

"The Visitation"

Luke 1:39-56

December 10, 2003

Midweek - Advent 2

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Boise, Idaho

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Two women meet and greet at the house of Zacharias, one very young and one very old. These very-different cousins have something in common: Both are with child, against the laws of nature and by the Word of God. It's the two pre-natal boys in their bellies that take the stage today. Baby John is six months older than baby Jesus, and he leaps in Elizabeth's womb when his cousin arrives; and don't discount jumping John. It's not a random kick at his mother, but he specifically leaps for joy. And he specifically leaps for joy because, by the work of the Holy Spirit, he knows that cousin Jesus is the Savior. When they're all grown up, John will be the voice in the wilderness who prepares the way of the Lord (Luke 3:4). Already, he takes his calling seriously: Since he has no voice unborn, he jumps up and down to point to the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

It's the Lord Jesus who takes the center stage, even though he's no bigger than a little bee. His still-forming body can't yet utter words, either; but His Word is still heard that day: By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Son in her womb, Mary sings her song, the Magnificat. She declares the wondrous work of God in sending the long-promised Savior. She is praising the Lord because Jesus has opened her lips. She is speaking the words that He has given her to speak.

The Savior's proclamation of the kingdom is begun; and His proclamation will always be one of Law and Gospel. As Mary sings the Lord's Word of His mercies in Christ, the Lord also has her warn of three sins that would especially lead us away from Him and His salvation. She sings,

He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, And exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, And the rich He has sent away empty.

It is to these three sins that we now turn.

He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. Pride. It's a deadly sin, a perversion of God's good gifts. He equips you with certain talents and skills and personality traits. He provides these things to you in His service to you, and He gives you these things so that you can go and serve others. This is key to understanding the depravity of pride: All that you are is a gift from God in order to serve others. But sin turns this completely on its head with the temptation of pride. Succumbing, the sinner says, "Look at me and all that I am! I will boast in these things and take credit for them, as if I am responsible. And proudly, I will use these things to convince myself that I am better than those around me. This is how I will build my self-esteem!"

So the sin of pride has many attendants. Rather than thank God for His gifts, the sinner takes credit for them. Rather than use them to serve others, the sinner uses them to serve himself, to prove to himself that he is better than the rest. But pride is no friend to the sinner, for hear what Mary says

again: [The Lord] has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. Pride is no friend, but a deceiver: It will convince you that you are better than others-and that others believe this, too; even while others only dismiss you for your arrogance. Pride, as Mary says, is the imagination of your own heart, and nothing better than that. Furthermore, she sings that the Lord scatters the proud, and we witness this as well: If you are proud, by definition you believe that you are better than other people-and you will allow no one to be as good as you. Therefore, the one who is proud isolates himself and becomes a lonely man, for no one else wishes to come near him. So the Lord scatters the proud as they are made lonely by their sin.

But the self-delusion and the loneliness are not the greatest sins at work; neither is the taking credit away from God! No, there is a far worse danger lurking in pride: The one who is proud says, "I am better than the rest." And the one who believes he is better than the rest will naturally believe he is less sinful than the rest. Therefore, rather than confess his abject sinfulness before God, he says, "I may not be perfect, but I'm not as bad as others. I don't think I should feel that sorry for my sin." Or, when the Lord allows some trouble to bring him back down to earth, the proud one may rebel and say, "I don't deserve this because I'm better than this! If this is how the Lord treats me, I have no need for Him." This is the greatest danger of pride: It drives the sinner away from the Lord and the forgiveness He so desperately needs.

So pause and witness the antidote to pride that you see in the text today. The Son of God sits at the right hand of the Father from all eternity. Were He to say, "I deserve all worship," it would not be a proud, sinful boast; it would only be the truth. But in our text, the Son of God does not stay on His throne and demand adulation. He consents to take on human flesh. He humbles Himself and submits to all the weaknesses of a human nature, to nine months in Mary's womb and thirty-plus years of walking this sinful world. Pride is not His guiding principle: Humility is, and He humbles Himself and goes to the cross so that you might be forgiven. He declares, "Each time you boast in glory for yourself, you rob Me of the glory I deserve. And what have I done in response? Suffered the punishment that you deserve, so that I might forgive you and share my glory with you forever."

That's why the Baby is in Mary's womb, and this is the message He gives her to sing.

