

Jesus in the House

Text: Luke 1:39-45

Hymn: "Tell Out, My Soul, the Greatness of the Lord" (*LSB* 935)

"Hail, Mary," or in just plain English, "Greetings, Mary." This prayer addressed to the Virgin Mary is quite rightly associated with Roman Catholicism and with those forms of Christianity that take their ritual and liturgical practices from Roman Catholicism, because within the Roman Catholic Church, Mary has a very significant and exalted place in everyday and in official spirituality. In point of fact, those words, "Hail, Mary" and so on are directly quoted from the Bible. The first part of the "Hail, Mary" comes from the mouth of Gabriel. When Gabriel appears in Nazareth to Mary, he says, "Greetings," or, "Hail, O favored one!" And the second part of the "Hail, Mary" we just heard from the Gospel, the words of Elizabeth, who, filled with the Holy Spirit, greets Mary saying, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Anyone who says Mary is not blessed among women or isn't special or unique has the Bible itself to contend with. However, in the Lutheran church we don't address these words to Mary. And the reason is quite simple: We are neither Gabriel nor Elizabeth. But the Bible tells us that that is how Gabriel and Elizabeth greeted Mary; it's appropriate then to take those words seriously. Mary is the favored one. She is uniquely the mother of God. Mary is blessed among women because of that.

At the same time, when it comes to our prayers and our words addressed to God and all the prayers by which we approach and plead for the grace of God, they must be based on the promise and the command of God. Since there is neither a promise nor a command that our prayers addressed to other Christians, including those who have gone ahead of us, will be heard with special favor or that the dead in Christ are able to

hear our requests, we have nothing to base the practice of such prayers on. We cannot place confidence in the effectiveness of our prayers on the hopeful thought that perhaps the dead in Christ intercede for us. They might. They might not.¹

Nevertheless, what we are to do with these examples of faith the Scriptures give us is to learn from them and to see what is it that feeds our faith today. Today, on the Visitation of Mary, which is one of the white festivals of the church, that is to say, it's a festival of *the Lord*, not a festival of Mary, where is Jesus for us here today? The answer very simply and very literally is in the womb of Mary. And this isn't just to say what's obvious. It's to acknowledge a profound truth!

It's so profound a truth that a whole two lines of the Nicene Creed are devoted to it: "who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary." "Was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary." He took on our human flesh, entered our human existence by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary for our salvation. That God should share our flesh is a mystery that is so commonplace for us Christians we can very easily get used to it to the point we forget how astounding it is and how fundamental it is that God should become a human being. God became flesh! He entered into our life that we might enter into His!

And for that reason Mary is known as the Mother of God, not to be put on a pedestal but for us to recognize that the child she carried in her womb is indeed the Son of God. And that the Son of God was the Son of God when He was so small in His mother's womb that it was known only to Mary herself. Only she knew the situation.

¹ "Let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways" (James 1:6-8).

And yet when the Holy Spirit revealed this truth to Elizabeth and when John the Baptist in his mother's womb heard the voice, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and they were filled with joy.

This tells us first that God, when He entered into our flesh, entered into the experience of human life from its very beginning and thereby honored human life already in the womb. We live in the midst of a death culture that does not respect life unless it has some value that can be measured, a culture that treats unborn life as disposable, a matter of parental choice or perhaps tissue for medical research or body parts to sell.² Not so in the eyes of God. From the conception, Jesus the Son of God was the Word made flesh in His mother's womb. And His presence led those who were beneficiaries of His presence to be filled with the Holy Spirit and with joy.

Jesus still brings joy with the Holy Spirit to people today. Where is Jesus for us now? On that day, Elizabeth greeted Mary with those words because Jesus was present to her through the womb of Mary who was standing in front of her. We do not greet Mary the same way because Mary is no longer the vessel of Jesus' presence for us. Where is Jesus' presence for us now? Where should we seek Jesus to be for us that we too might experience the joy and peace that the Holy Spirit brings by the presence of Jesus Christ? Mary was the vessel by which Jesus came into the world. And in that role she also became, if you like, a foreshadowing of the church. John in his Gospel makes this abundantly clear with repeated references, that what Mary was in Jesus' entry into the world, and what Mary was during Jesus' humble ministry, which is the vessel of His presence in the world, the church is now. Just as Mary gave birth to

² Daleiden, D. (2016, June 28). "Planned Parenthood's illicit body parts scheme." *The Hill*. <https://thehill.com/homenews/285122-planned-parenthoods-illicit-body-parts-scheme/>

Jesus in the world, so the church gives birth to new life in the world today. When we are baptized, we are born anew, born from above. And when we are born from above in Holy Baptism, Christ enters into our lives and we are united with His life. And Peter on the Day of Pentecost promised by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that all who repent and are baptized in the name of Jesus will also receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. And where the Spirit is, there is love and joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, all these abundant gifts. Just as Mary nourished Jesus in the womb and nursed Him after he was born, so the church nourishes and nurtures those who are born again of the Holy Spirit, metaphorically through the food of the Word and sacramentally through the Jesus' body and blood in the Lord's Supper.

So, just as Jesus entered into the world, and was recognized by the gift of the Holy Spirit by those to whom He gave grace, so also Jesus continually enters into our world. And through the Gospel, the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to recognize His presence, hear His voice, and receive His gifts. So we can join our voices with the words of Mary, addressing not her but the Giver of all gifts: "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." The gift she received we've received. This is why Mary is blessed, as Elizabeth said, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." Mary is blessed because she trusted in faith in the Word of God. And we are blessed when we hear the Word of the Lord and we believe in the fulfillment of what God speaks. We can't see the fulfillment. We can't taste it or feel it. But we can hear it and believe it. All that the Lord has spoken will be fulfilled. When Gabriel said to Mary, who was still a virgin, that she would have a child, because God spoke the Word, it would happen. She believed and it was

fulfilled. God speaks to you today. Your sins are forgiven. Eternal life is yours. Christ already has defeated every enemy. All things shall be well. And all these promises have been uttered by the same God who once said to Mary, "You shall be the mother of God." Blessed are you that you have believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to you from the Lord. You have not yet seen the fulfillment. But just as surely as the word to Mary was fulfilled, the words spoken to you will be fulfilled, too.

Do not question God. Do not doubt. He has shown throughout history, in the pages of Scripture and the history of the church, His full intention to carry out to its completion every gracious promise. So we can indeed unite our voices with Mary in the Magnificat, as we just did in the sermon hymn, and believe every word. While we wait for justice to rule in the world, while we wait for proud hearts and stubborn wills to be put to flight, while we wait for the hungry to be fed and the humble to be lifted high, we can do so neither with wishful thinking nor in despair. God has spoken. He will surely do it.

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