

Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 18, 1988

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

When Elizabeth greets Mary, she feels little John, the Baptizer, leap for joy in her womb - and filled by the Holy Spirit she exclaims: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb." And naturally, all of us who have heard Catholics doing the Rosary have heard that over and over again. "Hail Mary, full of grace, blessed are you and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Remember us now and in the hour of our death. Amen." Some of you might know the prayer better than I, who have always been Lutheran, while you were once Roman Catholic.

What we want to emphasize this Sunday is Mary, the way John the Baptizer was emphasized the last two Sundays. But you know that we emphasized the highway that God clears for us and the Word of God coming into the wilderness much more than the last prophet John. In the same way we want to understand Mary in terms of her witness to us, much more than for her own sake. We want to understand her example and demonstration of faith, much more for our help, than for making her Queen of Heaven, or Queen of the Earth, or even a goddess, which I'm afraid is often done wrongly.

It is very true that Mary is blessed. And she is blessed because she is the Mother of God. She was chosen to bear the one promised through the ages - the anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ, the Holy One of Israel who ushered in the new kingdom.

Luther on Mary

Luther states: Mary is indeed blessed. In all of humankind she has no equal. She has a completely unique place, in that she had a child by the Father in heaven...and such a child! So she has been crowned by the title forever: Mother of God. And all honor, blessedness and all good things God bestowed upon her with that. (paraphrased from the Magnificat, page 326.) Luther continues: just ponder the fact that she was chosen to be the Mother of God - and you will see what a wonder is here.

But Mary herself attributes everything to the grace of God and claims for herself a lowly estate - claims to be a lowly servant...and she does not at all claim that she merited this divine choice at all. She had to be from the tribe of Judah, a woman, a virgin,, and believe the angelic vision...but in none of this did she merit being chosen - she says herself - God regarded the low estate of his handmaiden...or God my savior has looked with favor on his lowly servant...the way this morning's translation reads.(The above thoughts are taken from Luther.)

Luther therefore shows that she attributes everything to God, and the grace of God -and nothing to her own merit. She is a creature as we all are. We cannot take away too much from her, because like us she was created out of nothing. We can easily

take too much away from God's grace, which is a dangerous thing to do and not at all pleasing to her. So we should not make her a Queen of Heaven, for she is no goddess and she does not render aid, grant gifts, - as many suppose who flee to her and pray to her rather than to God. Mary gives nothing. God gives all. (These are all Luther's remarks concerning Mary.)

So we do not pray to Mary - but we are invited to ponder her being the Mother of God. That's beautiful, because in the birth narrative is written that Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. (Luke 2.v.19) And that means Mary pondered all the events of the birth of her Christ Child and must have been ready with her deep faith and understanding to be the mother of this Holy Child. When Mary and Jesus' sisters and brothers try to take Jesus away (Mark 3:31-34), when that disagree with his ministry, Jesus says: Who is my mother? Who are my sisters and brothers? Those that hear the Word of God and keep it. And in a sense these words requalified Mary as his mother, because she did keep all these things and pondered them in her heart. She was blessed.

A woman exclaims to Jesus: "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that you sucked!" But Jesus responds: "Blessed rather are those who hear the Word of God and keep it." (Luke 11.v.28)

In this way Jesus again named his mother blessed, because that is the one characteristic mentioned of her in the story about Jesus' birth. Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. And she was a woman of faith - who stood a test of faith that even old Abraham would have been unequal to.

It comes out well in the Cherry Tree Carol. Old man Joseph and Mary are walking through a cherry orchard. Mary asks Joseph to pick her some cherries. He is furious with her knowing she is pregnant. And walks further ahead of her thinking to leave her. But the Babe in her womb commands the cherry trees bow down to the Queen of Heaven, and she can pick as many as she pleases, because the trees obey their Lord.

That is not a Biblical story - but it tries to explain the problem of faith and doubt and imputed guilt and shame that Mary had to bear - believing that the baby came from God as was foretold to her.

Sometimes I like to say the Word of God really became seed in Mary, and really made her pregnant - and the Word became flesh when her faith-child Jesus was born.

I remember working with a woman in a psychiatric hospital who had an imaginary pregnancy from Paul McCartney, one of the Beatles. She had been raped by a whole gang and could not recover

psychologically. That was a really sad person. Somehow her belly was really swollen and she certainly looked pregnant. What a tragic person. But Mary had a faith pregnancy - because God chose her to bear his Son, who is called Immanuel, our beautiful Savior.

Let's not fool ourselves - Mary had to keep on believing - especially when this little God-Child was in diapers. When he was a little boy. And especially when he was a man. So many refused to believe. But Mary believed and had faith to the end.

So in many ways we also have to learn the Word of God and keep it like Mary. That is how by faith a new birth takes place in us. We do not become pregnant and bear a child - no Mary did that once and for all. But we also give birth to a new self, who is Christ born in our hearts. And only in this way can we do the will of our Father in heaven. Only in this way can we hear the Word of God and keep it. Because it is all God's doing.

And what's more. Mary has become the archtype of the Church. She can represent the Church. Because the Church is the body of faith. The Church is the one who hears the Word of God and keeps it. The Church is the one who does the will of the Father in heaven, rather than glorify creatures of the earth.

And in this way in the midst of the Church, we can again be in the womb of Mary, and that sweet virgin can bear us again, so that we are born anew, sons and daughters, children of God, the heavenly Father. Then like for Mary, it can also be said to the Church: Blessed are you and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, the new children of God.

But again it is all God's grace. The role Mary plays in it is merely that of a lowly servant, which is also the only role relegated to the Church. But Mary as well as the Church get the regard of God, who gets the look of favor - not on her own merit, but by God's grace. So we have to keep the Word, ourselves and our congregation. We have to exercise our faith even unto the absurdity of a virgin birth - so that God can really be our Father, and we can be his own dear children. And rather than focus on ourselves at any time, or even on Mary, we need rather focus on doing the Will of God in heaven - which is only possible because this one believed, pondered it all, kept God's Word and Deeds in her heart, and gave birth to the long awaited Jesus. Amen.

"The Magnificat" from Luther's Works, the American Edition, translated by A.T.W. Steinhaeuser and published by Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri, circa 1956.