

GOD CAME SMALL

Luke 1:39-56

Fourth Sunday in Advent (Series C)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The Gospel lesson for the Fourth Sunday in Advent comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 1, verses 39 through 56. This is the story of a visit between two mothers as well as their children.

A little context for you, because Luke has done a lot to set this up earlier in chapter 1. The first woman Luke introduces is Elizabeth, and she was an old lady. Luke's gentle way of saying it is that she was "advanced in years" (1:7; 18). But the angel Gabriel announced to her husband Zechariah that, despite their old age, they would conceive and bear a child. And they should call him John (1:13). And, indeed, they conceived, just as the angel Gabriel promised (1:24). This child grew up to be the prophet we know as John the Baptizer.

Six months into her pregnancy, the angel Gabriel appeared to another woman. This time it was to a virgin, who was not yet married, but was betrothed to a man named Joseph. And this virgin's name is Mary (1:26-27). Gabriel announced that she would also conceive (1:31), but not in the natural way; the Holy Spirit would come upon her and the power of the most high would overshadow her. This child would be the Son of God (1:35), and his name is Jesus (1:31). Then Gabriel told Mary all about what was going on with Elizabeth, who was a relative of Mary's.

And that brings us right up to the reading for today. This is what Mary does after Gabriel's announcement. It's the story of the visit between these two mothers along with children. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 1, beginning at verse 39, we read in Jesus' name.

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."

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ And 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;

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52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55 as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

56 And 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.

The eternal Son of God, through whom the entire universe was created, came small. And he did it to save the small, to exalt the humble, and to fill the hungry. The manner in which the Son of God came to us indicates who he came to, and who he came to save. He could have come in any manner he chose. He could have come to any class of people he wanted. He could have been born in a palace. Or he could have been born in the temple. At our district pastors meeting earlier this week, one pastor said that, to us, it would have seemed appropriate for him to be born in the temple, miraculously emerging from the holy of holies, wrapped in purple cloths with a golden crown or a shining halo. Or he could have just skipped the whole birth thing altogether and come as a full-grown man. He's God. He didn't need a mother. But he chose to need a mother. And he could have come to the mighty, the rich, and the proud. But he chose to come to the weak, the poor, and the humble. This is what we see in this amazing gospel lesson.

This passage is absolutely marvelous. There are a handful of passages in the Bible that, every time I read them, just captivate me. I can sit and meditate on them. And as I go about my day, I keep thinking about them. You might have passages like that. And they might be different than mine. But for me, this is one of those passages. When you stop and think and realize what's going on in this meeting between Mary and Elizabeth, it's just awe-inspiring.

On December 25 we celebrate Christmas. And it's a high and glorious festival in the Church. We celebrate the miracle of the incarnation. *Incarnation* is a fancy Latin word that means "enfleshment." The eternal Son of God took on human flesh. We celebrate it on Christmas. But there was really nothing miraculous about Christmas, not in Bethlehem anyway. The angelic announcement to the shepherds was miraculous, but the scene in Bethlehem, where Jesus was born, was completely ordinary. We might even say that it was "sub-ordinary." We'll talk more about that on Friday evening. But the real miracle of Christmas took place about nine months earlier, when the angel Gabriel announced the conception to Mary and the Holy Spirit came upon her. And when we realize this, then the miracle of Christmas actually appears even more miraculous, because it's not really that God took on the flesh of a newborn baby. The miracle is that God took on the flesh of what we call a "zygote" in today's scientific terminology. A zygote is that very first stage of human existence. It is the product of conception. Some call it a clump of cells. But the Son of God was pleased to take it as his flesh. He became human at the very first

stage of human life. This is what we see in this remarkable visit between Mary and Elizabeth, and, of course, their children.

Mary and Elizabeth were relatives of some sort. We don't know the exact connection. It seems that Elizabeth was something like a great aunt or a cousin twice removed, because Elizabeth was probably about two generations older than Mary. Mary was, we presume, a young woman, because she was betrothed to Joseph at the time, but not yet married. Some people say she was only thirteen or fourteen, but there's nothing from the Bible to indicate she was really that young. That age is thrown out there because, in the ancient world, young betrothed women did sometimes get married that young, and people like to make the Bible sound scandalous. But all we can really say is that she was probably of typical marrying age for the time and typical child-bearing age. She was also old enough to make the journey from Nazareth in Galilee to the hill country of Judea, without parental supervision. This was about sixty or seventy miles.

