

Fourth Sunday in Advent: Luke 1:39–45

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Preached for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, Year C

Every birth is preceded by a conception and a pregnancy. My point is theological, not biological. Before the Word made Flesh appeared in a manger in Bethlehem, He dwelled among us in the womb of His mother for nine months. That's the focus of this morning – the plain fact that our Lord Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and so He embraces the whole of our humanity, literally from the womb to the tomb.

As with all pregnancies, we don't want to rush things. We want this Advent to go to full term, which is why we're holding back on the birth celebration for a few more days. On Thursday we'll celebrate the birth, with a warm-up of Readings and Carols on Wednesday evening and a full blast Divine Service on Christmas morning. But on this fourth and last Sunday of Advent, we consider Jesus' conception and Mary's pregnancy song, her Magnificat.

Even when the spotlight is turned to Mary, the focus is still on her Son. The bulletin cover does justice to that idea. Mary is large and Jesus is small. But look closely. The face of the child is that of a man, for this Child is older than his mother. The shining nimbus around his head indicates that this is no ordinary child, He is the great I AM, Yahweh in the Flesh. And even as He is cradled in the arms of His mother, His right hand extends up to her in blessing. The mother is blessed by her Son.

When Elizabeth was six months along in her amazing pregnancy, her younger cousin from Nazareth named Mary went to the hill country of Judea to stay for three months. Luke doesn't tell us why Mary went to visit Elizabeth, but you can only guess what it would be like to hear from an angel that you are about to conceive the Son of God by the Holy Spirit, while you're engaged to a man who's still scratching his head over the whole business. Best to leave town for a while and take up with relatives who would understand.

If anyone would understand, and believe it, it was Elizabeth, a senior citizen well past childbearing age who was three months away from delivering John the Baptizer, the

forerunner of Jesus. They are really an amazing picture, these two women – an unwed pregnant Virgin, and a woman old enough to be a grandmother about to deliver her first born. Truly, nothing is impossible with God! And just as truly, God doesn't take the easy, or the expected, way. His ways are not our ways; his thoughts not our thoughts.

As soon as Mary says "hello," John leaps for joy in his mother's womb, and Elizabeth blesses her younger cousin. "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" Consider that, the next time you are tempted to believe that the Word doesn't work on little ones or that babies can't believe. John was preaching three months before he was born!

She blesses Mary. She doesn't worship her, or seek her blessing. Elizabeth blesses Mary. She is blessed among women. She is what every Israelite woman aspired to be, the mother of the Messiah. She is the counterpart to Eve. Eve heard the doubt-full word of the devil and was deceived. Mary heard the Word of God through the angel, and she conceived. Her Child is the devil's head crusher, the One who would make war and conquer death by dying.

Elizabeth blesses Mary for her faith, for believing that the Lord would do what He said. In this way, Mary is also a picture of every believer. She hears the impossible Word, that in her virginity she would conceive and bear a Son, who would be Immanuel, God with us, to save His people from their sins. And she responds as only faith can respond to the impossible Word of God. "Amen," she says. "Let it be to me according to your Word." And that's how it is with us. God says to us, "In this Son, Jesus Christ, you have life, you have forgiveness, you have peace, you have everything in fullest measure." And faith simply says, "Yes. Amen. Let it be to me according to your Word."

Elizabeth calls her "the mother of my Lord." It took Christianity nearly 400 years finally to sort out what Elizabeth simply blurts out with Spirit-filled joy. This younger cousin of hers, a young woman probably 17 or at most 18 years old, is the "mother of my Lord." And if that doesn't cause at least a few of your theological synapses to jingle a bit this morning, you didn't have enough coffee. The Lord of the universe, the Word through whom all things were made, has a mother! Mary is, as the Council of Chalcedon called her, Theotokos, the One who gave birth to God.

This is the great and mighty wonder at the heart of Christmas: the Infinite God took up residence in the finite, a little cluster of fetal cells in the womb of His mother. Think about that. The Creator became the creature, the fulness of the Deity dwells in the humanity of Jesus

growing in the belly of His mother. Here is our little high priest, prenatally presiding, like us in every way, including His nine month residency in the womb of His mother.

He could have appeared suddenly, out of nowhere, as a fully grown man, 30 years old. But then He would not have embraced us in the totality of our humanity. He would not have experienced the trauma of childbirth, the helplessness of infancy, of toddlerhood, childhood, adolescence. He would not have known what it's like to wear diapers, to be utterly dependant, to live obediently to mother and father. It had to be this way, for Jesus to literally be the Savior of all. His human nature embraces all our humanity, from the tiniest cluster of fetal cells to the dying breath of the man on a cross.

And if all that weren't enough, we have Mary's song of salvation, her Magnificat to the Lord who has done great things for her. Whenever I sing this hymn, I must remind myself that it was composed by a teenage girl. She knows her psalms by heart, and the OT. She knows Hannah's song of praise at the birth of Samuel. The Holy Spirit, by whom she conceived the Savior, put this song in Mary's heart and upon her lips for your blessing and mine. Mary is a true theologian of the cross and a worthy psalmist.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Mary is a magnifier. As a magnifying glass enlarges an image, Mary magnifies the Lord. Not herself, but her Lord. She would decrease, as her son would increase. I find it fascinating that very little is mentioned of Mary in the Gospels, virtually nothing at all after Jesus' childhood, except for the wedding at Cana, the time when she thought her Son had lost his mind and went with His brothers to get him, and at the cross. We never hear Mary say anything of significance. She is never mentioned in the epistles. And she is very pleased by the lack of attention. She magnifies the Lord, and she would have us do the same. Mary would not be pleased by all the attention that is given to her. She might not even be terribly pleased by our bulletin cover. Mary is humble and lowly. She is nothing, her Son is everything.

