

Luke 1:39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child 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 by 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 with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
50 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 powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

NEW BIRTH

Nothing changes your life more than the birth of a new baby. We have some church members who have discovered that for themselves just recently. Everything changes when you become a new father or mother.

And things change for people around you as well. New grandmothers and grandfathers excitedly consider their new role. Pictures are emailed to family and friends. Who could imagine that someone so tiny could make such a big change in the lives of so many?

My mom used to say that it's as if God has allowed us to participate in the creation process. I think that's a very good way to put it.

And long ago God used the process of new birth to change not only the lives of a few people in an obscure village far away but to change the whole world for ages to come. As one popular

Christmas card puts it, “Christmas is love tugging men and women back to God ... with the powerful clasp of a tiny hand reaching from a bed of straw.”

This is fourth Sunday of Advent. The celebration of the Divine birth is coming soon. How do we prepare for this blessed event?

THE IMPOSSIBLE BIRTH

In our lesson for today Mary prepared by going to visit her relative, Elizabeth.

You may remember that when the angel told Mary that she was going to become the mother of the Son of God she quite naturally asked, “How can this be since I am a virgin?” And the angel answered that “the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most high will overshadow you; and for this reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God.”

And then as a kind of proof that “nothing is impossible with God” the angel said that Mary’s relative, Elizabeth ... an old woman who was thought to be barren is now in her sixth month of pregnancy.

This is a theme that runs throughout the Bible. When God decides to do something new, there is a miraculous new birth. For example, Abraham’s wife Sarah is so old that she has one foot in the nursing home and then God decides to put her other foot in the nursery.

The idea was so ridiculous that it made Sarah and Abraham laugh out loud, but as always God had the last laugh. They had a son in their old age, and Abraham became the father of many.

Nothing is impossible with God.

And to herald the coming of his Son, God does it again. Elizabeth conceived in her old age.

ZECHARIAH’S UNBELIEF AND ELIZABETH’S FAITH

In this instance the angel came first to Elizabeth’s husband, the priest Zechariah. Old Zach was serving in the temple when the angel, Gabriel brought him the news. There would be a new birth in his family, a boy who would be a forerunner to the Messiah, and they were to name him John.

But, an angelic message in the temple was not enough proof for Zach. All this talk of a new birth made him afraid, and he asked, “How can I know for sure? It’s one thing to read those stories of miraculous births in the Scripture; it’s quite another to think that this can happen to old man like me.”

And the angel said,

“Here’s your sign. You won’t be able to speak again until the child is born!”

The religious professional, the priest could not believe in the sign of a new birth. And so he is left speechless. And it was left to the women in the story to be signs of faith and hope.

When Elizabeth found out that she was pregnant she didn’t question it. She saw it as a blessing from God. She believed that in this miracle of a new birth God was working to change her life and the lives of others.

It’s no wonder that Mary traveled with haste to visit her relative, Elizabeth.

Who else could understand what Mary had just experienced?

Only Elizabeth could understand and support Mary in what surely would be a very difficult and frightening time. These two women, one very old and one very young would wait together for three months.

NOT TRUSTING GOOD NEWS TO BE GOOD

Now the birth of John and Jesus were unique, one of a kind events. It’s not every day that a prophet is born or the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us.

In fact it only happened once. But, the power and hope of that new birth continues to affect our lives even today. And yet, as we put it in our prayer of confession for today, “We have not trusted good news to be good.”

Like Mary we are also inclined to ask, “How can this be?” Like Zechariah we want to know for certain that the message of the angels is not just an elaborate hoax. Let’s be honest. Many of us are not spring chickens any more. We know all too well that life comes with limitations.

Yes, we believe (in theory) that with God all things are possible. It’s just harder to believe in those impossible possibilities when the angel lands on our doorstep and challenges us to step out on faith.

THE VISIT

Mary struggled to believe, but God provided a way for her faith to be strengthened. God provided the testimony of her relative, Elizabeth.

Some commentators suggest the trip that Mary made was a very long and difficult journey. In fact some question if a young girl like Mary would have even attempted such a trip.

Perhaps under normal circumstances Mary wouldn't have attempted the trip. But, the circumstances were anything but normal. Mary's world had been turned upside down by the events of the past week, and she needed desperately to talk with someone who might understand.

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you desperately needed to talk with someone who might understand? If you have had such an experience you know why Mary traveled with such haste to visit Elizabeth.

Some people look upon spiritual experiences as a lonely moment of insight when the angel comes to us and gives us the word. And sometimes it does happen that way.

But, in the Bible those moments of private insight are meant to be shared. It is through our fellowship with others who have also been touched by God's Spirit that we find the strength and courage to allow ourselves to be used by God for a greater purpose.