She goes to the hill country of Judea, because the angel told her about Elizabeth's pregnancy. Now think about this from Mary's point of view. She has a baby growing in her. But who's going to believe her when she tells them that she's still a virgin, and the Holy Spirit gave her this baby, and this baby is actually the Son of God? Her friends? Her parents? Think about this: if you're a parent, and your daughter says this to you, would you believe her? Would Joseph believe her? He needs an angel to tell him (Matt. 1:18-25). There's only one person who might believe Mary, and that's Elizabeth, because Elizabeth is also experiencing a miraculous pregnancy. So that's where Mary goes.

When she gets there, Elizabeth doesn't need any convincing, not from Mary anyway. This is what's so amazing. Elizabeth learns about Mary's pregnancy from her six-month old son. And by "six months old," I don't mean that this is six months after his *birth*. I mean that this is six months after his *conception*. He's still three months from being born! When Mary entered the house and greeted Elizabeth, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed, "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. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (1:42-45).

Now this is a lot to deduce from an unborn baby's movements. Mary hadn't told Elizabeth her story yet. Elizabeth didn't even know that Mary was pregnant. All Mary did was greet her when she came into the house. But Elizabeth deduces the truth from what she knows about her unborn son, and the Holy Spirit puts the pieces together in her head. The angel Gabriel had already promised that John would go before the Lord and prepare the way for him. John would grow up to announce the presence of Jesus and introduce him as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). And here, in the womb of his elderly mother, John announces the Lord for the first time. He leaps for joy. This is more than just a baby's kick. Elizabeth feels the joy of it. And she knows who her son is. So the Holy Spirit puts the pieces together for her. John is announcing the presence of the Lord. But all Elizabeth sees is the Virgin Mary in front of her. Mary won't even be showing for several months. But Elizabeth learns from her unborn son and the Holy Spirit that God is in the womb of Mary. It's marvelous. She is the first human in the Bible to confess Jesus as Lord, and she does it when he's—well, I don't know exactly how small he was—but much smaller than the bread you will receive in your hand today.

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The key truth in this passage is that the eternal Son of God, the Lord, the Mighty One, has come down from his exalted throne. He has come to the small, the humble, and the poor, in order to lift them up and fill them with good things. This is the great and glorious truth we learn today. But there are a few bonus teachings that decorate this great truth.

One of them is Mary's title, "the mother of God." Other protestants usually get a little squirmy when we call Mary, "the mother of God." It sounds too Roman Catholic. But in our confessional documents, Lutherans affirm that Mary "is rightly called and truly is 'the mother of God'" (*Formula of Concord, Epitome, VIII:12*). This passage is the proof for this title. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, calls Mary, "The mother of my Lord." So we accept this as true. But we should note that when Elizabeth says this, and when we say it, it's not so much a statement about Mary, as it is about Jesus. Certainly, Mary is blessed, and we can honor her, both as a woman, and as an example of faith. But when we call her "the mother of God," we are not saying that she is divine. She was not sinless. She is not the source of Jesus' divine nature. She is also not the mother of God the Father or God the Holy Spirit. But she is the mother of God the Son, because the Son of God assumed human flesh as a zygote in her womb. So it's really a statement about the humanity of Jesus Christ. He became fully human to the extent that he needed a mommy. We are simply confessing that Mary is that mommy.

We also learn something about unborn children. We see in this passage that human life begins at conception. But then we don't really need this passage to tell us that. We see it in the natural world every time a child is conceived. Every ultrasound and every sonogram teaches the same thing. So does every modern medical textbook that deals with embryology. It's a basic scientific fact. Human life begins at conception. But this passage confirms that God also sees the zygote as a human life. It is a human life that he has created. More than that, he sees it as a human life in need of redemption. So the Son of God assumed human flesh at the level of a zygote. Remember, at this point, Jesus is just a few days old. And, again, I don't mean that this is a few days after his *birth*, but that this is just a few days after his *conception*. And already, Elizabeth calls Mary, "The mother of my Lord." It's not that Mary *will be* the mother of God in nine months, but when she visits Elizabeth, she already *is* the mother of God.

So a little advice for you when you find out you are pregnant for the first time: Do not say, "I'm going to be a mother." Say, "I am a mother." And the same goes for fathers. Do not say, "I'm going to be a father." Say, "I am a father." Life begins at conception; therefore, parenthood also begins at conception.

