

# THE LORD LIFTS UP THE HUMBLE

Luke 1:39-56

Fourth Sunday in Advent (Series C)

December 22, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The Gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 1, verses 39 through 56. This reading comes immediately after the angel Gabriel appeared to a virgin in Galilee named Mary and announced that she would conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit and bear the Son of the Most High. She was to call his name Jesus. Gabriel also told her about her relative Elizabeth, who, despite being quite old, had also conceived a child and would call his name John. So in this text Mary goes to visit her elderly relative. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 1, beginning at verse 39, we read in Jesus' name.

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

<sup>46</sup> And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

<sup>48</sup> for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

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

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

<sup>50</sup> And his mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.

<sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

<sup>52</sup> he has brought down the mighty from their thrones  
and exalted those of humble estate;

<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty.

<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,

<sup>55</sup> as he spoke to our fathers,

to Abraham and to his offspring forever."

<sup>56</sup> And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

*Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort*

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*of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen*

You may be seated.

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Merry Christmas! Technically, we're still in the season of Advent, but this gospel lesson is getting pretty Christmassy.

For a little while, we try to keep Christmas from completely taking over Advent. It is good for us to have a time of contemplation and repentance before we get to the celebration that is Christmas. And so, for the first few weeks of Advent, we hold off on the Christmassy stuff. And we often hear the preaching of John the Baptizer, calling us to repent. But Christmas is one of the themes of Advent. And in this text, even though Jesus is not yet born, he is present. The miracle of Christmas had already taken place. The Son of God had assumed human flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary. The eternal Son of God, through whom all things were created, became human in the smallest of human forms.

This passage reveals that, at Christmas, the Son of God came to earth in order to lift up the humble and heal the broken-hearted. He came to bring the lonely into a family that will last forever and never forsake them. And so we rejoice. God has come among us in humility, in order to save us.

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Elizabeth rejoiced when she learned this. Elizabeth is one of my favorite persons in the Bible. When naming a child, "Elizabeth" would be a good choice if you want that child to grow up to believe the Word of God and confess that Jesus is Lord. Elizabeth is one of the few characters in the Bible who doesn't have anything negative written about her. Just consider the other people close to Elizabeth. Even Mary, who is a wonderful example of faith, has a few less than perfect moments. Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, who is described as "righteous before God," has a moment of faithlessness (1:18-20). And even Elizabeth's son, John the baptizer, whom Jesus said was the greatest man born of women (7:28), had a season of doubt (7:19). I suppose the thing is that they were all sinful people, like you and me. If you write enough about a person, and if you're honest about them, you will have to reveal some kind of flaw. And the same would probably be true for Elizabeth if more were written about her. But she's only spoken of in Luke 1, and everything about her is positive. She is a great example of faith to us. The greatest thing about Elizabeth is that she simply believes God's Word, so she looks forward to the coming of the Christ and rejoices when his presence is revealed to her.

Elizabeth was an old lady. Earlier in the chapter, Luke describes her and Zechariah as being "advanced in years" (1:7). That's the more dignified way of saying it. I don't know if that means sixty or eighty, but she was certainly well beyond the age of bearing children. And she had been barren her whole life, so she and Zechariah had no children (1:7). One day, and you can read about this earlier in Luke 1 (1:8-25), her husband Zechariah was burning incense in the temple. He was a priest, so that was his job. The angel Gabriel appeared to him and announced that he and Elizabeth would have a son. They were to name him John. And John would grow up to turn the hearts of the children of Israel back to the Lord their God. We know him as John the Baptizer, who prepared the way for Jesus to be revealed as the Christ. Zechariah had a hard time believing this, because they were both so old, so Gabriel gave him a sign. He made him mute until the child was born.

Six months later, and this is also recorded earlier in chapter 1 (1:26-38), that same angel Gabriel appeared to Mary in the city of Nazareth. She was betrothed to Joseph, but not yet

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married and still a virgin. But the angel announced to her that she would conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit and bear a son. And he would be no ordinary son, but he would be the Son of God and the promised Messiah. Gabriel also told Mary that Elizabeth, who was a relative of Mary, was now six months pregnant. Mary responded in faith, saying, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (1:38). This is what we call the “annunciation.” It’s the announcement to Mary of Jesus’ conception. So it was either at this moment, or very shortly after, that the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and the Son of God took on human flesh in her virgin womb. That moment was the real miracle of Christmas. And that’s the background for today’s gospel lesson.

