Mary, the mother of our Lord. The word means "God-bearer" and that is truly what she did by the power and grace and gift of God Himself. She bore the eternal Word made flesh until the day of his birth. And the miracle for us all is the wonder of that. People can get all misty eyed about the little baby in the manger. And we will celebrate that in a few days. But consider for a moment the incredible truth of the Incarnation. From the moment of conception, the Virgin Mary carried the Son of God, the Holy One in her womb.

Here is a good understanding of that name that we just sang in the Hymn of the Day. Emmanuel. The name of the child whom the virgin would conceive and bear. Emmanuel. God is with us. God was truly present in that visit. He was really there.

III. A Song of Praise

And in the presence of God there is song. The closing verses of the Gospel for today present us with the song of Mary. It is the first of the four great canticles or songs in the opening two chapters of the Gospel of St. Luke. It is a grand song of praise. It is known as the Magnificat after the opening words of the Latin translation. We sang a version of it before as the Hymn of Praise. Mary glorifies the Lord. She praises him and rejoices in God her Savior. For she too needs a Savior and though privileged by grace to be the mother of the Son of God, she acknowledges that all need to look to the Lord for salvation. It reminds us of him whose name itself means salvation, Jesus Christ our Lord. Spend some time today and look closely at the words of that song. It speaks of the humble and the lowly. It speaks of the mighty and the proud brought low. It speaks of the holiness of the Lord, of his mercy and love. It speaks of the promises of God fulfilled, the promises spoken to Abraham and his descendants. It speaks of the faithfulness of a God from generation to generation. It is truly a song of praise from the lips of a humble virgin, the Blessed Virgin Mary.

IV. Conclusion

And let that song be a reminder of our final preparations again for Christmas. It is so easy to be overwhelmed by preparations or to be overcome with thoughts of sadness at this time of the year. We may have so much to do or we miss loved ones no longer in our midst. Or we are just lonely ourselves and have an empty place in our hearts. Remember the visit. Remember the four. Remember the Lord. Christmas is coming. Christmas has come. The Lord is near. The Lord has come. And so we pray:

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!

In Jesus' name. Amen.