

"All About the Baby"

Luke 1:39-56

December 11, 2002

Midweek - Advent 2 B

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Boise, Idaho

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I. The Family Gathering

From Elizabeth's point of view, this really is quite the family gathering. In her home, up in the hill country of Judah, there are two women, two unborn baby boys, two priests and two prophets. It's quite a gathering-especially since there are only five people present.

There are the two women, the "miracle moms." Elizabeth shouldn't be pregnant, since she's been barren all her life and now is past the age of child-bearing. Mary shouldn't be either, according to the laws of nature. When she enters the house and greets her older cousin, Mary tells Elizabeth all that Gabriel has told her, and the two rejoice in the miracles that God has wrought. Elizabeth's story is wonder enough, though it's not unprecedented: Throughout the history of Old Testament Israel, there were barren women who gave birth to a firstborn son later on in life: Sarah, Rachel, Manoah's wife, Hannah. These women were remembered, and their sons each played a notable part in God's plan for salvation. But Mary, on the other hand, is unique-a virgin conceives and bears a Son, whose name is Immanuel. The Son in her womb is the reason for her visit to Elizabeth; it's all about the Baby.

The two unborn baby boys are the two prophets in the house, and neither of them is wasting any time in going about his prophetic office. John the Baptist leaps for joy in Elizabeth's womb when the Son of God enters the house. Remember from last week, the greatness of John the Baptist is to point to Jesus. Jesus is there; and even though he can't utter a word, he's going to make sure that mother Elizabeth knows. But John the Baptist is not the first prophet to speak that day: Jesus, the Word made flesh, speaks first as Mary utters the Word of the Lord spoken to her by the angel Gabriel. It may be Mary's lips that move, but she speaks the Word's Word. According to His human nature, the Son of God doesn't have a functioning tongue or voice box yet. According to His divine nature, He has been speaking from all eternity.

In any event, the two prophets prophesy that day, with John leaping to point to the presence of Jesus. There are two prophets, but it's really only about one of them. It's all about the Baby.

There are two priests in the house, too. Elizabeth knows one of them well; he's been silent for six months now, and still has three months and eight days to go before his voice returns. This is Zacharias, of course. He's a priest who no doubt has offered his share of sacrifices over the years. He's spoken his fair share, but not recently: He doubted the Word that Gabriel spoke in the temple, and doubting priests shouldn't speak. Therefore, his voice is gone until his boy is named.

The other priest has arrived with Mary-the Baby in her womb. Rather than doubting the Word of God, He is the Word made flesh; and He will accomplish His Father's will for us men and for our salvation. How? He will be the Priest who offers the final sacrifice to atone for the sins of the world.

But this Baby is more than the priest: He is the Sacrifice. According to His human nature, His brainstem is maybe just registering signals. According to His divine nature, He's purposefully making His way to Jerusalem. He is on the way to the cross.

There are two priests in the house that day, both a part of God's plan. But in the end, it's all about the Baby.

It's a quiet family gathering, because only two of the five have the ability to speak. We refer to Elizabeth and Mary, of course, so let's listen in to what they have to say.

First, Elizabeth:

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord" (Lk. 1:42-45).

Elizabeth has great words to say about her younger cousin, Mary. Among women, she is especially blessed. It's quite a compliment right there, but let's not stop too soon. Why is Mary especially blessed? She is blessed because of the fruit of her womb; she is blessed because she is the mother of God. In other words, she is blessed because the Lord is present with her, full of grace and truth. Furthermore, Mary is blessed because she believed-the Word gave her faith so that she might give birth to the Word; and she is blessed because God is faithful and will fulfill His promise. Add it all up, and you see a common theme: Mary is blessed because of the Child within her, conceived by the Holy Ghost.

Why is Mary blessed? It's all about the Baby.

And what does Mary have to say for herself?

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.
For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant;
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.
For He who is mighty has done great things for me,
And holy is His name.
And His mercy is on those who fear Him
From generation to generation.
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.
He has helped His servant Israel,
In remembrance of His mercy,
As He spoke to our fathers,
To Abraham and to his seed forever" (Lk. 1:46-54).

It's quite a speech by an unwed teenage mother-to-be; and one might ignorantly decide that she must be a haughty young thing all stuck on herself. She speaks in the form of an Old Testament psalm, the kind that priests voice around the temple; it's hardly the style of the Nazareth youth set-talk about putting on airs! Furthermore, listen to what she says: "The Lord does not bless the proud, the mighty or the rich-but me!" Again, it hardly strikes one as a humble statement. And finally, quite over the top, is the statement that "all generations will call me blessed." If she's going to speak Old Testament-style, we'll just take a look at the Old Testament. Not many blessed things last for all generations. The Lord's name does (Ex. 3:15). So does His will (Ps. 33:11). So does His praise (Ps. 79:13), His faithfulness (Ps. 89:1), and His fame (Ps. 146:10). So does His truth (Ps. 100:5), His absolution (Ps. 106:31), and His presence (I Kings 8:12-13). And Mary says that all generations will call her blessed?

It would be a haughty, prideful song indeed, except that Mary is singing about the Child inside her belly. He is the Son of God-He is God's truth, faithfulness, absolution and presence with His people. He brings salvation for Mary and the world-not by their works of pride, might or wealth, but by His life, suffering, death and resurrection. That's why all generations will look back and call Mary blessed: Because the Lord is present with her, full of grace and truth. Blessed are all among whom the Lord dwells with His forgiveness and life.

