

Fourth Sunday in Advent

December 20, 2015

Gospel: Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

Epistle: Heb 10:5-10

Lesson: Mic 5:2-4

Psalm: Psalm 80:1-7

CLB Commentary by Pastor Ken Narvesen

Luke 1:39—35 Pericope Notes

The first thing that strikes me as I look at this text is the simple phrase, “in those days.” It seems to be a phrase one heard from Luke often. He used it over sixty times in this text. Commentators indicate that it was a phrase indicating immediate action. I also see a sharp contrast between this phrase and the familiar phrase, “once upon a time.” When one hears the latter phrase, one knows a fanciful tale is about to begin. But the phrase “in those days” anchors what one is about to hear in real time. I hear it as a shorter form of the familiar words from the beginning of the second chapter of this Gospel. “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.” In both instances Luke is making sure his readers realize that what he is telling them happened in our very real world. He is not relating a fairy tale or some morality story. This all happened. Real people were involved. And these events changed everything, not just for the people involved at the moment but also for all of us.

The next thing that strikes me is John leaping in his mother’s womb as Mary comes near. There is no indication that Mary had time to explain what was happening to Elizabeth; in fact, the wording indicates all this happened immediately upon hearing Mary’s words of greeting. Further, from Luke’s telling of the story, this was obviously much more than normal fetal movement. The unborn child John recognized and responded to the unborn Jesus, true man and true God. And the very same Holy Spirit by whom Jesus was conceived filled Elizabeth at that time. Several things are important to note here. First, this was not the same kind of thing that happened to Mary. John was not conceived of the Holy Spirit, as incredible as word of Elizabeth’s pregnancy had seemed to Zechariah. Second, we see the personhood of this child in the womb, in contrast to how our world thinks it is perfectly acceptable to cast aside “just a fetus.” But most importantly, we see that the Spirit of God came upon Elizabeth that she might speak these words of blessing and encouragement to Mary, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

Several things here. First, Mary was blessed. She did nothing to deserve what was happening to her; this was God's work, his blessing of Mary. Just as God had chosen Abraham without any merit or worthiness in Abraham, God chooses Mary without any merit or worthiness in Mary. And so also God chooses us. The term "favor with God" from 1:30 speaks more of God's grace than it does of Mary's merit. Also, we see Elizabeth's humility. "And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" In her humility she recognizes Mary as the mother of her Lord. The Spirit of God came upon her specifically to give her this insight. God chose to do this not simply for Elizabeth but for all of us who would read it through the centuries. In his grace and mercy he unveils for us the wonder of the incarnation. And then we hear more specifically how even Elizabeth's unborn son responded to what the Spirit revealed. "44For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy." And people say infants are incapable of recognizing the working of the Spirit of God. They can't believe, people say. How wrong they are. Faith is a gift that the unborn John received at the same moment his mother Elizabeth did. Favor with God...blessing...chosen of God...neither Abraham nor Mary nor Elizabeth nor John nor anyone else does anything to deserve it. It is God's doing, and so even this unborn child could be blessed. And finally, Elizabeth recognizes the leap of faith that Mary had taken in believing the words of the angel. "45And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." It was not easy for Mary to believe this. It changed her whole life and brought many challenges to her and to those who loved her. People would talk...but Mary believed. And so the challenge of the text is this: are you among the scoffers or among the believers?