

December 23, 2018

Luke 1:39-45

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“Blessed to be a Blessing”

Who is ready for Christmas? I am ready for Christmas. This year for the first time I am trying to follow all the things and traditions that people do here in America. I have been listening to the Christmas music. I have watched some of the standard American Christmas movies per request of my dear staff colleagues. I even have gotten a Christmas sweater! I am definitely ready for Christmas! I would say our staff is ready for Christmas! We have all the bulletin printed and folded. All the candle lights and low stakes are ready to be used for silent night. Almost all the ushers are trained. There only a few practices left today for our kids and youth. We are ready for Christmas. I am sure you are ready for Christmas. Well, Except for the last-minute shopping and meal prep. And now the only thing is left for us to do is to wait in anticipation. The kids are in anticipation of opening the gifts on Christmas morning. We, adults are anticipating a very calm and peaceful Christmas Eve and then Christmas morning with nice breakfast with pancakes and good cup of coffee. As Christians we anticipate a miracle of Christmas night, of a change in our hearts, of experiencing God anew. And some even are anticipating a healing, or a new job, or reconciliation, or getting out of prison.

That anticipation that most of us experiencing is very similar to the anticipation that Elizabeth and Mary were experiencing when they saw each other when Mary came to visit her. Both of them were pregnant. So of course they were anticipating a birth of their children. Those children were very special. Elizabeth was expecting a miracle child, because she and her husband, Zachariah could not have children. But they were able to even in their old age, after the Angel of the Lord announced that to them. And from what the Bible tells us this child became John the Baptist, the one who prepared the way of the Lord, Jesus. Of course, Mary's child was also announced by the angel of God and was to be a Savior of the world. So lots of anticipation there, how God is going to continue work in their lives and how God would work in the lives of their children!

When Mary came to Elizabeth, the significance of this meeting and really of this short passage is in the words that Elizabeth spoke to and about Mary. And those words reminded me about a memory that I have of my paternal grandmother. I was 9 or 10 years old when my paternal grandmother asked me if I knew Mary's prayer. My grandmother was a Russian Orthodox and she was not very vocal about her faith. Our family did not go to church. So, I said no, I don't know Mary's prayer. So my grandmother wanted to teach me one of the most important Russian orthodox prayers. Another important one is of course: The Lord's prayer. I remember how she said the short phrases of the prayer, I repeated them back to her. Then we repeated them together.

God-bearing Virgin, rejoice, grace-filled Mary! The Lord is with you! Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb because you bore the Savior of our souls. (My translation)

Of course, it was all in Russian. And because my grandmother taught me this prayer so diligently, I will remember this prayer forever. The reason why I am telling you this today is that when I picked the text for this morning, I knew that somehow I know those words. It took me just a couple of minutes on the internet to realize that the words in this text that were the words in that prayer. Those words are “blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” The word “blessed” is used a couple of times in her words. When I looked up the word blessed in Greek, this word means “speak well of, praise extol.” So, Elizabeth said meant that Mary was extolled and praised among women. And I kind of question that.

How is that that Mary was blessed? If one were to have an outside view of Mary, one would not call her blessed. Let’s look at her life. Some scholars say that Mary was possibly a slave, because high percentage of the population that was captured by the Roman Empire was enslaved. They lived in cages and in poverty. On top of what her status could bring, she was pregnant not from the man she was engaged to. Not good. If anyone found out, it would be a shameful situation and she could have been stoned to death or thrown out of the community. So, there is so much in her circumstance that does not sound like she was a blessed woman. So, Mary’s blessedness is not very apparent probably either to her or it would not be apparent to others.

But the words that Elizabeth was saying were a proclamation of the truth that no one yet saw yet and no one knew about yet. The Russian Orthodox prayer that my paternal grandmother taught me is called “God-bearing virgin or young woman.” Mary was the God-bearing virgin, she was the one who bore God into the world. There is a great theological Greek word to describe that. That word is Theotokos that means the same. The one who bore God. It does not mean that she bore God the Father into the world but that she bore God’s Son Jesus who was both divine and human. So, Mary bore into the world the divine.

She was truly a blessed woman, God-bearing woman! God-bearing so that the world could hear the good news of salvation through Jesus! God-bearing so that the tidings of great joy and peace, shalom, could be experienced by the people of all times and at all places! God-bearing so that God entered into the world and became our Emmanuel, God with us! Of course, Mary was blessed! She was blessed to be a blessing for others and her blessedness touches our lives even today! She bore God into the world so we can be blessed with the gift of God’s presence and love, the gift of salvation, and the gift faith.

Just a week or so ago, I visited a woman in our congregation who is under palliative care now. After having cancer and other serious illnesses, her body could not do it anymore, and this woman decided to accept this special care. When I visited her she told me how blessed she was. She told me about a great life that she lived, her career, and family. But then she said that how blessed she was to have God in her life. And then she said and I quote, "I don't know exactly how God looks or who God exactly is, but for me God is the assurance that I have that I will be okay no matter what." My friends, this is the blessing that Mary shared with all of us - the gift of faith and God's presence with us.

As Mary was bearing God into the world and was blessed to be a blessing, we are bearing witness to God and what God makes possible in Jesus in our lives. We bear witness to God and what God is doing in our lives. That is how we share our blessedness with others. To be a blessing, we all do not have to be Mary. We could do small things by sharing what God is making possible in our lives with others.. It could be words, and it could be gifts, or meals, or money. And you are already doing as a congregation. At this time of the year, I especially celebrate the work of God through our congregation. It is a true joy to watch the way you all are blessing the communities around us sharing hope and love. And it is a delight and a blessing to see how you are blessing each other. Ready to stand and help, provide care and support to each other. It is a true blessing to be in the midst of the congregation who is faithfully bearing witness to God's love and peace.

Friends in Christ, we are blessed to be a blessing. And may we receive the gifts that come with the gift that Mary brought to all of us. Amen.s a