Who plays the role of Elizabeth in your life? What person do you need to seek out in order to better understand what God wants in your life?

THE MIRACLE OF FAITH

Mary had a unique role to play in the drama of God's salvation. It was, to be sure a task of overwhelming importance.

But, we do Mary an unwelcome injustice if we seek to elevate her to the role of semi-deity. Mary was chosen to be the bearer of God, but she was not God. She was fully and totally human. In her the Word became flesh.

Martin Luther once said that three miracles occurred at the birth of Christ.

God became human. A virgin conceived, and Mary believed.

According to Luther, the greatest miracle may well have been this last one, the fact that Mary believed. Mary, an ordinary girl, believed the promise that she had been chosen to bring the presence of God into the world.

God's people are reborn when they believe the promise that new life is possible.

A BIRTH THAT WILL CHANGE THE WORLD

This past week I watched a movie that came out a few years ago about the birth of Christ, The Nativity. The thing that impressed me about that film was the way it portrayed the harshness of life when Jesus was born.

Crazy King Herod taxes his people to the breaking point. The Romans line the roads with the crucified bodies of those who dared to dream of independence. Mary is engaged to a man that she barely knows at an early age because the family can't make ends meet.

Some of this was conjecture on the part of the film maker, but there was also an element of realism. Life was brutal and short. It was a struggle just to survive. And into the middle of this hopeless situation an angel comes.

Talk of angels seemed rather foolish in the real world of taxes and political intrigue. No one believed Mary ... except Elizabeth. Elizabeth had also been touched by an angel, and that enabled her to look beyond the brutality of daily life to a hope that only the intervention of God could bring.

Mary and Elizabeth expected more than just the miraculous birth of two boys. These expectant mothers expected the arrival of God's kingdom.

When they heard the word of the angel no doubt they recalled the prophecy of Isaiah who predicted that the birth of a child would herald the coming of God's kingdom. (Isaiah 9:1-6)

When they heard the word of the angel no doubt they thought about the words of the prophet Joel who foresaw a time when young and old alike would dream dreams and see visions. In that great day men and women alike would be filled with the power of God's Spirit. (Joel 2:28-29)

And as the baby leaped for joy in Elizabeth's womb that common event leads her to an uncommon conclusion. The birth of these children will change the world forever. They will fulfill the prophecy

We have many examples of how in a smaller way the birth of a child changed the world. For example, think of how different the world would have been without a Martin Luther or an Albert Einstein or a Mother Teresa. The birth of one child can indeed change the course of history for good or for evil.

But, in this case the birth of one child not only changed the course of history; the birth of one child brought salvation into a world that seemed beyond saving.

A SONG OF SALVATION

We still live in a world that seems beyond saving. Many people live on the brink of starvation. Terrorists and brutal dictators attempt to control others and enrich themselves through sheer brutality. Sometimes I think the only way our world has changed is that the weapons of war have become more deadly.

According to Elizabeth, Mary was blessed because she believed the promise. Mary was blessed because she believed that God could and would use her to bring the presence of God to the world.

But, what does that promise mean to us today?

I believe it means that the presence of God can still come to us in a very human way. The presence of God, the Spirit of God in Christ is with us here and now. Christmas does not end with the birth of Savior. It is only the beginning for Mary and for us.

Notice how Mary responded to Elizabeth's greeting. She sings a song. It is a song about God's promised justice.

In the kingdom that comes the lowly will be lifted up and the hungry will be fed. In the kingdom that comes the high and mighty will be knocked off their high horses. God will be merciful to his people.

In a world where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer Mary foresees a time when mercy will prevail. The song that this little girl is singing is a very subversive song. In fact even today there are politicians in some countries who advise against singing this song because it could cause social unrest.

But, this song was not just Mary's song. Songs like this had been sung by God's people long before Mary was born and songs like this would continue to be sung for years to come. (For example see 1 Samuel 2:1-10)

In a violent and cynical world run by crazy men like Herod and Caesar the greatest threat to their power are these "little ones" who believe in the triumph of God's grace. The greatest threat to evil is the word of those who believe God's justice.

Evil can only rule over people if it can somehow convince them to give up hope. But, once the seed of hope is born in the hearts of God's people new birth is inevitable and with that new birth there is a new world.

NEW BIRTH AND SALVATION

Have you ever noticed how Bible often uses the image of new birth to describe salvation? The baptism of John was a symbol of new birth. Jesus told Nicodemus that he had to be born again in order to become a part of God's kingdom. The Apostle Paul wrote that if anyone was in Christ they were like a new creation. The old had passed away, and the new had come.

Generally speaking we are not in control of the birthing process. The baby comes when the baby wants to come.