Properly understood, the song of Mary is not about herself at all; she is simply the instrument that God uses to bring His Son into the world. The song isn't about her; it's all about the Baby.

It's all about the Baby; and to be all about the Baby, it must be all about all the Baby. In other words, one does not really speak of Jesus if he only speaks of an infant in a manger. One truly speaks of Jesus when he acknowledges that the Baby in Mary's womb is the Incarnate Son of God; that He is the Prophet who speaks the Word because He is the Word made flesh; and that He is the priest who offers the ultimate Sacrifice for sin-Himself. You can't speak all about the Baby until you have spoken of the cross; it is why Mary first speaks of God as her Savior. Her-and His-Son will save the world from sin.

II. Still About the Baby

It's still all about the Baby, and that's why we heed the song of His mother; and it is why we sing the song of Mary, the Magnificat, as part of the service (Order of Vespers) this evening. Christian worship is all about the Baby, Christ the Savior.

This is why, of course, we condemn such crass sins as universalism and syncretism, teachings that all religions are equally pleasing to the one true God or that there are many true gods of many religions. Humanly speaking, such teachings are illogical: The man who embraces all religions embraces no religion. Far more important, however, such teachings and religions are condemned by Scripture. Why? Because they're not about the Baby. If one believes in other saviors and other salvations, he no longer places his trust in the one-and-only Savior, conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary. Instead, he credits other gods, making the crucified Son of God just one savior among many; and that means it isn't all about the Baby anymore. Those who believe that all religions are the same do not share the faith of Mary's song; their spirit does not rejoice in God, the Savior, and His mercy does not rest on them. So they are lost.

Christian worship is all about the Baby; furthermore, it is all about all the Baby-especially those things about Him that are shared by nobody else. For instance, many will emphasize Jesus as an example to be copied, but not so much His divinity or His cross: "Do what Jesus did. Jesus loved His neighbor, therefore you should, too." The difference in focus-example versus Savior-is usually justified with words like these: "We teach Jesus and you teach Jesus, so we must all teach the same thing-right?" Well, not quite. If you're going to teach Jesus as example, you will not emphasize that He is the Son of God. Why? Because the more you emphasize His perfect, holy divinity, the more you preach that we cannot imitate His example. You thus are working to defeat the focus on our need to imitate Him. Furthermore, if your message is that we should follow Jesus' example, you will stop short of instructing people to suffer and die for the sins of the world; there, nobody wants to do what Jesus did. No, if your primary focus is the example of Jesus, you might speak about the Baby, but you will not speak all about the Baby.

We recognize and give thanks to God that His Son lived a perfect life and set a perfect example. However, we have plenty of saints who set a good example for us, not to mention the explicit Law of God. Jesus came to be more than an example: He came to be the Savior. Mary's song does not declare Him a pattern or model; it declares Him to be the Savior who does great things to show mercy. She praises God for doing what we cannot do, no matter how hard we try. She praises God for saving us from our sins. He saves by sending His Son to become flesh, to go to the cross; only when you speak of God's Son on the cross have you spoken all about the Baby.

Christian worship is all about the Baby. Therefore, of course, we condemn prosperity theology, which teaches that-if you only believe enough-God will make you proud, mighty, rich. This is not at all about the Baby. Mary declares that the Lord comes to scatter the proud, put down the mighty, and send the rich away empty. The Savior does not come to make you great in the eyes of the world; such pride, might and wealth leads to trust in worldly things, not Him. If we preach prosperity theology, we point you to the things of the world; may it never be. The things of the world cannot save you; the Baby can.

It's all about the Baby! That's why we proclaim Christ and Him crucified. It is also why we declare the wonder of the means of grace, our Lord's Word and Sacraments-for that it how the Lord is present with us, just as really present as He was in the womb of Mary. Elizabeth speaks of blessed Mary because the Lord is present in her. We speak of the blessed, holy Sacraments because the Lord is likewise present in these means for us. To point to the Baptism and say "It's just water" and to point to Communion and say "It's just bread and wine" is the same as pointing to Mary's womb and saying, "It's just a baby like any other, no One special." We therefore declare and administer the Sacraments, because they are all about the Baby.

All about all the Baby. He doesn't stay in Mary's womb or in the manger. He grows up and goes to the cross. This is His destiny: The Baby is going nowhere else but Calvary. So, to speak all about the Baby, you must speak all those things unique to this Son of Mary. He is the Word made flesh, God incarnate; sons are born all the time, but only one is the only-begotten Son of God. He is the Priest who offers the final Sacrifice for sin; tons of priests have offered tons of sacrifices, but only one has sacrificed Himself to atone for the sins of the world. He is present here to save; lots of false gods promise help and presence, but non-gods can't help or be present. Only He can, and only He is.

That's why you gather here, and it's all about the Baby. No syncretism or universalism here; only the Baby born of Mary, God your Savior, who goes to the cross for the sins of the world. Not much

Jesus-as-example teaching: We have enough examples in the Bible to show us what we should do, so when we look at Jesus we rejoice in the Savior who has done what we can't do. No prosperity theology, either; we confess our love for pride and prosperity as the sin that it is, then confess that our salvation is in the Savior born in Bethlehem.

This is the Baby in Mary's womb, who journeys from there to manger to cross to the right hand of God; and who journeys from there to visit you by His means of grace-to prepare you for His return in glory and life everlasting. It's all about the Baby; by His work, begun and continued, you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen