

Luke 1:39-45

³⁹ In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, ⁴⁰ and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, ⁴² and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³ And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." (ESV) *This is God's Word.*

I am amazed at the waves of statistics that sports commentators can spit out during a game. I used to work in the business, but with computers, there are now these sports-statistical agencies that sell statistical data to broadcasters, so that you get these incredibly esoteric factoids during a game – "So-and-so is the first 100-win quarterback to throw 5 interceptions in one game, after going to the playoffs the year before." You get the idea.

The biblical writers need no such agencies to feed them facts like this. Because *so many* things in the gospel are a first. Last week we spoke of Mary as the first Christian. But there are some facts that the writers assume, that might amaze us more than a star player's quarterback rating.

First, we have Elizabeth. Elizabeth learns, through her husband Zechariah (who learned from the angel Gabriel), that at her advanced age she would have a child who will be the herald of the king. That in old age, she would have a child who would be the forerunner of the Messiah. This is miraculous at her age – after the age of childbearing, and thinking of herself as barren – but statistically she is not the first, because this is a Sarah-like pregnancy. The coming birth of John the Baptist is, if you will, one of those grand Old Testament miracles.

But something new, for which there has never been a need to record any statistics, before or since, has happened. A young girl, *a virgin*, has conceived. We need new categories for this! And how about this statistic: Joachim Jeremias, the great German New Testament scholar of the last century, states that "the usual age for a girl's betrothal" – her arranged engagement – "was between 12 and 12½" years-old. When you couple this with the fact that after the announcement of the betrothal, the bride would still live with her own family for a year before a formally moving to the groom's home, this means that Mary – as we find her here – is just beyond puberty, and hasn't even reached her adult height and figure. These are stats and facts that can be offensive and absurd to modern, western sensibilities, but nevertheless, a 12-13 year-old girl was chosen to be the virgin mother of our Lord, and in many ways, a model for how to respond to the good news about the coming of Jesus.

But here is the problem with statistics: *statistics don't tell the whole story*. Statistics don't tell us who is visiting whom. Because statistics can't tell us what has not happened and what we cannot see.

This morning we need to go behind and beyond the numbers. For instance, who is visiting whom? Is Mary visiting Elizabeth, or is there more here than meets the eye?

This morning we want to look at three visitations:

- Mary visits Elizabeth
- Jesus visits John
- God visits humanity

This happens, I think, less and less as one gets older, but have you ever watched a child – say, a 5 year-old – open a present at Christmas, and not really understand it? They look at the box, and they don't really understand what this thing does.

So they bring it over to an adult, and the person helps them unwrap the gift and start putting the parts together... and pretty soon, this mysterious box turns into their favorite gift.

And you see them smile.

Sometimes, when we think of the annunciation – that announcement of the coming of this baby, Jesus – and we think that the Magnificat follows immediately. You know, those verses starting at v. 46 where Mary breaks into rapturous song. But that is not how it happens. There is something about this visitation that helps Mary understand the nature of the gift she has received, that drives her impulse to sing with such passion and power.

As you have your bible's open, I want you to scan back over last week's verses. What exactly does the angel Gabriel tell Mary about this gift?

V. 32: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." V. 35: "the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God." How does Mary respond? V. 38: "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

Do you see that? The Lord God will give her this baby. The Lord God will give the baby this eternal throne. And therefore, Mary responds to the angel, "I will be a servant to the Lord and whatever he says."

But what does Elizabeth say when Mary comes over for this greeting? She says, "You're right as far as it goes, Mary." V. 45: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." But look at Verses 42 and 43: and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "...why is this granted to *me* that the mother of my *Lord* should come to me?"

Do you see what is happening? Elizabeth is looking at the very gift that Mary has come to show her, and she says, "That gift – that baby – isn't just from the Lord. That baby *IS* the Lord!"

It's the same word, "Lord." How could Mary be the mother who is pregnant with the one who sent the angel? Right? How could the angel come to her and say, you will soon give birth to the one who told me to come here and tell you these things?

Elizabeth is explaining – through the power of the Spirit – the true nature of the gift Mary has received. It's this recognition that ultimately forces the early church to reckon with the power – the doctrine – that we call the trinity. That there is one God, but that three are co-eternal and absolutely equal in being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

So what does this mean?

It means this: That at Christmas, the infinite becomes finite. The immortal became mortal. The omnipotent one became impotent. The greatest, has become a single cell. The impossible becomes possible. The thing you could never let yourself hope for, you can now hold in your hand.

But not only that.

This gift, to the extent that you take it in, becomes transformative.

Now I know how that sounds. It sounds almost trite: every ad on television is selling transformation this Christmas – those ads where you wake up and your spouse takes you downstairs, drops a set of keys in your hand, and then shows you a "transformed" driveway because it has a Lexus with a big bow on it. Or a Christmas that gives you a transformed hand because of the new diamond ring you can get. That's not what we're talking about here. What we're saying is that in this gift can be a whole *new self*.

The gospel is not like a toy that ends up in a closet or even the trash. The gospel is not a car that ends up in a junkyard or a ring that becomes a yellowed and chipped heirloom. The gospel, when it goes into your heart, transforms you and all the relationships you have.

I want you to think about how many if not all of your relationships go when they start to crack and fall apart. And it goes something like this: "You let me down when you did this." And the other person says, "I had to do that because you let *me* down." In other words, you say, "This is your fault," and the other person says, "No, it's really *your* fault."

Now friends, you know how this goes. You buy the car, you buy the diamonds, often to patch up those arguments, but these conflicts happen over and over, and you can only buy so many cars, right? You can't break this cycle forever with "stuff."

You continue to be argumentative and defensive. Why?

You know what a new car or a diamond ring says in these after-fight situations, don't you? It says, "I'm sorry you feel bad." But it doesn't say, "I'm wrong." That's why they don't really work! It's why our relationship receives a patch, while it's still, actually, broken.

There is something in you that says, "I cannot afford to lose. I just cannot afford to be wrong." What is that "thing?" It's called pride. And pride is the single greatest killer of relationships. Pride says "what I want and need is more important than what you want and need." And understand this – the nature of pride is that you are too prideful to admit you've got it.

If you're saying right now that you don't have a problem with pride when you get defensive... you have a problem with pride!

How is this cycle broken? On the one hand, it's a lot cheaper than a Lexus, but on the other, far more expensive. And you see it in the way that Elizabeth blesses Mary (and not vice-versa). The fact that Elizabeth blesses Mary indicates the importance of the gospel in this visitation.

Let me explain: This phrase in v. 42 - "Blessed are you among women" has led a lot of people – certainly the Roman church, to see Mary as someone who is full of grace, pre-Christ. As if she is the one who gives grace – her own grace – so that she can give her grace to us. I don't think that's quite right. Elizabeth is right – Mary IS blessed. She IS highly favored. Mary IS the blessed virgin! She is the blessed mother of God's son, such that all generations can call her blessed. But you see, it's not because she gives grace, but because she has *received* the grace and favor of our Lord. The blessing that she receives is the blessing of Jesus Christ.

You know, the confusion about Mary may have started very early on. There is a place later in Luke – Luke 11 – where a woman in a crowd listening to Jesus shouts out some words of worship. She says, "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!"¹ And Jesus doesn't deny that this is a blessing. Think about this: No human being is more significant, no person has received a greater honor among humanity than Mary, for Christ has taken from Mary his flesh, his life – his human life – and is protected there in her womb.

But here is how Jesus answers the woman in the crowd: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" It's a very gentle correction that is Jesus' way of saying, "Mary's blessedness doesn't consist simply or even primarily in her relationship with me or the fact that she gave birth to me, but in the fact that she heard the word of God and kept it. That is where true blessedness lies. And *you* can do that, too."

Yes, Mary received the word of God incarnate into herself and became the bearer of the good news in a physical, fleshly, wonderful way. But the greater blessing comes from something that Mary does that *we* can now do: Mary received the word of God from a messenger of God and she trusted it. She *believed* it.

This visit shows us what God's visit has done to Mary. Just as her son comes not to be served but to serve, Mary also – not only in her body giving sustenance to God (think about that!) but in her heart – comes to Elizabeth as a handmaiden to serve her aged cousin. Mary has been transformed into a servant. Think about that! Mary has just been told by an angel, for Pete's sake, that she is carrying in her womb, the very Son of the Most High. Think of the pride that would grow in our hearts if we had been told that! But there is no pride.

One commentator implies – I won't – that this could have, should have been a catfight of biblical proportions. Elizabeth, you see, is likely in her 80's, and something has happened that makes her special. Extraordinary. She is pregnant. But she is *already* important. She is a daughter of Aaron, the wife of a priest, and the elder of these two women. She has favored status in her own home.

¹ Luke 11:27-28

And in comes this young... child, really. A virgin! Elizabeth has so much of her own good news to rejoice about and to boast in concerning her own life and her own honor in the community. But the spirit of God breaks in and replaces the need to be defensive and a heart of pride and gives her a spirit of humility so that she has a *heart* of humility. Three times there is this mention of Mary's greeting – verses 40, 41 and 44 – but Elizabeth doesn't think about herself.

Friends, we need the gospel, we need Christ who comes only for sinners, to show us that there IS a problem with us. When you see that the eternal one becomes temporal, living in time and space... when you see that the lawgiver is willing to come and live under his law... when you see that the king has come and is willing to be born in a stable and die as a criminal... *for you...* **that** is a pride killer. When you see that the omnipotent one needs to become impotent against death... **to save you...** it remakes you, and transforms you, so that you can say when you need to, "I'm wrong." The gospel gives you a heart of humility.