This has obvious moral implications: do not harm these little children. But there's more here. There's something beautiful and gracious in the fact that the Son of God assumed human flesh at the smallest and earliest stage. He did this, not to make Mary uncomfortable for nine months, but to redeem humanity, even these tiny, unborn children.

There's a great quote from the early church father Gregory of Nazianzus. He said, "That which was not assumed is not healed; but that which is united to God is saved." We can apply this to the smallest form of humanity. Jesus took on the flesh of these tiny humans in order to save them. And this can be a great comfort to post-abortive mothers, and fathers too, who mourn their children. It is also a comfort to those who mourn over miscarriages and stillborn children. The Son of God took on the same kind of flesh as those children. He looked on their humble estate, and he came to redeem them.

We also see something about infant faith in the womb of Elizabeth, where John the Baptizer, before he was even born, believed. Faith does not depend on our knowledge or intellect. It depends on the work of the Holy Spirit. Faith is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

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Many of our protestant brothers and sisters do not baptize children, and especially not infants. But the real disagreement between us is not over Baptism. We do disagree about Baptism, but the heart of our disagreement is really over the nature of faith. They do not baptize infants, because, they say, infants can't have faith. But this is not true. Faith is the work of the Holy Spirit. And he works this gift through Baptism and the Word of God. If infants can't have faith, then nobody can have faith. Look at John the Baptizer. Here he is, three months *before* his birth, and he leaps for joy at the sound of Mary's greeting. He didn't even know what her words meant, but we see his faith in action. Contrast this to John's faith later in life. John was locked in prison, and he was doubting whether or not Jesus is the Christ. This would have been our Gospel lesson last Sunday if not for the Christmas program. So I'll give you a little bit here. From prison, John sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus if he is really the Christ, or if they should look for another (Luke 7:18-19). John hadn't fallen from the faith. But he was attacked by doubts in his suffering. As an adult, he doubted. But as a preborn infant, he was bold and joyful in his faith.

We make a critical error when we think that faith is dependent on our intellect. Faith should develop into an intellectual understanding of God's Word. But that is only part of mature faith, and it is not the start of faith. Faith is the gift of the Holy Spirit, and he gives this gift through Baptism and hearing the Word of God.

Consider John again. He obviously wasn't baptized yet, but he believed. Growing up in the home he did, he certainly heard the Word of God, even before he was born. And even though he did not yet understand those words, he believed. Faith comes by hearing, and our lack of understanding does not stop the Holy Spirit from working through his Word.

So parents can start teaching the Christian faith while their children are still in the womb. Many of you are past this stage in life, but you can encourage your children, grandchildren, or other parents to do this. If you're not yet a parent, you should definitely think now about what you will do when you are a parent. Bring them to church in the womb. And at home, read Scripture to them, sing to them, and pray for them ... out loud. For one thing, it's going to be easier to develop these habits before they get out and start squirming around. But also, the Holy Spirit works through the Word of God to create faith. We believe that Baptism gives the gift of faith, so we bring our children to Jesus in Baptism, but I suppose many infants are Christians even before they are baptized.

Jesus loves these little children. He came in their size to redeem them. He came for all who are small, humble, and hungry. He has brought down the proud and the mighty. In fact, himself, the mightiest of all, and the only one who truly has a right to be proud, he humbled himself. And those who are proud and mighty should beware and humble themselves. But Jesus looks mercifully upon those of humble estate.

This is what Mary confesses in her song. She says, "My soul magnifies the Lord" (1:46). And remember, when she says this, the Lord is the tiny child in her womb. She magnifies the Lord, because he has looked on her humble estate. In her lifetime, many would despise her, thinking she was an adulteress. But every generation since then has called her blessed.

And yet, the shame she endured can never compare to the shame her son, the Lord, endured. He humbled himself to the lowest place, and I don't mean the form of a zygote. We were all once that small. But he lowered himself to the place of a criminal. People wished he had died as a zygote. He was condemned by the state. He was condemned by his people. He was even condemned by his Father in heaven, who condemned him for very different reasons. That is the

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state he humbled himself to. The eternal Son of God, through whom the universe was created, came small. He came small in order to be humiliated and condemned as a man. So he redeems the humble, from the zygote to the elderly, and every humble stage in between, even criminals and murderers, because he also assumed their state. He assumed the same flesh as you, in order to redeem you. “His mercy is for those who fear him” (1:50). Amen.

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