

*At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea,<sup>40</sup> where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.<sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.<sup>42</sup> In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!<sup>43</sup> But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?<sup>44</sup> As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.<sup>45</sup> Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"*

<sup>46</sup> *And Mary said:*

*"My soul glorifies the Lord  
<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
<sup>48</sup> for he has been mindful  
of the humble state of his servant.  
From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me—  
holy is his name.  
<sup>50</sup> His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.  
<sup>51</sup> He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.  
<sup>52</sup> He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
but has lifted up the humble.  
<sup>53</sup> He has filled the hungry with good things  
but has sent the rich away empty.  
<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel,  
remembering to be merciful  
<sup>55</sup> to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
even as he said to our fathers." (Luke 1:39-55)*

### Christmas Gifts of the Spirit

Last Sunday, I asked you how many of you have your Christmas shopping done. It was a relatively small number. I won't ask you to raise your hands again today and tell if you're done or not because I'm afraid of the answer. Just in case you didn't notice, tomorrow is Christmas Eve. If you're not done with your shopping yet, I know what you'll be doing today. And I would guess that today will be a miserable day to go Christmas shopping. Why do we spend so much time and effort and money on presents every year? Well, there is a good answer to that question. We give gifts on Christmas to celebrate the fact that God gave us the greatest gift that we will ever receive on the first Christmas. God gave us his only begotten Son. The truth is, there is no gift that we could ever give that can even come close to God's gift – not even if you gave your wife a Lexus, like certain commercials hint at every year. And that makes today's gospel lesson all the more pointed, because in the lesson for today, God gives even more gifts. Today we see **the Christmas gifts of the Holy Spirit.**

#### I.

We want to look at the gifts the Holy Spirit gave and what those gifts meant to the people who received them. We'll start by considering **the Christmas gifts of the Spirit to John.** The John we're talking about today is John the Baptist. He's the baby in the womb of Elizabeth. Remember the story? Zechariah and Elizabeth were elderly. God had never given them children, but when it was too late for them to have children in the ordinary way, God caused them to conceive. Elizabeth was a relative of Mary's. And without a doubt, her whole extended family was talking about how this elderly aunt was suddenly pregnant. Then God did an even greater miracle. He reached down into the womb of the Virgin Mary and caused her to conceive. That baby, of course, was Jesus.

Very soon after Mary conceived, she left the little town of Nazareth way up north by the Sea of Galilee and she headed south to stay with Elizabeth. Mary was pregnant and she wasn't married yet. Under Old Testament law, her life might actually be in danger. Now, it's quite difficult to know how strictly the people of Nazareth were enforcing those laws at this time, but even if there was no real chance of her being stoned for adultery, without a doubt tongues were wagging and people she had known all her life were looking at her funny. So Mary went to see Elizabeth, the only other person who might understand what it was like to have a miracle baby growing in her womb.

And when she came into the home, the Holy Spirit began handing out early Christmas presents. The very first one went to John the Baptist himself. The baby leaped for joy in his mother's womb. Think of the miracle here. A child in the womb of his mother knows that he's in the presence of his Savior. How did that happen? Elizabeth says that he leaped as soon as the sound of Mary's voice reached her ears. Doctors tell us that babies in the womb can hear sounds. So, we can assume that John heard Mary's voice. But how did he know whose voice it was and what it meant? That's a miracle we can't answer. God had told Zechariah, John's father, that this child would be a prophet and we know that later in life, God spoke to him directly. God must have done something similar here.

John the Baptist had faith already in his mother's womb. On some level, that baby understood that he needed a Savior and this Jesus was that Savior. That tells us some wonderful truths about our lives. It tells us that babies can believe. Faith lives first in our hearts and from there it takes captive every thought and attitude of our minds. Faith is not something that we have to consciously decide to have. We don't weigh the options and the arguments and decide to believe. Faith is a gift from God. He gives it where and when he wills. So what could possibly stop him from giving that gift to children? Even to babies? Nothing. He's God.

Ordinarily, he gives that faith through the gospel in the word and in the sacrament of baptism. To us adults he gives it primarily through hearing and understanding the word, specifically the good news of what Christ has done for us. It comes through our minds into our hearts. But to babies, he gives it first through the sacrament of baptism. He goes through their hearts to their minds. In both cases, God takes an unbelieving heart and he makes it his. Now, in the case of John the Baptist, it's hard to see how he did it. But God reached into the heart of an unborn baby and gave him faith. And he even gave him joy so that he leaped in the womb of his mother when his Savior came in.

## II.

And the Holy Spirit gave his mother the same joy. That was the first of **the Christmas gifts of the Spirit to Elizabeth**. Elizabeth lifted up her voice and welcomed Mary, the mother of her Lord. How did she know that? Luke says that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. For one moment at least, God made her a prophetess and he gave her a message for Mary: **"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!"** Mary had a unique role in the history of salvation. She was the one woman who got to be the mother of Jesus. And of course, the Holy Spirit places the emphasis on Christ: "Blessed is the child you will bear!" or the more literally, "Blessed is the fruit of your womb!" Jesus would indeed be blessed by his Father during his life on this earth and he would be the greatest blessing that our race would ever receive. And Elizabeth says, **"Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"** Faith in God brings blessings that no unbeliever will ever understand.