"All generations will bless me," she says. We bless her, as Elizabeth blessed her. We bless her when we sing the song she sang, as we do at every Evening Prayer. We bless her for the mighty things God has done through her. We bless her that God chose such a wonderful way to make his appearance in our world. We bless Mary for her humble servanthood, for her faith that said "yes," that bowed humbly before the Word of God as a servant and said, "Let it be to me according to your word." We bless her because she is the Mother of our Lord. If we lose

Mary, we lose the Incarnation of the Son of God, for the One whom we call both Lord and God has a mother, just as you and I have mothers.

We bless Mary because she stands at the end of a long line of blessed and chosen mothers, from Eve, the mother of all the living, to Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth. Down the line through all the mothers of Israel who carried the Promise from one generation to the next, until the fullness of time came, when God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under Law, to redeem those under the Law.

We bless Mary, but we must not worship her. She would be offended and irritated by such misguided worship. Her name is not holy. She did not earn her honor as the Mother of our Lord; it was given her. God's name alone is holy. The Child whom she carried, the Child who bears the Name of God in human flesh, the Child whose name Jesus means "Yahweh is salvation," His name is holy.

Mary teaches us the fear of the Lord. "His mercy is on those who fear him, from generation to generation." What does fear have to do with Christmas? Jesus in a manger is safe, cute, cuddly. A helpless baby wrapped in clothes, nuzzling his mother. There is nothing to fear there. The shepherds were afraid of the angels, not the swaddled baby. It's as if we don't want Jesus to grow up, to suffer, to die, to rise, to reign. We want the manger crib without Calvary's cross.

But don't be deceived. Even in the womb, this Child has the power to create and destroy. He is the arm of God extended to us, the arm that can kill and make alive, that throws down and picks up. He scatters the proud in the arrogance, he brings down rulers from their thrones, but He lifts up the lowly. Just think of the sight of Saddam Hussein being pulled out of his cave, all scruffy and unshaven and dirty. This is the once proud and boastful king of modern Babylon. He didn't learn his history lesson very well. In the book of Daniel, his predecessor, Nebuchadnezer, spent some time crawling on all fours eating grass like a cow. It never goes well for any king or president, who arrogantly boasts of his accomplishments as though he were the driving force.

With the strength of His arm, this little arm in the womb of Mary, the Lord topples the thrones of this world – Pharaoh in Egypt, Sihon of the Amorites, Og of Bashan, Tiglath-Pileser in Assyria, Nebuchadnezer in Babylon, Alexander the Great, the Caesars of Rome, Hitler

and Mussolini and Stalin, the communist empire. One day He will sweep His arm and every throne under heaven, including our own nation, will crumble under the weight.

With the strength of His arm, He sweeps away the riches of the rich. He takes away our property, position, and honor. He strips away our pride, he crushes our egos. He opens the floodgates to earthquakes and floods and fires, plagues and famines, disasters and diseases. He takes away our life, our goods, our fame and fortune, our family. He utterly devastates every idolatry in us by the strength of his arm – the pride of our hearts, the will to power and control others, the lust for fortune and fame. The arm of the Lord is to be feared.

And yet it is also an arm of mercy. To those who fear Him, who have heard the death sentence of the Law and tremble before Him, the Lord extends that arm of mercy. He gives to the empty, to those who offer nothing, to the beggars, to the little ones of faith, the spiritually poor, the meek, the lowly, the least, the lost, the dead. “He fills the hungry with good things.” To the broken hearted, empty handed, penitent sinner begging for mercy, the Lord is mighty in mercy to save with the strength of His arm.

With His arm outstretched, God swore an oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He promised descendants as numerous as grains of sand on the seashore, and an inheritance that would never pass away. By His right hand and holy arm He brought the children of Jacob out of Egypt and gave them a land. By His right arm, God reached down to us and embraced our humanity in all of its sin and misery and death.

The strength of His arm is hidden under weakness – a virgin Mother, a manger bed, a cross. Yet when He appears most weak and low – in the womb of His mother, sleeping in His crib, enthroned on His cross, He is most Savior for you.

God remembers His promise. He promised Abraham that through his Seed, all nations of the earth will be blessed. God keeps His promises. Mary was, in a very real sense, pregnant with the Promise. And her Son, who is God’s Promise fulfilled, reaches out to you your Baptism, in the Word that forgives your sin, in the Supper of His own body and blood.

Dear Christian, baptized believer, magnify the Lord. Rejoice in God your Savior, the holy Child born to Mary. For the Mighty One has done great things for you; holy is His name.”

In the Name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "Luke 1:39-45(46-55) (4 Advent C)", posted 2003-12-21 (<https://htlcms.org/2003/12/luke-139-4546-55-4-advent-c/>).