He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly, she next declares. Once again, she speaks of a godly gift turned bad by sinful man. Authority is not a wicked thing, but a gift from the God of order; God gives power and places people in authority to serve. However, power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. You see it again and again in Scripture: Saul is a nobody until God makes him king of Israel; but in sinfulness, Saul takes that God-given authority and abuses it until he fails as king. Likewise David is a shepherd boy in Bethlehem until the Lord makes him king; but then he too abuses his authority, and his house must be troubled for the rest of his life in order to keep him in line. You will witness this in our current world as well: Time and time again, wealthy, powerful parents have children who fall into self-destructive lifestyles. They begin with every advantage; but rather than use those benefits in service, they fall prey to self-gratification and destroy themselves. The Lord gives power and authority for the purpose of service; sinful man uses it to gratify himself and enslave others.

You are not a king, and you may have no position of authority in life that leads you to set aside the needs of others. But still, here is the corrupted might within you: With each sin that you commit, you set aside God's Word. Each sin is a declaration that you have a better plan than the Lord, that you are a better authority over what's best than He is. It's a shocking truth: Each sin claims a greater

authority than the Lord. Therefore, each sin is an exercise of might that must be brought low. Without forgiveness, you would be brought low into the depths of hell for eternity. It is why He brings you low with His Law, lest you be lost forever.

But look again at the unborn Baby in the text today, and marvel at the salvation He brings. The Ruler of all things does not come into this world in order to exert power and enslave. He comes not to throw His might around and force you into submission, but to serve-and to give His life as a ransom for many. In Mary's womb, His tiny hands and feet are budding. But His hands are not to wield a sword, nor are His feet to go on the necks of His enemies; they are growing there so that nails can hold Him to the cross. The King of kings does not save you by force, but by service. Because He gives up all might and goes meekly to the cross, you have forgiveness and eternal life. Therefore, He who brings you low by His Law then exalts you, the lowly and repentant sinner, to live and reign with Him forever.

Mary warns of a third sin in this evil trio: He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty. Like the others we have mentioned, wealth by itself is not a bad thing, for all that we have is a gift from God. Once again, however, sin seeks to pervert the gift of riches in order to lead you away from Christ. Money is a thing of this world, for this life; and worldly things tend to blind us to eternal gifts. The one who is wealthy will often believe that God favors him, whether he is forgiven or not; thus he believes that his money proves he need not repent. Furthermore, money means spending power and owning lots of stuff. Owning a lot of stuff means spending a lot of time on the stuff that you own, for now you must take care to keep it. All that stuff, then, keeps you busy and distracted from God-given responsibilities, vocations and grace. It may be enjoyable for a while, but what does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? Thus, if they do not repent, those who love riches are sent away empty for eternity.

This sin lurks within you and me. Except for the occasional contented soul, there are two sorts of people in the world: Those who are wealthy, and those who wish they were. Greed lurks from an early age: Supposedly "innocent" children look to Christmas Day not to rejoice that Christ is born, but with the continuing query, "What am I going to get?"

So look once again at the innocent, unborn Savior who puts these words in Mary's mouth. He does not come to earth with wealth and glamour and an entourage. He comes to earth in the womb of a teenage single mother, orphaned for all we know. She's betrothed to a small-town carpenter who at least can pay the bills; though when it comes to a sacrifice for Jesus at the temple, they can only afford the poor man's alternative. The Savior comes humbly in poverty, born in a stable. He lives the life of a traveling rabbi, not a prosperous businessman. When He is crucified, even His clothes are divided up and taken from Him so that He has nothing left at all. Now, mark this well: He does not do this out of personal preference, but for you. He lives a life perfectly devoid of the love of wealth so that He might sacrifice himself for your sins of greed, coveting and discontent. He's already living this life in Mary's womb; before His birth, He is at work for your salvation.

The Lord is conceived in Mary to save you from your sin! Therefore, beware those sins that would lead you away from Him, and confess daily those sins of pride and boasting, power and envy, greed and covetousness. Instead, give thanks to God for His many gracious gifts and mercies to you! It is He who gives you your gifts and skills, authority and things. And where sin would corrupt these to lead you away, He has given you His Son-conceived by the Holy Ghost, and born of the Virgin Mary.

That's the song that Mary sings, the words that her unborn Child places in her mouth. This song proclaims to you deliverance, for this song declares to you that you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen