

Luke 1:39-56

Advent 4C + December 23, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls
Great Things

The Word of the Lord from Luke 1:48: Mary said, "From now on all generations will call me blessed." This is the Word of the Lord.

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

Michelle. Debbie. Krista. Francine. Megan. Shawnee. Those are the girls I remember from kindergarten, way back when in Mrs. Peterson's class. I had a serious crush on Michelle. Debbie and Krista were smart, and we'd duke it out in spelling bees for many years to come. Francine's family were Jehovah's Witnesses and Megan's family were atheists. And Shawnee? Whenever we played soccer at recess, she always kicked me in the shins.

So I remember six girls from kindergarten 45 years ago. Since the district couldn't pass a levy to save its life, the classes averaged 30+ kids apiece, which means that I've forgotten more girls in that class than I can remember. That's no sin, but just how life is. People come and people go, and we don't remember a whole lot of them. People come and people go in congregations too, sometimes memorably and sometimes not. We remember some, we forget others. Occasionally, a vaguely familiar face appears somewhere and says, "Hello, Pastor Pauls," to which I graciously and warmly respond, "Hello...*you*."

I understand that my memory is no great shakes, but here's the question I pose: if I can barely remember six girls from 45 years ago, how come the world still remembers Mary and Elizabeth after two thousand years? They don't just remember, but they unconsciously celebrate them: in the United States alone, there are nearly 1.5 million Elizabeths running around. That's nothing: there are over 4.3 million Marys in our nation today. I'm going to suggest that there are that many Marys and Elizabeths running around because of the Mary and the Elizabeth in our Gospel lesson. There have been other famous women with those names since – British monarchs, movie stars and others – but the women in our text get the ball rolling.

In fact – a little known fact about your pastor: if I recall correctly, had I been born a girl, I would have been an Elizabeth ... and thus *not* your pastor.

The world still remembers Elizabeth and Mary, and they will not be forgotten because they cannot be. As Mary said, "From now on all generations will call me blessed." And where the story of blessed Mary is retold, Elizabeth is coming along for the ride. If you just look at what's going on with your eyes, there really isn't much to see: Mary goes to see her cousin Elizabeth up in the hills. That's as newsworthy as, say, a girl from Council going to see a relative in New Meadows. It's a little notable that Elizabeth is way too old to have kids, but for the first time she and her silent husband are expecting. There's a whiff of scandal in this reading too, because Mary is with child but not yet married. But that's not why they get remembered for all generations.

By the way, we really don't know much about Mary. We know she lives in Nazareth, that she's betrothed to Joseph, and that she's still a virgin despite the pregnancy. We're pretty sure she's about 14 or 15, because that's about the time girls got married back then. The evidence is good that she's dirt poor, and it's a decent guess that she's an orphan. That's about all we know. Meaning no disrespect to the mother of our Lord whatsoever, she might not be very pretty: we know from Isaiah that her firstborn Son isn't particularly handsome. She may be an awful cook. She might talk with her mouth full and be terrible at math. I don't say any of this to demean her, but to glorify God as she does in the text, to note that the Lord so often chooses the foolish to shame the wise. There's nothing about Mary that causes

God to choose her to bear this child. There is nothing especially virtuous about Mary that she would be remembered and called blessed for all generations.

So why remember Mary and Elizabeth?

It's their kids, Mary's far more than Elizabeth's. Mary is the mother of God, and Elizabeth is the mother of John the Baptist – and Jesus Himself will say of John that there is none born of women who is greater in the kingdom of heaven. John is ordained by God to be the last Old Testament prophet, to prepare the way of the Lord – to point to Jesus and say, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." And here's where we get to the first unusual thing in our text: when Mary arrives and greets Elizabeth, John jumps in Elizabeth's womb. It's not a random kick or twitch: the unborn John is jumping for joy and starting his task of pointing to the Savior. Thus Elizabeth fills us in, and she speaks by the work of the Holy Spirit when she says to Mary,

Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.

So Mary is blessed because among the billions of women to live in history, she is chosen by God to bear God's Son. That's a singular honor, all God's doing and gift to Mary. But that's not the only reason she is blessed: Elizabeth declares that Mary is blessed because she believed that God would fulfill His Word. She is blessed because she has faith, also God's doing and gift to Mary.

Then it's Mary's turn to speak, and her words in the second half of our Gospel lesson are so important that the Church has wisely designated them a hymn called the *Magnificat*. Mary begins,

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for He has looked on the humble estate of His servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name.

Mary confesses what is true: God has chosen her because ... God has chosen her. In her humble estate, there was nothing about her to catch God's eye or earn His favor. She will be called blessed throughout all generations not because she has done anything, but because God who is mighty has done great things for her.

