

THE REAL CHRISTMAS MIRACLE

Luke 1:39-56

Fourth Sunday in Advent (Series C)

December 23, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Fourth Sunday in Advent comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 1, verses 39 through 56. It is on page 724 of the pew Bible. This lesson occurs immediately after the angel Gabriel visited the Virgin Mary and proclaimed to her that she would conceive and bear a son who is also “the Son of God” (1:35). Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 1, beginning at verse 39, we read in Jesus’ name.

³⁹In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah,
⁴⁰and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, ⁴²and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

⁴⁶And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
⁵²he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

⁵⁶And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the part of the season of Advent where we really start to turn our attention toward Christmas. For most of the season of Advent we're kind of looking forward to Christmas. But now it seems like we're almost there. We're so close we can feel it. And, in fact, if we really think about the *miracle* of Christmas, we would have to say that it's already happened in this gospel lesson. The *birth* of Jesus wasn't really a miracle. It was actually quite ordinary. The *miracle* of Christmas was really his conception by the Holy Spirit in the Virgin Mary.

And it might be helpful to clarify what we mean when we use the word "miracle." We're talking about a significant event that defies the normal patterns of this world. It's not just something marvelous. It's not just something we have a hard time explaining. And a legitimate miracle is not just an event where we don't know how it happened. A miracle is an event where we know what happened, but it defies the laws and patterns of this world. We know that it should not have happened. So when skeptics argue that miracles can't happen, part of our response is, "Yeah, we know. That's why we call it a 'miracle.' It's something that couldn't have happened, but somehow it did."

So a miracle is more than something marvelous and amazing. We've all seen those Christmas movies where everyone goes to Florida for a destination Christmas wedding. Then the beloved Uncle Charlie's plane gets delayed in Wisconsin, so he's going to miss the wedding. But then he unexpectedly shows up just in time. Then it starts snowing, and someone declares, "It's a Christmas miracle." And I just gave away the plot of all the movies you're going to watch this afternoon. Now at the risk of being labeled a Grinch, that's not a miracle. Ba hum bug. It's heart-warming. It's fun. Watch those movies and enjoy them. You could do a lot worse. But that's not a miracle.

Also, the birth of a child is not a miracle. It's marvelous. It's amazing. And I will never be able to comprehend the suffering, pain, and exertion that a mother goes through in that event. But it's not a miracle. As marvelous as it is, that event is in perfect accord with the patterns of this world. Now if I visit you in the hospital after the birth of your child, and if you refer to your newborn baby as a miracle, I will not think less of you, and I will not correct you. But since we are not currently sitting in that hospital room, I will correct you here. That's not a miracle. It's amazing. That child is a gift. And there is certainly some mystery to the whole thing. But it's not a miracle, because it actually fits with the laws and patterns of this world.

So when we think of *the* Christmas miracle, it's not actually the event we're going to read about tomorrow night. It's not the humble birth in Bethlehem. It happened about nine months earlier in a city of Galilee named Nazareth (1:26). And this is right before the text we read this morning. The angel Gabriel appeared to the Virgin Mary. And Gabriel told Mary what was about to happen inside her. Gabriel said, "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 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, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." (1:31-33). Mary wondered how this would be, since she was a virgin (1:34), and Gabriel told her about the miracle that would occur. This is the part that defies the ordinary laws and patterns of our world: "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" (1:35). And Mary's response was, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be done for me according to your word" (1:38).

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And then the Scripture doesn't even record the conception. Sometime after this conversation and before Mary arrives at Elizabeth's house, this miracle occurs where, without the help of a man, but by the power of the Holy Spirit, the eternal Son of God, who was there at the creation of the world, takes on human flesh in the tiniest of forms. In today's medical terms we call it a zygote. That's your word for the day. It's that first cell that results at conception. Then it divides and multiplies for a few weeks until it becomes an embryo.

And consider the wonder of this. It's hard enough for us to wrap our brains around the idea of a full-grown man being God in human flesh. It becomes a little harder when we back up to Christmas and the birth of this infant. How could this helpless infant be God? But it goes back even farther—to the very beginning—to his conception as a single-celled zygote. This zygote is God in human flesh. Think about this: there was a point in human history when God was a single human cell. And he grew from there, just like the rest of us.

And this zygote is recognized as God in human flesh. And the person who recognizes him is a six-month old fetus, who would later be known as John the Baptizer.

This is what we read about in the gospel lesson. Mary went to visit her relative Elizabeth. And it's not like Mary was a few months, or even a few weeks, pregnant when she got there. She would have been *days* pregnant. After the angel departed from her, it says that "Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah" (1:39). She didn't sit around for a while. She went quickly. And it would have taken just a few days—less than a week, for sure—to walk there.

And if we put ourselves in her shoes, we can understand why she did this. She's a pregnant teenage girl who's not married. She needs to talk to someone about this, but who's going to believe that she hasn't been promiscuous? And who's going to believe this baby is God? Several months later, Joseph needed an angelic visit to convince him (Matt. 1:20). Who's going to believe that this is an honest-to-God miracle? No one, not even her parents. They probably knew their daughter was a fairly virtuous girl, but come on, the Holy Spirit? Really? No one is going to believe that. Except, perhaps, Elizabeth. Because, in addition to the conception of the Christ-child, Gabriel also told Mary about her relative Elizabeth, an old lady who had been barren but is now six-months pregnant with her first child (1:36). Mary needed to talk to someone about this, and if anyone is going to believe this miracle story, it's going to be Elizabeth, because she is experiencing her own miracle.