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So Mary quickly left and went to visit Elizabeth in Judah. And I think we can understand why. Mary was pregnant and unmarried. It was a miracle, and she seems quite happy about it, but who would believe her that the child was from the Holy Spirit? If anyone would, it would be Elizabeth, who was also experiencing a miraculous pregnancy.

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What happens when Mary reaches Elizabeth’s house is simply marvelous. Mary greeted Elizabeth, and, immediately, Elizabeth knew the whole thing. This must have been such a relief to Mary. Perhaps she worried if Elizabeth would even believe her. But all she had to do is say, “Hi,” or, more likely, “Shalom aleikhem,” which means, “Peace be with you,” And Elizabeth knew the whole thing. And this is so interesting. How did Elizabeth know? Gabriel told Mary about Elizabeth, but he didn’t tell Zechariah or Elizabeth about Mary. How did she know? Gabriel actually did tell them enough, but it would take faith to understand it.

Elizabeth knew the promise of God regarding her son. This was not an unspoken spiritual revelation that came to Elizabeth in that moment. All the pieces were in place, from what the angel had spoken to her husband, for Elizabeth to put it all together. Elizabeth’s great virtue was that she believed the promises of God. She knew that her son, John, would prepare the people for the Lord God to come to them. Gabriel had even promised that John would be filled with the Holy Spirit *in his mother’s womb* (1:15). So Elizabeth was expecting her unborn son to do something prophetic, even before he’s born. And as soon she heard Mary’s greeting, John leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. This was more than just a kick, which six-month-old babies often do. But her son was telling her something. It’s like he was leaping to attention when his Lord came into the room. So this told Elizabeth that the one he had been sent to prepare the way for was present. The Most High God was present in that room. And there was only one place he could be. So even though Mary showed no signs of being pregnant, and Elizabeth had no prior knowledge of Mary’s pregnancy, she knew, simply because she believed what was spoken about her son, that Mary was carrying the Son of God.

And so Elizabeth has the honor of being the first human to confess with her lips that Jesus is Lord. She 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). Elizabeth is a great model of faith to us, because she simply believed what God had spoken.

Sometimes we get the false idea that being filled with the Holy Spirit means that we’re tuned to hear or feel special unspoken messages from God, like there’s something that just speaks to our spirits without going through our ears. That’s a modern myth. In the Old Testament, God

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spoke to the prophets in an audible voice. He spoke to Mary, Zechariah, and Joseph through angels. Zechariah reported what he heard to Elizabeth, probably by writing it down for her. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit to believe the promises God had already spoken. And so you too, when you pray to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and we should all pray for that, do not expect a secret, hidden revelation that you feel with your heart. God is a much clearer communicator. Simply believe the words he has already spoken. That's what the gift of the Holy Spirit to you is for. He is given for you to believe the words of Scripture. So when you come to church or when you open the Scriptures in your home, simply pray that the Holy Spirit would humble your heart to accept the words God has spoken. That's really what faith does. It's not a secret insight into special mysteries. Faith humbly accepts what God has spoken, and it anticipates the fulfillment of his promises.

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This passage also reveals something about unborn infants. John, at six months old, demonstrates his personhood. And it's not just John whom we see as a person, but also Jesus, who at this point is maybe just a few days old. At most, a couple of weeks. And Elizabeth confesses that, even at that young age, he is the Lord, and Mary is his mother. This confirms what we should understand from nature: every child who is conceived is a human person, and every woman who becomes pregnant is a mother. Do not think of yourself as a *future* mother. And do not think of the baby as a child you *will* have. But, when a child is conceived, you *are* a mother, and the man *is* a father, and you *have* a child. This is the reality. And it's not just a spiritual reality, it's also true biologically.

Not everyone likes this reality. And that's really quite sad. Every child that is created is loved by God and is a gift from God. To not want that child is a sinful attitude. And by "sinful," I don't simply mean that it's on the list of things God forbids. But to have a sinful attitude about anything is really to deny goodness. Sometimes we're just blinded by sin so that we cannot see a good thing for what it is. Everything God does and everything God gives is good. Sin is our heart's inability to recognize it. And that's not just bad, but it's bad for us. It's unhealthy. So we should repent. We should confess that we have not treasured God's gifts as we should. And God is merciful to you. Even if you have sinned against your own child, God is merciful to you, and he forgives you for Jesus' sake. After all, that is why he sent his Son in the womb of the Virgin Mary. And we should repent of all our sinful attitudes. We should turn and love everything that God calls "good." For that is not simply good, but it is good for us.