And the same is true when it comes to spiritual rebirth. Mary and Elizabeth could not have expected an angel to enter their lives and change everything. In fact the coming of God's Spirit into their lives was quite disruptive and painful in many ways.

But, Mary and Elizabeth are praised in Scripture because when the critical moment came they were willing to let God abide in their lives. They were willing to say what Jesus would later say in the Garden of Gethsemane, "not my will but thine be done."

They were able to believe that the divine could touch the human in a significant way.

NOT GIVING IN TO DESPAIR

Do you believe that? Do you believe that the divine can touch your life in a significant way?

I believe that there a great problem in the church today. It is the problem of pessimism. Christians look at the troubles in the world, the duplicitous politicians, the hypocritical religious leaders and the unbridled lust for more and wonder, "What this world is coming to?"

Certainly we shouldn't minimize the impact of evil in the world. Christians are called to expose idolatry wherever it is found.

But, Christians are not given the option of wallowing in despair because Christians believe in the power of new birth. Christians believe that when a child was born in Bethlehem long ago that was the beginning of a new world. God was in Christ, and that changed everything.

We all have challenges to face in the coming year. Some of you face the challenge of raising children. Some of you face the challenge of poor health. Some of you face the challenge of finding a job. Some of you face the challenge of an important relationship that has gone bad.

Life is not easy. But, according to our passage for today, there is hope in even the worst of circumstances.

Like Mary we need to hear the promise of the angel and believe that it can happen to us. Like Mary we need to seek out those who have also been touched by God's Spirit and let them give us encouragement in our time of need.

THE BAPTISM

If this story sounds familiar, it is. I used it in an Advent sermon several years ago, but I wanted to use it again because for me it epitomizes how the divine can touch our ordinary lives.

A Presbyterian minister baptized a child on Thanksgiving weekend. As is the custom in many churches, the pastor routinely asks the congregation, "Who stands with this child?" At this point the grandparents and an assortment of relatives join the parents in holding the baby and presenting the baby for baptism.

After the service was over, and the congregation had left for dinner, the pastor was putting the sanctuary in order when he noticed a person who had remained. He said that she was dressed "Salvation army style, clutching a black plastic purse." He recognized her as someone who always sat in the back pew, close to the door. She seemed at a loss for words.

After an awkward silence, she commented on how lovely the baptism was and then with much emotion she said, "Tina has had a baby and, well, the baby ought to be baptized, shouldn't it?"

The pastor suggested that Tina and her husband should come to see him. They could discuss the possibility together.

The woman looked up at the pastor and said, "Tina has no husband. She was confirmed in the congregation and came to the youth group. But, she got involved with an older boy. And then she got pregnant. She is only eighteen."

Now it was the pastor's turn to be at a loss for words. He finally mumbled something about needing to bring her request before the Session. When the pastor present the request to baptize Tina's baby there was more mumbling.

How could they be sure that Tina would be faithful to the promises she was making? How could they be sure about anybody's promises?

After thirty minutes of indecisive discussion, the session finally decided to schedule the baptism for the fourth Sunday of Advent. When the Sunday arrived the church was filled, just as it always was a Christmas approached. They went through the usual service ... lit the four Advent candles and sang "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus."

And then it was time for the baptism.

The pastor said, "Will all those who are going to be baptized please come forward." An elder of the church stood and read off a three by five card, "Tina Corey presents her son, James, for baptism." He awkwardly stared at the card as if he wasn't quite sure who that might be.

Tina got up from where she was seated and came down to the front, holding two month old James in her arms. A blue pacifier was stuck in his mouth, and he was giving it a real workout. The scene was just as awkward as the pastor and the elders knew it would be.

Tina seemed so young, so alone. As she stood there they could not help but think of another mother and another baby, young, alone, long ago.

And then the pastor came to that appointed part of the service where he asked the usual question, "And who stands with this child?" He looked at Tina's mom dressed in her meager way and nodded. She slowly, awkwardly stood and moved toward her daughter and grandson.

The pastor's eyes went back to the service book to proceed with the questions to be asked of the parent. It was at this point that he sensed some movement within the congregation. A couple elders stood up. Then the sixth grade teacher stood up. Then a new couple in the church stood up.

And then much to the pastor's astonishment, the whole church was standing, moving forward and clustering around the baby and her mother. Tina was crying. Her mom was gripping the pew as if she were clutching the railing on a tossing ship.

And little Jimmy as the water touched his forehead grew peaceful and calm ... as if he could feel the warm embrace.

The whole congregation came together that day. It was as if this child was their child. It was as if they were all one family.

I believe that a Savior was born long ago, but that was just the beginning.

I believe that each and every day a new birth occurs. I believe that each and every day the divine touches the human, and lives are changed forever.

Amen.