The Spirit's gift to Elizabeth was to encourage Mary by reminding her of God's blessings. Mary was a young, unwed mother and even Joseph reacted very negatively at first. It must all have been hard for her because she was a sinner, no matter how much the Catholic Church tells us differently. But at this moment of trial, God gave her a message of hope and comfort to maintain her faith. God does the same for all of us. And it's the same message. Whether we're children or adults, whether we're respectable members of society or we've been guilty of public sins, even if our problem is simply that living as Christians in an unbelieving world has a cost, God comes to us with the message of Christ to forgive us and to renew our hearts and strengthen our faith. That child in the womb of the Virgin Mary was God's Christmas gift to us. He has come to us in baptism and in the word and given us faith. Week after week, he gives us the opportunity to come here and renew that faith so that we can feel joy in God's love for us in Christ.

On the day Mary stood before Elizabeth, she probably didn't even look pregnant yet. But that child in her womb was the Son of God come to set us free from all that sin does to us. And like Elizabeth, God gives us the privilege of encouraging those around us when living as Christians hurts. He gives us the opportunity to

comfort and strengthen our brothers and sisters when they've sinned, when life hurts, when they feel beaten and discouraged. Now, we aren't going to have the Holy Spirit fall on us in power like he did for Elizabeth, but he does work when we share the comfort of Jesus with each other. That is a wonderful Christmas gift.

### III.

Of course, we've been talking about her all morning, but we need to pay special attention to **the Christmas gifts of the Spirit to Mary**. Through the words of Elizabeth, the Holy Spirit renewed her faith. Then he made Mary a prophet, too. He inspired in her a song of praise that we use to this day. Traditionally, we've called it the Magnificat. It has much to say to us today.

Mary's song focuses on how God blessed someone who was nothing. **"For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed."** Mary does not imagine for a moment that she's some kind of saint who has earned God's favor. She doesn't see herself as a "co-redemptrix" or as someone who shares in Jesus' work, the way the Catholic Church teaches. She sees herself as nothing more than a sinner, whom God lifted up and did so much for, that all generations would see her as blessed. She comes back again and again to how poor and lowly she is. She speaks of God feeding the hungry but turning the rich away empty, of God pulling rulers off their thrones and lifting up the lowly. All that is poetic language for the undeserved grace God has given her.

Then Mary speaks of the miracle in her womb. **"The Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name."** God did the greatest miracle in all creation on the day he caused Mary to conceive. The Son of God took on a real human nature in her womb. God used the biological reality of a young Jewish girl's eggs to make himself man, without ever giving up his Godhood. Mary doesn't try to understand or explain that miracle. She just says, "Holy is his name." Praise God for what he has done!

Mary sang of God and his promises. **"He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers."** More than two thousand years before Mary was born, God promised Abraham that through him, all nations would be blessed. He was now keeping that promise. In Christ, all the promises of the Old Testament, from the one God gave in the Garden of Eden are fulfilled. In Christ, all that sin does to us is undone. All our guilt is gone. All our suffering will be healed. And we will live with him forever. Or as Mary said, **"His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation."**

That was God's gift to a Jewish teenager whom he asked to carry a real burden: a pregnancy that no one was going to understand. God didn't leave her alone to carry that burden. He lifted her up with his promises. He renewed her faith and her joy so that she could sing about those promises. He even inspired her song. But the greatest gift God gave Mary was the ability to see that she was indeed blessed to be a part of his plan and purpose. It would not be easy. In fact, in nine months, another prophet would warn her that a sword would pierce her heart. God was going to make sure that the immediate problems were solved. Joseph did marry her. She did eventually go home and raise her child in that hometown of Nazareth. Apparently, God gave her more children. But she would live to see that child in her womb die on the cross. She would stand beneath that cross and hear him commend her to another John to care for her until her time on this earth ended. And throughout all those years, she would ponder what God was doing, until Easter morning when it all made sense. God carried her through it all.

And God will carry us. That same Jesus who died and rose for his mother's sin, that same Jesus who was invisible to the human eye at this moment, but who was the Son of God and now the son of Mary, that same Jesus will carry us through all that this life does to us. The same Holy Spirit who came to Mary in the gospel promises comes to us in those same gospel promises and he lifts us up, too. In the eyes of the world we live in, we are nothing. But God pulls rulers off their thrones and he lifts up the lowly. God fills the hungry with good things and he sends the rich away empty. These words aren't about physical hunger. They're about the spiritual hunger for having our guilt removed and our sins forgiven and for having the burdens of life in a sinful world lifted off our shoulders. God remembers his promises to his people – not just his Old Testament people, but his New Testament people, too. All those promises God will keep in Christ.

John, Mary and Elizabeth tell us that. God gave them gifts for the first Christmas. Through them, he gives us gifts to us, too. Their words and actions are the Holy Spirit's gift to us. Through them, he gives and strengthens our faith. That gift will carry us through this life to eternal life. So, right now, I invite you to join

me in praising God for those gifts, by singing the Song of Mary. It's printed in the bulletin and on page 57 in the front part of our hymnal. Please rise.