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This passage also reveals something about faith in unborn infants. John was a believer, even as a six-month-old in the womb. You might look at an infant when she's baptized and think, *Can she really have faith?* Answer: yes; absolutely. And Baptism is one of the ways the Holy Spirit brings that faith to life (John 3:3-6; Acts 2:38; Titus 3:5). Faith is not something we reason ourselves to. That's not even how it works for grownups. Elizabeth did not even reason herself to recognize Jesus as Lord. She knew the promises of God, but it was the Holy Spirit who filled her to trust those promises (1:41). Faith is always a creation of the Holy Spirit. He does it through Baptism, and he does it through the Word of God. So yes, baptized infants can have faith. Even unborn children can have faith.

One of the frequent questions people ask me, and this might actually be the most frequently asked question, is whether or not a child can be saved if he dies before birth. The short answer is, "Yes, because God is merciful, and the Holy Spirit creates faith through his Word." I suppose the reason this question comes up is because we talk about the value of baptizing our children, and

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we talk about how Baptism saves (1 Peter 3:21). So you might wonder about those who die before getting the chance to be baptized. Remember that Baptism is not the only way the Holy Spirit gives the gift of faith. “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). So Christian parents should read and sing to their children before they are even born.

Family devotions or family worship can be such a blessing to your home. Even if you live alone, you should read Scripture, sing a hymn, and pray every day. If it’s just you and your spouse, you should read Scripture together, sing a hymn, and pray every day. If you have kids in your home, you should read Scripture with them, sing a hymn, and pray every day. I would say that parents should start devotions with their children while they are still in the womb, but if a husband and wife are practicing this already, then they’re giving the Word to their children before they even know they are there, and you just keep doing what you’re already doing.

The hardest part is starting the discipline, but doing this with your family gives you built-in accountability. The intimidating part, if you haven’t gotten comfortable with it yet, is the singing. The reading of Scripture is primary, but singing hymns together is also extremely valuable. You just have to try it. Start with something easy, like “Jesus Loves Me,” and then expand to more of the hymnal. And for prayers, they don’t have to be elaborate. You can even use written prayers, like Martin Luther’s morning and evening prayers, which you can find in the Small Catechism or the hymnal. It’s like Paul says in Colossians, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16).

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This is what Mary and Elizabeth did for one another. Elizabeth rejoiced when she recognized the fulfillment of God’s promises, and Mary responded with Scripture. Verses 46 and following are Mary’s song of praise. The traditional name for it is “The Magnificat.” That comes from the opening line, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” But Mary didn’t make it up. She took most of it from an ancient hymn in 1 Samuel 2. It was originally Hannah’s prayer. Hannah had been barren and prayed fervently for a child. The LORD heard her prayer, Hannah conceived, and that Son grew up to be the great prophet Samuel, who anointed King David. Samuel prepared the way for King David, much like John the Baptizer prepared the way for the Christ, the Son of David. So, while Mary’s spirit certainly rejoices because of the child in her womb, it seems to fit better that Mary actually sang this Scripture for Elizabeth’s benefit. Elizabeth is much more like Hannah, and John is much more like Samuel. So Mary blessed her with this Scripture. Then Mary stayed with her for three more months, right up until the birth of John. And imagine the blessing this was to both of them as the godly and elderly Elizabeth blessed the young mother of our Lord. This is the kind of encouragement we should give to one another through the Scriptures.

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In the Scriptures, and this one is a great example, we see that the Lord lifts up the humble. And by that, I don’t mean that he simply reaches his long arm down from heaven to pull us up. But he brings himself all the way down. And he comes down, not in the same way that an angel might come in glorious splendor. But he comes down in humility to lift the humble. He came as an unborn infant to redeem the smallest and humblest of us. There was a time when his human flesh was merely days old. There was a time when God’s human flesh was only seconds old and microscopic. He was vulnerable, poor, and completely dependent on his blessed mother. He came to redeem the young and the old, the very young and the very old. By his humility, first as a humble and poor infant, and later as a humiliated and condemned criminal, he has redeemed

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those who humble themselves and trust his salvation. Through this humility he demonstrates his divine strength. He scatters the proud, but he lifts up the humble. Amen.

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