Now I imagine that as Mary is walking up to Judah, she's practicing her speech. What is she going to say to Elizabeth? Elizabeth is the most likely person to believe her, but it's still no guarantee. How will she convince Elizabeth of this miracle? But it turns out she doesn't have to convince Elizabeth, because Elizabeth has a messenger inside her.

When Mary greets Elizabeth, the baby in Elizabeth leaps. This, apparently, was more than a normal kick. Elizabeth recognizes this is something more. She is filled with the Holy Spirit, and instead of Mary telling Elizabeth the story about the child in her womb, Elizabeth tells Mary about it. And she got this message from her unborn son. The Holy Spirit helped her understand what the leap meant, but when Elizabeth states how she came by this information, she attributes it to the baby leaping for joy in her womb (1:44). You see, Elizabeth already knew about her own son—that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit even from her womb (1:15) and that he would go before the Lord (1:16). This is what an angel had told her husband, Zechariah. So Elizabeth didn't even know beforehand that Mary was pregnant—she's just a few days into

it—but when the baby leaps, Elizabeth knows what it means. She is in the presence of her Lord, and Mary must be carrying him. She learned it from her unborn son.

So imagine this: a teenage girl who is just a few days pregnant walks into the house of an old lady who is six months pregnant. The teenager greets the old lady—something like, “Peace be with you”—and the old lady instantly knows that the teenager is pregnant and that the child is God. That’s what’s happening here.

Now there are a few titles for Mary that are derived from this passage. They come from what Elizabeth said to her when she was filled with the Holy Spirit. So they really come from the Holy Spirit, not from Elizabeth. First, we call her “The Blessed Virgin.” It kind of sounds like something Roman Catholics would say, and they probably do, but it’s also something all Christians can say, because it’s biblical. Mary’s a virgin, or at least she was at this point, and she is blessed—Elizabeth says so (1:42). Now she’s not blessed because of something special about *her*. Mary is blessed because of the child in her womb. All generations will call Mary blessed, not because of anything special about Mary, but because of what God has done for her (1:48-49). So we refer to her, at least at this stage in her life, as “The Blessed Virgin.”

And the second title is the one that really seems to make us Protestants nervous: “The mother of God.”

I have a little true and false quiz I like to give people about the nature of Jesus Christ. One of the questions is this: “Mary is the mother of God.” True or false? It’s quite rare, in my experience, for Protestant Christians to get this right, but the answer is true. And when I say that, I can see some of the adults starting to get mad at me, so I have to hurry up and explain myself before I lose my job. Two things:

First of all, this title is biblical. It comes right out of this text, when Elizabeth calls Mary, “The mother of my Lord” (1:43). And remember, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit when she says this. Also, remember that “Lord” is the word they used to translate the Old Testament divine name “Yahweh.” So, really, an even more accurate title to give to Mary, based on this text, is, “The mother of Yahweh.”

And second, when we call Mary “the mother of God” or “the mother of Yahweh,” we’re really not making a statement about Mary’s nature. Jesus did not get his divine nature from Mary. He always had it. Mary was a normal human being with a sinful nature just like you and me. Instead, when we call her “the mother of God,” we’re really making a statement about Jesus. We’re saying that this child whom she bore—who at this point in his life was a mere zygote; you would need a microscope to see him—we’re saying that this zygote is God in human flesh. We’re confessing something about the two natures in Jesus Christ. We’re confessing that he is human to the extent that, even though he was conceived miraculously, he still went through every stage of development that a normal human being goes through, and he needed a mommy with a womb to get him through that development. He is completely human. And yet, at the same time, he is completely God. So when Elizabeth calls Mary “the mother of Yahweh,” she is confessing that there is a human being inside Mary—a very small human being—who is also God. That is, the God who created the heavens and the earth, who spoke to Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, who led the Israelites across the Red Sea—that God is a zygote in this text, and Mary is his mommy. That is how human our God is. And that is the real miracle of Christmas.

Now I find this to be awesome. And I mean “awesome” in the literal sense that it inspires awe. It’s the kind of thing where you can just sit and stare into space as you think about it. And we can get lost thinking about it, but we need to make sure we get around to saying why this happened. Why did the Holy Spirit put the Son of God in the Virgin Mary as a zygote? It seems like kind of a strange thing to do. If we didn’t know any better it might sound like an intra-Trinitarian prank—kind of like when one wizard turns another wizard into a toad.

But there’s a very good reason for it, and our epistle lesson from Hebrews tells us what it is. It quotes Psalm 40, saying,

“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body have you prepared for me” (Heb. 10:5).

This is actually a conversation within the Trinity. The Son is speaking to the Father about how all the sacrifices of the Old Testament were ineffective. They didn’t actually accomplish anything real. They didn’t take away sins, because the blood of bulls and goats and lambs can’t take away the sin of humans. So the Son says to the Father,

“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body have you prepared for me.”

And then the Son says,

“Behold, I have come to do your will, O God” (Heb. 10:7).

The Son of God has received a human body to do what bulls and goats and lambs were unable to do. To atone for the sins of man, the sacrifice actually has to be a human, and he has to be a human the same way we are human. He can’t just take on the flesh of a thirty-three year old for a few hours on a Friday afternoon. Human life begins at conception, so that is where the Son of God must begin his life as a man. In order to be our sacrifice, he must live a human life the same way we all live, with just one notable exception: he does it without sin. And thus he is a pure sacrifice. And this is why the Holy Spirit put the Son of God in the Virgin Mary as a zygote. “For us, and for our salvation, [he] came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.”

As you ponder the wonder of this miracle, remember that the purpose of this zygote is death. And this death is our salvation. So with Mary we rejoice that “[God] has looked on the humble estate of his servant” (1:48). We rejoice that “he has brought down the mighty from [his] throne and exalted those of humble estate” (1:52). Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.