

"Whose Child Is This?"
Luke 1:56

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Emmett, Idaho

24 December Anno Domini 2000
4th Sunday of Advent
Pastor Michael L. McCoy

Grace, mercy and peace to you in the Name of the Lord God - in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Dear Baptized,

Welcome to church on the 4th Sunday of Advent! While the days of preparation are nearly fulfilled it requires mental determination to focus and remain in the season of the Church year that anticipates the Festival of the Nativity of our Lord. In the minds and imaginations of God's children Christmas is here. When it is the morning of December 24th it is difficult to restrain ourselves from such thoughts. The day is such that we are sort of ... in between.

The Gospel Reading for the 4th Sunday of Advent, which you heard read earlier, takes place after the angel Gabriel told the virgin that she would be the mother of the Messiah and that her kinswoman had conceived a son in her old age and was six months into her pregnancy. The maidservant of the Lord then departs in haste to go be with her relative who lives in a city of Judah. She lifts up her eyes unto the Judean hills and begins the ascent which will enable her to give her greetings to Zechariah's beloved wife.

Young Mary, carrying the Christ in her womb, visits old Elizabeth, carrying John in her womb. The house of Zechariah is filled with joy and the son of Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit and little John hops for joy at the Word announcing that he was in the Presence of the Lord. Two miraculous conceptions and the laughter and the excitement and the anticipation of these blessed births become the focal point of this visit. Aged Elizabeth, herself filled with the Holy Spirit, intones her song of the faith and Mary responds with the grace-full words of the Magnificat. What a festive house of celebration - a holy home sanctified by the Presence of the Lord, Himself now about the size of a grain of wheat in the womb of Mary - a consecrated house that is blessed by the joyful anticipation of the birth of the John the Voice and the Birth of Jesus the Word.

The Holy Spirit, via the hand the beloved physician, St. Luke, adds a single sentence after

the Magnificat that is often not read during the Advent and Christmas seasons. That 56th verse of the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke is the sermon text for this day.

"Mary remained with her (Elizabeth) for three months and she returned to her own house."

Thus far the Word of the Lord our God.

One of the most beautiful, dogmatic, beloved and confessional Christmas hymns begins with a question: "What Child Is This?" The remaining lines and stanzas answer that question. But long before the question, "What Child Is This?" was asked in word and hymn, there was another question that surfaced in the minds and mouths of many; of both the righteous and the ungodly. This morning, with only a few hours left in the season of Advent, that other question - the one that stuns the family and fiancée, the one that raises eyebrows and haughtiness, the one that causes tongues to click and wag - needs to be answered. "Whose Child Is This?"

"Mary remained with her (Elizabeth) for three months and she returned to her own house."

Mary, the confessed maidservant of the Lord, takes the form of a humble servant in the house of Zechariah and waits on aged Elizabeth from her sixth month until the time when her child is born - when Zechariah's son is delivered. Mary, who is blessed among all women, does not come to Elizabeth to be served but to serve. She does this, not with a spirit of regret or with a feeling of being imposed on, but as a fruit of faith and a joyful desire to help Elizabeth. Day after day and week after week, Mary served Elizabeth as the latter was increasingly burdened ... her old back straining as her unborn son grew within her womb - her aged organs being discomfited as within her the baby arms reached out and the tiny feet kicked out. All the while Mary felt and experienced and noticed the changes taking place in her own body as her unborn Son began to grow.

"Mary remained with her (Elizabeth) for three months and she returned to her own house."

After the full term of Elizabeth's pregnancy had arrived, with Mary's time of service to her kinswoman now ended, Mary leaves and returns to her own house. What does Mary leave behind in the hill country of Judea? There is a joyful house ... an aged woman whose barren womb is opened and delivers a son ... an old man whose muted mouth is opened and delivers a word ... "His name is John" (Luke 1:63). Behind Mary, as she descends from the heights, she leaves behind a house of joy at the birth of John - an abode of celebration as the old couple hold each other and their only son - an involved and marveling community - an eighth-day time of wonder at the miracle of the man who

could now speak Gabriel's message - a place of stunning revelation when the old priest, Zechariah, was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied speaking the words of the Benedictus - "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, ... and thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways" (Luke 1:68-79). All of this is behind Mary for she "remained with her (Elizabeth) for three months and she returned to her own house."

And what was ahead for Mary? After three months in city of Judah, she returns to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, a place of which at least one will have said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). She comes down from the heights of the hill country and to her own house. The Bible does not say that she returned to her father's house or to a house of kin, but simply "she returned to her own house." This has caused some to think that Mary was an orphan and lived by herself - that while she had no parental responsibilities to keep her from going to be with Elizabeth for three months, she also had no father or mother's house to return to. Be that as it may, we do know this, that "she returned to her own house."

She also returned to her neighbors who, as far as they would know, understood that Mary had left her own house, was gone for three months and would come home pregnant. The question, "Whose child is this?" would certainly occupy their minds and conversation when it became obvious that Mary was with child. Thirty years later, the question would be restated when the Jesus' unbelieving neighbors and kinsmen would declare devilish words to Him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father - God" (John 8:41) - a not so subtle slur concerning the situation of Jesus' mother. These tongue-waggers dogged Jesus all the way to the cross where and when they "wagged their heads and said, 'If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross'" (Matthew 27:39-40). This Jesus endured even as He was atoning for the sins of these very same people as well as yours and mine.

Mary also returned to Joseph. At a certain point in time, Mary told her beloved that she was pregnant. It seems likely and natural, though we don't know for sure since the Bible does not explicitly state it, that the question must have surfaced in Joseph's mind, "Whose child is this?" What we are able to say for certain is that Joseph thought out his answer, "This child is not mine."

For "her husband Joseph, being a just man, and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call His Name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins'" (Matthew 1:19-21).

Whose Child is this? Mary knew the answer and "blessed is she who believed that there

would be fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Luke 1:45). Joseph was told the answer and "did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called His Name Jesus" (Matthew 1:24-25). You, like so many others throughout the history of the world, have been told the answer from loving kinsfolk and faithful messengers. This little One Who is born in Bethlehem is your Savior - He lived a perfect life in your place - He died a perfect death for your sinful doubts - for your wagging mouths - for words of false doctrine - indeed, for all your transgressions against the holy will of God.

Our Father, Who art in heaven, sent His Son to be the Savior - this Jesus, blessed Fruit of Mary's womb, will save His people from their sins by taking them upon Himself and covering us with the perfect righteousness wrought by His Blood. Dear baptized, this is "the Gospel of God which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, the Gospel concerning His Son, Who was descended from David according to the flesh and declared Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by His Resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 1:1-4).

Thus you confess what you have come to know - for all that you have heard and seen, as it has been told you. "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, Who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own, and live under Him in His Kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity" (Small Catechism).

"Mary remained with her (Elizabeth) for three months and she returned to her own house." Joseph remained with his betrothed and made plans for them. What plans? Well, "in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria" (Luke 2:1-2). Each had to go to his own city and this meant that Joseph would be required to go "up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary his betrothed, who was with Child" (Luke 2:4-5).

Dear Baptized, having now answered the question, "Whose Child Is This?" we are now ready to sing, "What Child Is This?" I invite you to return this evening at 7:30 pm to hymn that hymn for Christmas begins in a few short hours and to be here tomorrow morning for the Christ Mass at 10:30 am. Please turn to hymn #275 and sing the Magnificat.