

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent, December 23, 2018

Luke 1:39-45

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

"Hail, Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus." Have you heard that before? I think there may be some of you here who grew up speaking those words as a prayer. And then you continued, "Pray for us sinners now, and in the hour of our death. Amen." That whole prayer is known as the Hail Mary in the Roman Catholic Church. It's the main prayer used in praying the Rosary. 53 times. And it's definitely something that Lutherans do not do. But you might have noticed that the first part of it comes straight out of the Gospel according to Luke. The first part of the first part, "Hail, Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with you," comes from the angel Gabriel's greeting to Mary at the annunciation, which comes just before our reading this morning. If you were here for the Sunday School program last Sunday you heard it then. The second part of the first part, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" comes from Elizabeth's greeting here in our Gospel reading. Martin Luther was brought up praying to Mary and other saints. In fact, when he was caught in the thunderstorm that led him to give up his budding law career to become a monk, he prayed to St. Anne to save him. That's because St. Anne was the patron saint of miners, and Luther's father was a miner. They must have prayed to her regularly at home. Anyway, Luther later came to think that praying to saints wasn't a good idea. Maybe they can hear us, maybe they can't. But even if they *can* hear us, it's not clear that they can *help* us. Because of this, Luther decided that since we have the promise that God the Father will hear us when we pray to him, and that Jesus will hear us when we pray to him, it's best to go with the sure thing. So Lutherans don't pray to Mary, or any other saints for this reason.

But even though Luther stopped praying to Mary, he continued to hold her in high esteem throughout his life, and to hold her up as an example of God's grace to humankind. Which is how all the saints should be regarded: as examples of God's grace and mercy shown to them, and as examples of God-given faith that led them to do great things for others. Luther felt pretty strongly about this. So strongly that when he was in hiding after being excommunicated in 1521 – because he was wanted dead or alive – he came out of hiding and back to Wittenberg to stop one of his colleagues from tearing down the statues of the saints in the Wittenberg churches. Saints are to be honored, Luther insisted – honored for bearing witness to Christ. Just not prayed to.

But even so, we Lutherans have shied away from honoring Mary. You won't find many Lutheran churches with statues of Mary (I mean outside of nativity scenes.) And even fewer Lutheran churches name for St. Mary, though there are a few. But every fourth Sunday of Advent we get a chance to focus on the mother of our Lord and her part in God's saving work for us. So let's do that now. There are at least three things in today's Gospel reading worth our attention.

First Mary is blessed because she found favor with God. She was chosen to be the vehicle for God saving the world, the one through whom God would take on human flesh and be born among us as one of us. There's nothing in Luke's text to indicate she did anything to deserve this honor. In fact, quite the contrary, if we pay attention to our psalmody. The hymn that we sang there is a paraphrase of the song Mary sang immediately following this Gospel reading, the song we've been singing at Advent Evening Prayer for the past three weeks. "You looked upon my lowliness and I am full of grace," our hymn said. Mary is part of God's plan to right what is

wrong in the world, to fix what is broken, and to turn the upside-down world right side up. To do that God casts down the mighty and lifts up the lowly. Mary's only qualification for being lifted up was that she was one of the lowly ones to start with. Mary is blessed because God is gracious.

Second, Mary is blessed because she believed God's promise. "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord," says Elizabeth. The angel spoke to her the promise of her unlikely pregnancy, and that her child would be the Son of God, and she believed it! And this too is surely not her doing. Who could believe such a promise? It must have been the grace of God, don't you think? And the power of the Holy Spirit? Luther liked to say that Mary conceived through her ear. She heard this promise, and by the grace of God she believed it. And as soon as she believed it, it was so. "Here am I," she said. "Let it be." That's the gift of faith in action.

Third, bearing Christ has an effect on others. Mary's blessing is not hers to keep to herself. When she shows up at her cousin's house bearing the Christ child in her body, the unborn John the Baptist kicks in his mother's womb, as if to say, "Hey mom, he's here!" In response, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. And when people are filled with the Holy Spirit, good things are always sure to follow.

Following Luther's practice, then, of holding up Mary as an example of faith to inspire us, let's see how each of these three things applies also to us. First, we are blessed when God comes to us out of the blue and announces that we are loved, forgiven, and reconciled to God for Jesus' sake. This happens in different ways for each of us, possibly at different stages of our life. Some of us were born into families that conveyed that message to us from our earliest days, who brought us to be baptized when we were still newborns. Some of us came to faith as teenagers or adults. Still others have complicated relationship with our faith, or are unsure where we stand at the moment. Maybe a little like Mary at first. "How can this be?" That's her first response to the angel. If that's you, just know that God will not give up on you. The promise of God's love and God's life is for you. Second, like Mary we are blessed when we do come to trust the promise, whether that is sooner or later, or on again, off again. Wherever your faith is today, take comfort in knowing that you're not in charge of it. It is God's work in you when the promise is conveyed. Third, we too, like Mary, are called to bear Christ to others. Of course not in the unique way that Mary did, but in a way that is just as real. Just as God chose to become incarnate in Jesus so continues to be present in and through those who hear and trust the gospel. God chooses to work through human beings and human relationships, through our caring for one another, sharing each others joys, bearing each others sorrows, and reminding each other of God's love and faithfulness. That's just what Mary and Elizabeth were doing during their visit. And when we bear Christ to one another, lives are changed, and good things are bound to happen.

So, "Hail Mary, if you can hear me. Blessed are you!" But that message is also now for us: "Hail to you, favored ones! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you, and blessed is the witness to Christ that you bear!" May our gracious God continue to bless us in the coming Christmas season and throughout the New Year. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.