Friends, there is no way to have good relationships without being vulnerable. You can't do it. But this is the God that makes himself vulnerable! Receive and believe in him, and he WILL transform you AND your relationships. So that's our first point – Mary visits Elizabeth, and the gospel transforms them both.

○ Jesus visits John

There is obviously another visitation going on here, right? There are not just two people in this meeting, but four. John the Baptist and Jesus are present, and they are, astoundingly, communicating. John the Baptist leaps at Mary's greeting. This an amazing visitation, isn't it. A baby leaps in his mother's womb! Hard to believe – but let's look at it.

You know, there is a sense that this is the very hinge of history – John the Baptist, sort of the last of the Old Testament prophet, born in the miraculous Old Testament way – is meeting and confessing the one whom all of history has longed to see: the redeemer of God's people, the eternal son of God!

And here is this baby – six months old in the womb – the pre-born John the Baptist leaping at the sound of nothing less than the gospel. The good news that Mary is telling Elizabeth is that she indeed has been chosen to be not just the mother of the Savior, but the mother of *John's* savior. Even in the womb, this child John is a baby, a life, one of God's children. And John is, you see, coming to faith even in his mother's womb!

If you have ever had a miscarriage – ever lost a child in infancy and you know that pain and you've wondered about your child – well this is the passage that tells you that your child can come to faith, your child can know Christ, your child can be a witness to God through the power of his own spirit, because that is exactly what is happening to John. His role as a witness to Christ has already begun in *his* mother's womb.

Now I know that for some of you this is just an ancient, if sweet little story. "Come on. A baby in an 80 year old woman's womb leaps for joy and believes in another baby in another woman's womb, who is God? Well... if you want to believe that..." *You want to believe... but you just can't.*

But look. Look at who is in this visitation. Two women. Two babies. If you were going to start a religion, today, or even two thousand years ago, is this how you would do it? Of course not! A jury in the first century didn't accept the testimony of women, and here we are – theirs is the only testimony we have! If you were making this up, you would never have two women, and for Pete's sake, you sure wouldn't have the testimony of an unborn child!

But look... work backwards. Think this through. Sure, if this is the only testimony you had, then okay. Walk away. But do you know how much information we have on John – real evidence? And on Jesus, and his resurrection, thousands gave testimony. Even the secular historians record this. Well if he did rise from the dead, if the tomb was empty, if he IS God... then he always was. The angel says, "Nothing is impossible with God!" now you may not believe in angels, but if there is a God – investigate him!

Jesus is the first person born who is older than his parents! And this means that the eternal Lord becomes a baby... he decides it and he does it. You don't get to manage him; he manages you. You don't make him jump when you want God to jump; he makes *you* jump. He make you leap for joy! And yes, he can do it even if you're in your mother's womb.

Are you willing to consider him? Wrestle with him.

○ God visits humanity

There is no other religion in the world that would ever have anything like this story associated with it. You know, in the last few years, there have been textual critics of the bible that point out similarities between stories in the bible and in other literary documents of the time. That shouldn't surprise us – God frequently uses and redeems people, places and stories to show those who do not know God who he is because all of these people, places and stories... are his! But THIS story... this story about God and how he meets humanity ...you would never find this story anywhere else. No other religion would make this claim or tell this story. Secularism says the incarnation is impossible. Miracles are impossible. Judaism and Islam believe in miracles, but say that God could never become a baby. Eastern religions say that God either could never enter flesh, or that we are all gods.

It's only Christianity that says God became breakable. That God became someone who could be hurt, cry, need his diapers changed!

Why?

For this reason. Oh God had met humanity before. That wasn't new. But the problem is, he is holy. V. 35, right? "the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God." God is eternally and unchangeably holy. And we are not.

Problem! Big problem. Ever had a friendship or been in a relationship where the other person was just so much morally ... better ... than you are? It is so frustrating. It's unlivable. You feel guilty all the time!

Friends that is only by *degrees*. We're all sinners!

This God is a consuming fire of holiness. His being burns up all that is impure, all that comes in contact with him. So how can God come, and really live with his people, without our being burned up like branches and weeds thrown into the fire?

Christianity says that Jesus Christ became breakable, fragile, abortable, and burnable to die on the cross and pay for our sins to reconcile to himself anyone who knows they need this radical salvation.

God – the creator of the universe, the whirlwind – consumes and extinguishes his own fire, his own wrath against sin, by pouring that fire down on his only son – so that he can really live with you forever. To have a relationship with you.

That's the gift. God's son. That's what Elizabeth saw. That's the present that was given to Mary. That is the gift that will make Mary sing (next week). This is the love that loves and affirms you so much that you will be willing to let your anger go, let your defenses down, become vulnerable in your own relationships.

Open into your heart this gift at Christmas. For 2,000 years humanity has been visited. You and I have been visited.

Let's pray.