But this is not just about her. She goes on to tell what God, mighty and holy God, does for all people. He does great things! She declares, "His mercy is for those who fear Him from generation to generation." There's a sentence rich with good news: rather than help those who do enough good to catch His eye, God is merciful to those who fear Him – who acknowledge their sin, fear His wrath and trust in His promise of the Savior. God's mercy is not just for Mary because she gives birth to Jesus, but to all who trust in that Baby born to Mary.

Then she says,

He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate;
He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty.

This is a world dominated by types like Caesar Augustus and Herod, who have money and power and fame. There are plenty of wealthy and powerful people around. From all appearances, it looks like God must love them more because He's given them so much, or else because they have so much that

they can give to Him. So wouldn't it make sense for God to choose a daughter in some well-to-do, well-connected family for the birth of His Son? Maybe at least a family that could afford a better crib than a manger? But no, God scatters the proud who think they're something because of their wealth or power. He chooses lowly Mary as the mother of Jesus; and in doing so He declares that He saves by His mercy, not by man's work. He will not save by the offerings of man, but by the sacrifice of His own Son. He will save stretching out that strong arm to accept a nail through His hand.

And so Mary concludes, "He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." God has helped His servant Israel ... but why? It sure isn't because of the centuries of steadfast love and obedience on the part of His chosen people. They've been anything *but* steadfast and obedient. No, God has sent the Savior because He remembers His mercy, the mercy that He promised to Abraham and his offspring forever.

That's why God has sent the Savior: because He promised to, and He always keeps His promises.

So Mary's words have two big themes. One is that God keeps His promises, and the other is that God has mercy on people because of His promises, not because they've earned it. So He chose Abraham to be the father of Israel, even though there was nothing special about Abraham. He chose Israel to be His chosen people in the Old Testament, even though He knew they'd be a pretty disobedient bunch.

Put those two themes together and, says Mary, God has chosen her solely by His mercy to be the mother of Jesus, the promised Savior of the world.

Your Savior. In Him, God has chosen you. God has done great things for you.

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God has chosen you in Christ. He scatters the proud but remembers the humble. He doesn't save you because of your wealth, accomplishments, fame, lineage or anything else about you. He doesn't look to bless the self-made wealthy and powerful, nor are wealth and power a sign that He especially blesses someone. There is nothing special about you that makes you memorable before God. Before Him, all are leveled: He does not see King and peasant, rich and poor, achiever and slacker; but believer and unbeliever, forgiven and unforgiven. If this news troubles you, then it is time for self-examination and repentance: for if you consider yourself to be lovable to a holy God apart from Christ, then you are numbered among the proud and you will be scattered outside of the kingdom on the Last Day.

This news is comfort for the people of God, because they do not trust in themselves, but repent of their sin and trust solely in Christ. That is humility given only by the work of the Holy Spirit: those are the humble whom God remembers for eternity.

God remembers the humble because He has promised to, and God always keeps His promises. There is never a time where He fails to. In Christ, all the promises of God are yes. The absolution is never, "I might forgive you all of your sins," and there is never a day where He says, "Eh, I'm thinking about raising you up on the Last Day." The Lord continues to be merciful, as promised. As surely as you do not trust in yourself, just as surely you may trust in Him – He is as consistent and reliable in His Word as you are not. Because it's for the sake of Christ, you can be certain of His mercy. God will stop being merciful the same day that Jesus hasn't died on the cross for you. In other words, it's a done deal.

Therefore, blessed are you. Not because you've been chosen to be the mother of God; but like Mary you are blessed because you believe that there will be a fulfillment of the Word of God that you have heard.

You have heard that Christ has died and risen for you, and that He will return in glory. It is so – it

will be fulfilled.

You have heard that the Lord has made you His own in Holy Baptism, and that by His Word and Supper He strengthens and sustains you in the faith until life everlasting. It is so – it will be fulfilled.

You have heard you will be raised from the dead and you will have eternal life with the Lord in heaven. It is so – it will be fulfilled!

In other words, you will be remembered. Probably not by all generations, of course: by the time this congregation has the potluck for its 150th anniversary, most of us will just be names on a ledger, barely recalled by the family of God in this place. I mean, they might invite old Bowen Allen to stand up and say a few words about the good old days, but most of us will be forgotten by then. That's all right. What matters is that the Lord remembers you. For Jesus' sake, He's written your name in the book of life, engraved it on the palms of His hands. For all those who repent of their sins, He will not forget. He will raise you up on the Last Day.

With a nod to Mary and Elizabeth this Sunday morning, we turn our focus especially to Mary's Son tomorrow night and the days that follow. As you prepare to celebrate the Lord's birth, I bid you to reflect upon Mary's words that He remembers the humble; and as He begins His work of remembering and saving the humble, He will be wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a bed far more squalid than you've probably ever endured. As He remembers the humble, He comes humbly. The rough wood of a manger foreshadows the crude cross; for He comes to save by serving, even giving His life as a ransom for many.

It is salvation He comes to give, and He gives it by His Word.

So you have heard, and so you believe. That is a great thing.

So you have heard, and so you believe. So you are called blessed, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen